“Human Always”
A look at a great boarding school faculty
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At the end of each summer, I speak at a four-day conference for new teachers to boarding schools, and without terrifying them, I try to make them aware of the monumentally awesome opportunity that awaits them in a few short weeks – and I emphasize “awesome” in its original meaning: “inspiring reverential fear.” To teach in a boarding school is an exciting and exhausting ministry. You are hired primarily for your intellectual acumen, but you will find most of your day spent counseling, driving, encouraging, pleading, listening, laughing, helping, hoping, shouting “No!” and even exhorting “Yes!” Whatever our intellectual passion is – art, physics, literature, history, Latin, geometry – those moments in class will take up a small percentage of our day and of our contact with students.

I don’t think the current job description of a boarding school faculty member has changed significantly in my 26 years of teaching. St. Andrew’s still seeks scholars who are excited about their field, athletes who want to coach, artists who want to direct and help nurture the creative vision in others, adults who love teenagers and students. What has changed is the complexity of that teenager and the intensity of the world he or she inhabits.

The Great Faculty

What makes a faculty “great” for St. Andrew’s? One, St. Andrew’s is a place where teachers can continue to learn; they learn not only from their students but also, and perhaps most profoundly, from their colleagues. John Austin ’83 notes that during his teaching career at St. Andrew’s,

> *I have been able to co-teach courses with Monica Matouk, Elizabeth Roach, Tad Roach, Bobby Rue, Nigel Furlonge and Brad Bates. In the American Studies class, I have worked with John McGiff and John Higgins. As a member of the English Department, I have watched my colleagues conduct hundreds of orals with individual students. That is literally hundreds of hours when I have been able to watch – and learn from – my colleagues, a great gift. These experiences have given me a perspective on the art and mystery of teaching that my many years of formal education could not. That St. Andrew’s is such a place has much to do with the personal qualities of the faculty –*

their patience and generosity, their openness to new ideas and willingness to listen, their adventurousness, their love of learning and deep commitment to teaching.

This faculty is not stagnant or satisfied. All of us ask for specific feedback in the form of detailed course evaluations at least twice a year. We learn from our colleagues and from our students constantly.

Two, we value and spend time talking as a faculty about teaching. This year we began meetings in August with a goal of developing a teacher observation program – not a program to evaluate teachers (one of the negative buzz words in schools today), but instead to create what Tad Roach called "an academy of learners." By inviting other teachers into our classrooms, we have gained a second set of eyes in our classrooms.

For example, John McGiff asked me to visit his art history class to help him with class discussion – were his questions provocative, leading, coherent? Were the students only responding to his questions, or were they talking to each other? By asking these questions, John was already self-assessing his work as a teacher, my role was to act as "another John McGiff" in the classroom and give him direct and honest feedback on this particular issue. John "owned" the whole process – he decided what the questions were, what he wanted me to do. After visiting a few of his classes, we sat down and talked about teaching, about the difficulty of asking a question and then directing class discussion; about the goal of getting students to talk to each other, not just back and forth to the teacher. Together we brainstormed ways to reach this goal – and remember, between us there is almost 50 years of teaching experience. Both of us were learning new ways to be more effective teachers; we were deepening our friendship and trust by wrestling with the knotty aspects of teaching; and we were sharing in the joy of this mystical and mysterious ministry. Significantly, these observations and discussions are happening throughout the faculty.

William Bowen, former president of Princeton and recent author of *The Game of Life* and *The Shape of the River*, asserted that a great educational institution "is always under construction." This is particularly true of the St. Andrew's faculty. Even as we feel that we are teaching engaged classes and creating intellectually curious students, the curriculum and our pedagogy are constantly "under construction," questioning and examining. This happens through a number of on-going programs and structures which allow the faculty – and the students – to talk about the core of the educational program. Recently, these discussions have occurred through:

- the number of co-taught or inter-disciplinary classes;
- the amount of teacher visitation, observation and collaboration;
- the recent visits by educators Michael Thompson (*Raising Cain*) and Gerald Graff (*Clueless in Academe*);
- the work this winter with Ken Bain's book, *What the Best College Teachers Do*;
- our three-year discussion about the daily academic schedule;
- the new SAT II test;
- the national discussion about the value of the AP program;
- the place of women in math and science;
- the decline in student reading.

These are significant and complex aspects of teaching in the 21st Century, and there are not obvious or even easy solutions to the questions each of these topics raises. In a series of faculty meetings this winter, we have wrestled with and tried to answer two central questions from Ken Bain's book:

1. *How exactly can we inspire students to move towards the goal of becoming independent, critical learners?*
2. *What are the skills and habits of mind they will need, and how do we specifically teach to help them develop such skills?*

These questions force us to identify teaching practices and assessments which actually and intentionally create students we are excited to be challenged by. Through these open discussions, we have shared insights and approaches aimed at developing the intellectual skills to be life-long and impassioned learners. However, as Nicole Furlonge has observed, "this spirit of a teacher-learner is practiced and modeled in the ways in which we do business here. We are willing as a school to question and reflect on what we are doing as we do it. We are willing to be creative about our approach to education even as we

feel confident that we are already educating our students well, intellectually, athletically, socially and spiritually."

Our work this winter has focused on two critical areas of teaching. Initially, we have broken down Bain's central questions to a series of further questions – questions that are driving discussion in faculty meetings, department meetings and informal teacher conversations.

What does a passionate student look like?

Can we document learning outcomes?

What would the elements of a teaching academy look like at St. Andrew's?

How can we take more advantage of how well we know our students?

These questions are complex, and it takes time to move towards answers; but we are trying to be as specific as we can be so that we can be as clear as possible in our teaching. Part of the excitement of these questions has been that even in the dark days of the winter, we have been extremely excited about teaching, about the direction of these discussions, about the rethinking of each of our classes. The biggest challenge we've faced is giving ourselves time to think and have these discussions. We know it is an important time, but visiting classes, re-designing syllabi and classes, observing colleagues, creating examples of authentic learning assessments for colleagues and continuing to talk about the implications of these compelling questions – these efforts compete for time as much as everything else we do and value.

We want to be as intentional and clear as possible in our teaching about what exactly we are teaching and why we are teaching it. We have revised and created rubrics for assessments, for class discussions, for papers and labs; we have thought about where we want our students to be in June, or at graduation, and then tried to "plan backwards" in how we will get there, year by year, assignment by assignment. We have tried to tell our students exactly why they are doing a particular unit or project, so that they too will be part of the process. As a faculty, we have been teaching in this intentional way for many years, but we've mandated it this year. Ultimately, we know that we care deeply about student learning, and we are actively committed to their learning.

One other topic this winter has been authentic learning. Again, many teachers have made such elements and assessments the

cornerstone of their courses, but we've brought the topic to the full faculty in January and February. Additionally, the Education Committee of the Board of Trustees spent their entire meeting in February hearing about this, and the full Board discussed it at their meeting the next day. We want our students to be historians, scientists, artists, mathematicians; we want them to do the work of historians and scientists. We want the work that students engage in to be demonstrated and exhibited – not memorized or merely mastered, but be wrestled with for immediate relevance and connection. Students tell us that such work is both exciting and hard.

For many years the faculty at St. Andrew's have been challenging their students to apply their textbook skills to non-textbook situations and questions. The English Department has been involved with this type of work through the exhibition and the senior tutorial program; here are three examples from classes this fall and winter.

John Burk's Physics class: *Most introductory physics students study motion by recording the motion of everyday objects with a motion sensor, an electronic device that uses the principles behind sonar to determine the position of an object. However, rarely do students understand how these devices work. To address this, we created an injury-based lesson where students devised a method for measuring the distance to a faraway wall without getting out of their seats. As they tested their ideas, they quickly came to an understanding of SONAR, the idea that a sound wave can be reflected off the object. The time it takes for the sound wave to make the trip can be used to determine the distance to the object, if you know the speed of sound. From here, students begin to explore the many ways this principle has been further applied – how bats locate insects using high frequency sound and how radio pulses instead of sounds can be used to track planes with RADAR. Then, they see how these principles can be applied to map the ocean floor with SONAR, and they actually test their method by mapping a model ocean floor constructed by placing a variety of obstacles on the floor, and allowing the motion sensor to measure how far below the edge of the table these objects are. This inquiry approach gives students a much deeper appreciation of physics as a tool for asking questions about the physical world around us and devising answers and steers them away from their preconceived ideas of physics as a discipline driven by formulas with little connection to their everyday lives.*

Emily Pressman's History class: *The Social Reform Movements students held a "teach-in" discussion and debate on different approaches and goals within the Civil Rights Movement in the mid-*

1960s, including the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Malcolm X and the Black Panthers. The scenario was, essentially, that the students were to imagine themselves as leaders of all of these groups meeting together to discuss the movement: what means and methods would best be employed, what the goals of the movement should be, etc. It was very interesting to have the kids put all of these different approaches to the problem of civil rights in the 1960s in conversation – and at times, heated disagreement – with one another. The disagreement that existed within these groups even came out, with two students representing well the clash between members of SNCC that wanted to hold onto the organization's founding principles of non-violence, and members like Stokely Carmichael who wanted to move in the direction of "black power" (a term Carmichael coined) regardless of whether it took violence to achieve this.

Eric Kemer's Chemistry class: *Early in the year I ran across a very old unlabeled container of white powder in the chemistry stock room. I had seen it before, tucked away in the back of a cabinet. I had meant to try to perform an analysis to find out what it was, but hadn't gotten around to it. Bob Colburn could not remember what it was either. Well, I turned the identification task over to the class, providing only a one-page reference to a qualitative analysis scheme, a flow chart of tests designed, by process of elimination, to identify the constituents of an inorganic salt. The students, working in independent teams, were successful in carrying out a non-trivial analysis, working their way through some initially ambiguous results. They verified each other's results. As a teacher I had no right answer to give them. They were confident in their findings, and they made their convincing case and that was enough.*

We plan on continuing these discussions throughout the spring and into next year.

The third component of what allows the faculty to be "great" is that the faculty keep learning through the extraordinary generosity of the summer professional fund. Last summer we spent over $80,000 on graduate programs, travel, conferences, course work and new class development for almost half the faculty; the rest of the faculty were reading, re-thinking courses, creating new assessments and labs, talking extensively with colleagues or other professionals, visiting college and high school campuses. Over the past four years, 10 faculty members have experienced a full year sabbatical. St. Andrew's is almost without peer in its ability to fund such programs.

Four, for this faculty, teaching is exciting, intriguing, meaningful, intentional, personal. They are learning right alongside the students. Over and again in hallway conversations, at the lunch table, in semester comments or in college recommendations, St. Andrew's faculty talk about how they have learned from the collaborative nature of the classroom. Eric Kemer, Associate Dean for Math and Science, remarks, "I teach science. But what I actually do is involve students in inquries of the natural world using the methods of science. This is my fun. Including students in it makes it more so. I can't imagine running out of amusing and awe inspiring things to wonder about, experiment with, or understand more deeply." For this faculty is truly a collection of artists: we create on different types of canvases – a Harkness table, a lab, a theater stage, a studio, a one-on-one tutorial.

Much of the excitement for us comes when we take our creations, our passions, our insights about what we love in our field, and present them to our audience – the classroom, the students. It's there that a collaborative transformation occurs, a reinterpretation – and it happens in each class, each new year. No two classes will respond the same way to *Hamlet* or the Pullman Strike or Newton's Second Law. An art critic wrote last fall in *The New York Times* about the upcoming relocation of the Barnes Foundation's art collection to a new building in downtown Philadelphia, arguing that this was actually healthy because we will reinterpret these priceless paintings in a new setting. Viewing them in a fresh venue gives them more life. The same holds true for teaching: teachers almost weekly, if not daily, are saying in response to a student's comment or solution, "I never thought of it that way before." St. Andrew's is truly an "academy of learners" for both the students and the faculty.

The final hallmark of the St. Andrew's faculty is that it has always witnessed teaching as something far more than a job. In 1938, the faculty wrote down 10 ideas which each teacher felt was most important to his work: the consensus #1 idea was that the teacher "had to make the boys feel their thinking is valuable." Here is how Director of Studies and Latin teacher Nathan Costa expressed it to the faculty in August 2004:

> *The business of teaching, properly done, is hard. It's hard to teach a class for the first time, to teach a class for the tenth time, to teach a student again, to teach one who is unknown, to balance the work of preparation and assessment, awareness and visibility, to envision what our students know and how they learn and know it, to question the effectiveness of how and what we teach, to balance a life of work and play, self and other, school and family. I teach at a place like St. Andrew's because,*

as my teacher Don Saliers says of the Psalms, it allows me to experience humanity at full stretch, its mental and physical vigors and demands, its joys and sorrows, its questions and prayers, its ability to begin each day anew in the classroom, to be cognizant of human growth and the wonder of life in all its communion. This is hard work, thankless at times, human always.

Teaching is hard, but it is "human always." George Steiner in his book about teaching, *Lessons of the Masters*, asserts that teaching is indeed a matter of life and death: "Bad teaching is, almost literally, murderous and, metaphorically, a sin, but "Great teaching, the education of the human spirit towards aesthetic, philosophic, intellectual pursuits 'eternalises' not only the individual but mankind."

"Be with the Kids"; The Living Faculty

How does this treatise translate to daily life at St. Andrew's? Faculty have always been involved with the lives of their students; the faculty in 1938 noted how important it was to their classrooms to "work with individuals. Know each student's personality." In 2005, that edict not only is essential, but it is almost forced upon faculty by the mere nature of the job. Faculty are still triple-threats (an admittedly odd phrase for such a nurturing position!); returning faculty already know their students before the opening class; many of them have been coaching them for a week in pre-season camp, spending time with them at meals and in the dorm, putting them to bed at night.

By the time the first class arrives after Labor Day, faculty already have a working relationship with their students, a relationship which only deepens as the year unfolds. Family style meals, trips to town, late night desserts, weekend activities, headmaster forums, games, performances, rehearsals, corridor duty, advisee gatherings, tutorials, committees – so much of the structure of the School creates student-teacher interaction, teaching moments, time to gain insights to the adolescent world. Because St. Andrew's is an entirely residential school (with faculty apartments being added to dormitory space, and faculty homes built closer to the dormitories in recent years), faculty members have more chances to know their students, to augment the classroom relationship. But in fact, the work in and out of the classroom compliment each other: here is Allison Thomas-Rose '96 talking about the advantages of teaching and living on a III Form girls dorm:

On dorm, the door from the corridor to my apartment opens right into my living room. There is no entryway – just the living room, our couch, our home, our family. So when I open the door to a student she gets me, my dog, whatever show is on TV at that time, whatever smells are emanating from the kitchen, whatever laundry is waiting on the couch to be folded. I'm guessing this set-up was not an intentional design decision, but it does accurately reflect what I believe to be at the core of being a St. Andrew's faculty member. Whether you do dorm duty or not, teach or not, coach or not, you are asked to include students in your life to the extent that when you open the door to them, they are right there, in your living room, in the heart of your home and family.

Teachers at St. Andrew's have long realized, as one colleague of mine said, that we have to "be better students of students so that we might become better teachers of students." The challenge for 2005 is that the student's world is more intense and complex than it was even 15 or 20 years ago, and therefore the demands on teachers in a residential school are further increased. Teachers today can spend hours outside of the classroom working with students during the week, counseling, talking, lending an ear, driving them to town, helping them through an adolescent hurdle of a relationship or family issue.

St. Andrew's is no exception here: residential schools across the country are seeing an increase in counseling needs; at the college level, the demand on counseling and mental health personnel has doubled to tripled in the past four to five years. Our students are remarkably healthy, in part because they come from great families who have already bought into the ethos and intentionality of St. Andrew's. A third reason why students are productive and healthy is the faculty, who model for them balanced and meaningful lives, who listen to and affirm them, who push and challenge them, who help become resilient through their experiences. The faculty presence that Stacey Williams Duprey '85 talks about is exactly the presence she herself displays now as a faculty member:

So much of what it means to me to be a member of the faculty at St. Andrew's is rooted in my experience here as a student and consequently the reason I returned to St. Andrew's. What drew me back to St. Andrew's were the faculty members who gave so much of themselves – their time, their energy, their love and support to help me advance academically, develop athletically, grow artistically, and mature personally. These faculty members could not have known first-hand the obstacles

I faced being a black girl from East Harlem attending a school like St. Andrew's, but they recognized that the obstacles were there and provided a safe, supportive place for me and the few other students of color to come together. These are faculty members, past and present, who are still named as some of the most influential people in the lives of alumni more than a quarter of a century later. So to me, being a member of the faculty means it is my turn to give back the love, the encouragement, the support, and yes, even the occasional kick in the pants that was given to me so graciously many years ago.

Working with teenagers today is definitely a challenging task, "awesome" in its full meaning. But it is nevertheless exhilarating, especially at St. Andrew's, where the mission of the School grants teachers the chance to exist so closely with students, in and outside the classroom. In fact, the entire school experience becomes the "classroom" for faculty and students. The job description for a faculty member at St. Andrew's could simply read, "Be with kids." The benefits of such proximity and engagement are what art teacher John McGiff relishes about teaching at St. Andrew's:

In my previous teaching experiences at the college level, I had students for at least twice as much (and often three times as much) time in the studio, but I didn't know who their friends were, what sports they played, the kind of literature they read, the music that they listened to or what their family was like. Consequently, we did less formative, ground-breaking work together. At St. Andrew's, I feel much more deeply connected to my students in the process of developing their interests and spirit; and in spite of the frustration I feel at not having more time to spend with them in the studio. I am very gratified to work along with them and to have some small influence on their sense of who they are and what they are capable of achieving.

How do we know if we are accomplishing anything worthwhile, redeeming, effective? How do we know if each May we are graduating students who can navigate the world, who can be healthy people in their families and jobs and communities, who can serve others and change their neighborhoods for the better? Testimonies from alumni speak to what their experience at St. Andrew's was like. While in college, a recent graduate wrote back that what he felt was the greatest strength of the St. Andrew's program:

…the students feel loved. I think they feel that more than getting good SAT scores, being tri-varsity captain, going to a great college, the School loves them and cares about them because of who they are, what kind of people they are. This is what makes St. Andrew's so extraordinary, so different from other boarding schools. There is a safety in knowing you are loved no matter what you do – a safety a lot of people don't have at home or in their own families. It is this knowledge and safety that drives one to explore and take risks, too, I think.

Allowing Failure to Flourish

My final point about the experience of teaching is the strange but critical paradox about failure's importance to us in the classroom, and in our schools as a whole. The paradox is that as teachers and as schools, we need to celebrate failure: in our world today, we are running away from the chance to experience and fail, and the results could be catastrophic to our schools and children, and ultimately to our society and world.

When I talk about letting failure exist in our classrooms, even allowing failure to flourish, I'm not suggesting a loss of standards but an honest recognition that very little happens right on the first try. The nature of learning is trial and error, is struggle, is mistake after mistake, is risking another mistake in the process of understanding. Painters, musicians, athletes, actors, students, teachers, couples, lovers – rarely does it happen perfectly on the first try, and if it does, we usually don't understand why. Instead, there are wrong notes, mispronounced words, botched passes or stumbling passion – but we go at it again. We obviously don't want our students or children to fail, to be failures. However, I believe that we as a society put so much emphasis on not being a failure, on not failing, on only succeeding, that we've forgotten the necessary role of failure in that task. Today in our culture we've lost the notion that excellence is the end result of the journey; that failure is the tentative first but creative step in that voyage; that learning and knowledge and even wisdom are not a polished, perfect performance but rather hours and months and sometimes years of rehearsals and practices and questions and risks and disappointments and exhaustion and almost giving up. We must teach our students that failure is not annihilation: instead, it is the only valid process of learning. If we don't, they grow up to be soft thinkers, spoiled athletes, short-lived artists, and immoral adults. What they will lack, ironically, is resiliency, the strength to voyage through the necessary and inevitable hurdles of life.

The odd aspect about failure is that it's what we encounter daily in our schools. In the classes I've witnessed, I am struck by how the work focuses not on an answer but on how to get to the answer. In an advanced physics class, the problems demanded attention to the steps, to the procedure, but never to the answer. In a geometry class, there were always two or three different ways to arrive at the end of the proof. During art classes, John McGiff told us we could not erase anything – our pencils didn't even have erasers – because he wanted us to see how each scratch, each supposed mistake, each revision, was integral to the vision. All of these classes affirmed risks, nourished mistakes, and fostered collaborative explorations. Despite how terrified I was to be in those classes, it was also evident how much excitement and fun the students had, because they had the freedom to fall, because they knew from these sage teachers that learning and understanding are pilgrimages of twists and false starts and serendipity and recreation. They become the narrative of how to learn.

Let us also recognize, ironically, that the profession of teaching itself is about failure: teaching encounters and embraces failure constantly. We don't reach a student; we teach a class poorly; our students ask questions that reveal how little they've heard; no one down administration alley seems to notice our efforts. As a career, teaching is so close to the soul, to our own identity and our moral value. We may ignite 10 students, but there are still three or four retreating at the fringe. The way we approach this built-in reality check, this reminder of the inherent failure of our ministry, asserts our courage, and our conviction. I believe the acceptance of this paradox, is what catapults us back to St. Andrew's at the end of August each year: it is our refusal to see this calling as anything but a mission. And our example of tackling failure not as a defeat but as an inspiration transmits potent messages to our students and our colleagues.

What, then, is the gift of failure? Failure grants us a vision, a knowledge of how life is lived far deeper that what we find when we merely succeed. Yes, failure hurts, stings, is embarrassing, messes up that perfect lesson plan we thought we had. But when we allow failure to flourish, students – and teachers – earn insight and knowledge and a spine that will sustain our students years after they have forgotten our study of metaphor and Napoleon and the subjunctive. The experience, not the single moment of failure, but the whole process – the strength to risk, the willingness to fall, the courage to try again – becomes a sacred crusade.