Chapel Talk
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Tonight, I would like to wish you and your families a Happy Thanksgiving and thank you all for your collective efforts to make St. Andrew's a warm, intelligent, lively and compassionate school.

What we have learned and created and accomplished together in these three months of school should inspire us to thrive and flourish in the winter that lies before us. Our Thanksgiving harvest is one composed of innumerable moments of communication, collaboration and hard work, collectively designed to create a community.

We give thanks tonight for the faculty, staff and student body who together create this culture of hope and hospitality.

As you may have noticed, we use the word "authentic" in a number of ways at St. Andrew's. Authentic learning is much different than rote learning and memorization - it describes the process we follow when we pose, consider and debate essential questions facing scholars in their fields and leaders in their positions of responsibility and influence. In the words of writer and college professor Gerald Graff, authentic learning means entering the legitimate and compelling conversations that animate our lives as students and citizens. Too often, Graff argues, life in the academy or college is completely disassociated from the essential debates and arguments of both our times and our disciplines. Too often, we see the life of the mind as distant from the life of the citizen, the reformer, the activist.

Of course, the word authentic suggests that there is also a form of learning that is not genuine, real or transformational. The opposite of authentic learning is learning that is not learning at all - it may be learning that is teacher talk parroted back in an exam blue book; it may be learning that is desperately and strategically geared to please the teacher and secure the coveted grade. Ultimately, authentic learning frees us, liberates us to be independent, creative and resourceful citizens of the world. Rote learning, passive learning, strategic learning and lead to paralysis, emptiness and despair, not only for the individual but for the community as well. The stakes are indeed that high.

The greatest problem facing American schools today is the education establishment's refusal to take the minds of high school students seriously. At our so-called best, we are willing to drill, to threaten, and to intimidate teachers to teach to high stakes tests, or to comprehensively cover material, but we are unwilling to free teachers, students and schools to pursue a form of learning that will activate students' minds, ownership and sense of responsibility in the world of today. At our worst, we ignore standards completely and fail to prepare students for engaged and enlightened participation in our democracy.

I envision an American high school that commits itself completely to the cultivation of authentic learning and civic engagement and leadership. Such a school would thrive, flourish and grow as a place where the intellectual and student life of the school directly addressed the most compelling issues facing our democracy and world.

Such a school would address contemporary issues of war and peace, human rights and terrorism; such a school would build into its curriculum and student life program ways to explore and commit to principles and approaches to environmental sustainability. Such a school would commit once and for all to human rights and study our history of intolerance, bigotry and violence against our fellow man. Such a school would explore religious differences and seek common ground amidst rancor and misunderstanding. Such a school would study the art and science of economics and engage in studies and discussions of ways to pursue and strengthen the American and global economy. Such a school would graduate students who see their education as a source of intellectual, moral, spiritual and civic awakening. Such a school would serve as a direct response to a democracy in need of creativity, engagement and hope. Such a school would celebrate and enact the potential and reality of the global world, encouraging and providing language immersion and international study experiences.

A great democracy needs and deserves great schools and colleges, institutions bold and assertive and creative enough to invigorate our citizens, our democracy and our world. Our mission statements promise such thinking, but we often settle for conventional answers and predictable results. I do not hear or feel a sense of urgency or creativity that would push education to respond powerfully to 21st century needs. Instead, I see a country paralyzed, unable to act to combat global warming, nuclear proliferation,

economic dislocation, educational paralysis. I think the answer to our paralysis lies in a different way of thinking about schools and colleges in America - a different way of thinking about learning.

Let me give you three examples of student work that captures the excitement and transformation of authentic learning: The first assignment asked students to respond thoughtfully to Charles Blow's recent *New York Times* essay attacking private schools as places where racism, intolerance and harassment thrived. Here is an excerpt from a St. Andrew's senior's response - the student addresses Mr. Blow directly:

> Your central claim, that boys in private schools are more likely to discriminate against those who vary from social "norms," could not be more accurate. Generally, my private school friends, particularly those from the all-boys' school, fit cleanly into the cookie-cutter pattern of the elitist youth. They all have more money than the vast majority of the country. They all come from two-parent homes. They all belong to various, exclusive country clubs. Most importantly, however, they all solely associate with each other.
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> Throughout my years before high school, I was blindly complicit to acts of discrimination that I now abhor. Whether it was a snide remark made in passing or the public mockery of someone outside our group, these acts of intolerance were both disgusting and frequent. While at the time, I thought of these violations as nothing more than harmless jokes, I have come to understand through living in a more accepting, diverse community that these seemingly small comments act as the foundation for a larger sense of intolerance and hatred.
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> However, I would like to offer one critique of your otherwise accurate depiction of the state of acceptance among private school boys. You draw a distinct connection between the common intolerance and the fact that these boys are "chosen" when they are admitted into their various schools.
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> You say that simply by being chosen, these boys gain an inherent sense of elitism and exclusivity. You argue that the mere act of being accepted into a private school will inherently lead to a sense of entitlement within the boy and his family. This argument, however, leaves no room for a

> progressive, countercultural school to exist. Having attended four vastly different private schools, I can personally attest to the fact that not all private schools were created equal.
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> Quite simply, it is the duty of the school to destroy any sense of entitlement that might be fostered by the admissions process. If a school sets a standard of diversity, acceptance, understanding, and tolerance then its students will emulate these values. If, however, a school turns its nose up at the chance for diversity and a wide range of backgrounds amongst its students, then the students will likewise follow its lead.

Notice a couple features of this essay. The prose is sharp, coherent and compelling - the tone is gracious, thoughtful, serious and balanced. The writer accurately depicts Blow's central claim and responds to that argument in a fair and judicious manner. He graciously agrees and disagrees - he establishes an important contrast in the approaches of different schools. He humbly admits to his complicity in words of intolerance and manners and spirit and shows how young people move from ignorance to perception.

A less seasoned, versatile and experienced writer, one not skilled in the art of authentic work, might be tempted to engage not in analysis and argument but in defensive, angry and inappropriate responses. The essay works because in its expression, tone and substance, the writer believes deeply and enacts gracefully the purpose of writing.

Recently another senior wrote an essay evaluating the recent *New York Times* decision to publish classified information on the War in Iraq leaked by Julian Assange and WikiLeaks: he contrasted views expressed by writers in *The New York Times* and *New Yorker* magazine. The *Times* ultimately decided to publish the information despite lingering questions about Assange's character and intentions. The *New Yorker* article disagreed, emphasizing Assange's questionable past. Our senior writes:

> Though differing in their analyses of the conflict with the WikiLeaks publication, Brisbane and Coll offer a refined understanding of the issue. Brisbane justifiably condones the *Times*' separation of journalism and controversial questions of military security. He is right in defending a news source's general responsibility to publish accounts of war. However, Coll (in the *New Yorker*) illuminates what is most problematic about the *Times*' decision, the validity of the information

> itself. Surely the public has the right to know about the wars it supports and funds, but the media has an equal responsibility to report information from accurate and reliable sources. In this age of media in which celebrity gossip is broadcast alongside global crises and political humor is squeezed from important national issues, the line between credible news and banter thins.

The writer here is impressive in his ability not only to master two different approaches to the controversy; he succeeds in arguing that one writer has a perspective that is most convincing to him. Our student contends that *The New York Times* has a right to publish only if its source has met crucial standards of reliability, objectivity and character.

The student establishes his credibility through his eloquent writing, control of both arguments, and care for the legitimate questions involved in the case.

Both essays brought me out of my seat, for not only was the writing articulate, balanced, mature and sophisticated, the essays were authentic, as deserving of publication and national conversation as anything in the *Times*.

Yet such writing has limited applicability in American classrooms or no place in the world of standardized testing, unless one seeks, as St. Andrew's does, to both develop authentic learning opportunities and to identify an outlier test, the CWRA, that honors students by giving them an essential question and time to develop a coherent essay.

The danger of fostering an educational system that rewards memorization, rote learning, strategic thinking and standardized testing is that we as a culture unwittingly indicate that school is not about creativity, critical thinking skills and the use of writing and the scientific method for the pursuit of thought, reflection and creativity, but rather the expression of ideas, concepts and themes that have no relevance, no connection, no meaning. The danger of locking students away from commentary, analysis, protest and engagement in the authentic questions of our time, is that they will be unprepared for the world of work and civic engagement.

For example, if we teach writing to conform to the requirements of a standardized test that asks a barren and empty question and requires a 20-minute essay, we suggest that writing is a game, a skill to be mastered for a testing or schooling requirement. Writing is not an obstacle to be surmounted - it is not a barren exploration of a five-paragraph structure; it is a way of thinking, exploring, debating, arguing, clarifying, creating, refining and enacting. But because we often accept the contortions of a testing culture, we lose the essential dynamism of the art of writing.

Perhaps this is why professional lawyers, doctors, businessmen and women and journalists shake their heads today and tell me that many of the best and the brightest undergraduates and graduate school students do not know how to write, how to problem solve, how to create and how to collaborate.

On Tuesday night, our two varsity boys' soccer coaches attended a State semifinal game between two Delaware high schools. They were shocked and disturbed by the chants emanating from one of the cheering sections: in unison, fans yelled phrases such as "Who's that faggot . . . #5 is a faggot."

I asked my class to write letters to the DIAA, reacting to this form of hatred, harassment and intolerance. This was authentic writing, designed to assert protest, values, goodness, alarm and concern. Here are a few excerpts from student writing on this issue:

- In light of the atrocious and unacceptable behavior at the soccer game, I feel an obligation to quell the homophobia and disrespect that has no place at professional sporting events, let alone in a high school environment. It is morally unacceptable to allow this sort of behavior to continue in an environment that is meant to foster the growth of individuals and teams as athletes . . . No parents, referees, or DIAA officials confronted the homophobic insults that reverberated across the field. No ultimatum was presented and enforced in the face of their behavior.

- It is clear that our emotional investment in competition can easily overpower our sense of humanity and dignity. However, it is inexcusable for this to lead to the level of dehumanization and cruelty expressed by these fans. When, as shocking as it is to believe, players, coaches, athletic directors and parents stand by and do nothing, it is the DIAA's responsibility to intervene.

- I understand the heated tensions created in sports fans, but these high school students stepped way out of line. Similar to racism or sexism, this homophobia inflicts a deeper hate than curse words or insults. It cuts to the core of people's beliefs in equality. Imagine the sensation you would feel as a gay man or woman in that crowd.

This writing expresses outrage and disgust at an adult world seemingly so out of touch with the realities of the degrading and corrosive effect of homophobic speech—the writers affirm the mission of athletics as a source of teamwork, sportsmanship and values.

The writers ask profound questions about the role of bystanders when acts of discrimination and bigotry are expressed. Finally, the essays affirm the liberating power of empathy—writing helps us to imagine what the venom of such hatred would feel like to a LGBT person in the stadium.

Thanksgiving is ultimately a national holiday designed to remind us that we as a nation are knit together by a common spirit, energy and ideal. It is a time to give thanks not only for survival, but for the promise and purpose of membership in a family, community, nation and world.

Tonight we give thanks for the art, the spirit of education that asserts a democratic, civic and noble purpose on our high school and college campuses across the country and the world. At our best, our campuses signal hope, creativity and commitment to the needs of the world.

May you enjoy the celebration of this holiday with those you love and cherish. I hope you will return determined to continue to make St. Andrew's a school of hope and transformation in the world - we have a lot to be proud of and thankful for, but I have the deep and abiding sense that we can and must do more.