Daniel T. Roach, Jr.
Chapel Remarks
"A Stone of Hope"
January 11, 2012

I want to talk tonight about the sentiment of hope in our lives, and I want to do so through a reflection on the words of Václav Havel and Martin Luther King, Jr. I chose this theme to help you and me live with a steady and courageous sense of direction and affirmation in our lives and to honor both Havel and King, two revolutionary figures who made transformational contributions to their country and world. Havel, who died in December, led the remarkable Velvet Revolution that destroyed the austere, repressive force of a totalitarian state; King, whose birthday we celebrate Monday, awakened America from a long, stubborn, virulent history of violence, prejudice, discrimination and inhumanity to people of color. Both achieved greatness by an intentional understanding and development of a generous concept of hope in our lives.

I chose this topic too because writers like Havel and Bard College President Leon Botstein believe that we in the modern world have an incomplete, immature and dangerous understanding of the role of hope in our lives and in society. Botstein writes in his excellent book Jefferson's Children that we as a culture often use the word hopefully "not as the adverb it is, but as a way of saying I hope," as in "Hopefully things will turn out well." The problem with such a sentence is that we give up any notion of responsibility or agency for the goals or aspirations we identify. We imply that only random and unknown forces may be at play to affect and influence our goals. We express a pathetic and immature wish for our desires magically to come true. Botstein writes:

> *The use of hopefully to which we have now become accustomed is a sign of the extent to which we have lost hope and live in a culture of pessimism. We no longer feel comfortable putting ourselves on the line. We talk about events in our lives indiscriminately as if they are not in our control. We are not inclined to take responsibility . . .*
>
> *Our current use of language suggests we live in an age of greater helplessness than in the past, when the usage that is now persuasive was understood as simply wrong. No doubt we would like things to get better, but we place more distance in our speech from that idea and its realization. We depersonalize hope and act, in speech, as if we ourselves are not in charge . . .*
>
> *No other generation of children in the history of this country has suffered so much under the burden of sustained adult hopelessness.*

These are strong words by one of America's most brilliant and incisive educators. Botstein reminds us that what George Orwell observed in his essay "Politics and the English Language" remains true—our use of language reveals more than a knowledge of

grammar and proper usage: our language suggests and enacts a particular relationship to the world. If we cannot write or say the words, "I hope," Botstein argues that we cannot create, cannot engage, cannot change or commit to our society and world. We cannot imagine a definite and coherent vision or hope for the future because we have embraced an empty, passive relationship to our world.

It should not be surprising that St. Andrew's mission statement explicitly embraces the concept of hope. Our mission statement reads in part:

> *We continue to cultivate in our students a lasting and a deep desire for learning, a willingness to ask questions and pursue skeptical independent inquiry and an appreciation of the liberal arts as a source of wisdom, perspective and hope.*

This statement reflects the school's firm belief that education is a passionate inquiry into the meaning of life and the development of a more just, equitable and sustainable world. We aspire to be a school that transforms study and reflection into the commitment of work and action. I teach Tolstoy or Shakespeare or Virginia Woolf or Toni Morrison not because the ideas and doctrines and narratives they explore are scholarly exercises. I teach these works and these writers because literature by its very nature enables us to see, to feel, to understand aspects of our lives that need new insight, clarification and questioning. Literature for me embodies a commitment to hope in the world, to action in the world, to empathy in the world. Ask your teachers how they individually see their teaching, their syllabus, their classroom as a foundation for goodness and engagement in the world.

Havel describes hope this way: hope is the "ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. The more unpropitious the situation is in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper the hope is. Hope is the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how well it turns out." We notice that for Havel hope is not timid, superficial, selfish or self-serving. It is the habit of imagining and then creating a new reality, a new social order, a new way to express what is best in human nature.

Of course, Havel has remarkable legitimacy as an expert on hope. He possessed a personal and vivid understanding of the ruthlessness and hypocrisy of a totalitarian state that celebrated every virtue of a free, equitable and creative society even as such rights were repressed, violated and destroyed. The Velvet Revolution began with students who on November 17, 1990, marched and demanded freedom, human rights and reform. *New York Review of Books* writer Timothy Garton Ash described the moment when the regime exposed its essential and destructive corruption:

> *They were met by riot police with white helmets, shields and truncheons and by special anti-terrorist squads in red berets. Large members of demonstrators were cut off and surrounded . . . They went on chanting*

freedom and singing the Czech version of "We Shall Overcome." Those in the front line tried to hand flares to the police. They placed lighted candles on the ground and raised their arms, chanting, "We have bare hands." But the police and especially the red berets beat men, women and children with their truncheons.

Facing such an outrage, the students and then Havel exposed the great weakness of the totalitarian state. It could not survive once its brutality and emptiness was exposed.

It is not enough, Havel argues, for hope to be timid, insecure and frightened, real hope calls us to identify the good we as a school, country and world should embrace. This is a restless hope, a courageous hope designed ultimately to inspire us to work with grit, determination, courage and persistence. This hope promises nothing other than audacious pursuit of a good in our society—we gain no guarantees of success, of acclaim, of power or authority. We simply embody the spirit of humanity at its best.

As a tired and pessimistic country, we celebrate Dr. King's birthday this month. I was fortunate enough to live 11 years in America under Dr. King's influence, eloquence and affirmation of our country's ultimate potential. I sometimes worry that his life, his legacy and his story have been simplified by a country satisfied with media bytes and empty summaries of the Civil Rights Movement. Dr. King's great speech delivered during the March on Washington on August 28, 1963, is a visionary and prophetic address. But it is also a call to action, a call to work, to sacrifice and to struggle for an elusive and complex goal in a racist society. Like Havel, King found inspiration, strength and eloquence from the courageous example and suffering of those who came before him, those willing to translate hope into concerted action against a white system of oppression. On that day, he said the following words:

We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality. We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating "For Whites Only." We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations. Some of you have come fresh from narrow jail cells. Some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to

> *work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive. Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to South Carolina, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed. Let us not wallow in the valley of despair.*

"Unearned suffering is redemptive . . . We can never be satisfied . . . Let us not wallow in the valley of despair." King speaks of work and creative and redemptive suffering—he refuses to surrender to the vicious and brutal tactics of the opposition and, most significantly, he calls upon men and women of color to hew out of the mountain of despair "a stone of hope." That small stone of hope was to become the signal of change, the precious sign of epiphany and resolution that brought down the racist façade of the nation as surely as Havel's stone of hope extinguished a mighty, oppressive regime.

Thanks to Havel and King and Botstein, I have a better understanding of the power of hope in our school, in our country and in our world. It is easy, I suppose, for modern citizens to doubt our capacity to change our lives, our society and our world in such powerful ways. It is common, Botstein argues, for us to accept a life of passivity, resignation and weakness. But these inspiring examples remind us that we each have important roles and responsibilities far beyond our narrow bounds of self-interest. We must identify the goal, even if the achievement of that goal seems so audacious, distant, perilous and unlikely. And then we must roll up our sleeves and chip away at that mountain of despair. All we need is a stone to move us forward.