

Daniel T. Roach, Jr.
All School Chapel Remarks
Thursday, January 4, 2018

It is good to see you all after what I hope was a great winter break with family and friends. I hope this return day schedule eases your transition back to school, allows you to reflect on the good work and promise of the 2017-2018 school year, and focus on the crucial responsibilities we have for one another. Please be careful over the next three days as we handle snow and very dangerous cold and wind chill conditions. A big thank you to our Facilities staff who have been here since 5:30 a.m. to clear our roads and sidewalks to keep us safe. We want to enable emergency services on and off campus to focus on helping residents and citizens in need of support and not burden them with accidents that could have been avoided.

Over the vacation, I read an essay titled, "Waking up to the Gift of Aliveness," written by a professor of philosophy at Harvard University, Sean Kelly. The piece pays tribute to a teacher Kelly had in his undergraduate career, Hubert Dreyfus, and the source of the tribute is an epiphany created by finding and reading a long forgotten and discarded sentence from a notebook from a lecture class: the sentence read: "The goal of life, for Pascal, is not happiness, peace, or fulfilment, but aliveness."

What made this moment an epiphany was that Kelly read that note decades after he had taken Dreyfus' course. In fact, Kelly had turned back to his old notebook precisely because he, now a professor, was teaching the philosophy of Blaise Pascal in one of the courses he now taught at Harvard. In the intervening years, the notebook had been lost and forgotten, only to reappear miraculously not as a collection of observations that Kelly needed to remember for an exam -- but instead a philosophy, an ethic he could live by.

Both for Sean Kelly and for us here at St. Andrew's, the Dreyfus quotation -- the goal of life is aliveness -- is a powerful one for us to consider and remember in the winter and in the opening moments of 2018. It reminds us that our very lives are miraculous, full of great potential for dramatic and life and world changing contributions, discoveries, innovations.

For Kelly, the phrase from his notes resonated because as an adult he realized that what we call the routines and schedules of life do at times lull us to sleep, make us believe that the spontaneous, the miraculous, the essence of life are forever buried under the essential business and routine of our lives. John Gardner described our passive and unfulfilled potential with these words: "Most men and women go through their lives using no more than a fraction -- usually a very small fraction -- of the possibilities within them. The reservoir of unused talent is vast."

A note that lay dormant awakened Kelly. Here is how he described the phenomenon of reading that sentence decades after his class was over:

When you really feel alive, your past, your present, and your future somehow make sense together as the unity they have always promised to be. I sometimes feel truly alive for instance, when I am teaching my students. When it is going well, when we are connected and engaged and the classroom is buzzing, it is not just that we are sharing a special moment together. For me, that moment has the special character that it does because it fulfills the promise implicit in moments like that from my own childhood and youth. It is the validation of what came before as it is the preparation for what comes after. When you see in your students the sense that what is happening now will stay in them, will remain alive as a future memory that can sustain them in some other moment, far away and different from the one we are now sharing, then the moment vibrates with an energy it wouldn't otherwise have.

Let's think about that passage--when we feel really alive, Kelly suggests, we see ourselves as artists, somehow honoring and building on who taught and nurtured us, what was taught to us, and how we learned. We who teach honor our own teachers, our parents, our grandparents, our role models--we offer their wisdom electrified by our own personal gifts and insights. For you who now learn, you will carry this spirit, this vision, this presence, this wisdom onto your own lives, and then pass it on to the young people under your care someday in family, work, or play. The point Kelly makes is that the moments of our lives, the conversations we have on dorm, in advisee groups, in classes, have the potential to reappear and reignite our souls long after those days have apparently ended. When I teach, for instance, I remember the words of my professor Fred Stocking, now deceased, as he taught me that literature could illuminate the meaning of life. When I lead, I remember the inspiration of my high school soccer coach who said before a big game, "This is a great opportunity," thereby unleashing a confidence and audacity that led us to victory.

What is happening every day here at St. Andrew's is the collection and cultivation of people and insights and habits of mind and heart that will love and support and inspire you each and every day, yes, in moments of happiness, but more importantly when we deal with tragedy and difficult moments now and for the rest of your lives. This is extraordinary and magnificent! I witnessed such courage, and grace, and love, and support, and goodness, and compassion in members of the extended St. Andrew's family as we mourned the loss of two young alums in December.

On my Head of School bulletin board, I posted an article over the break about the Naval Academy's place kicker, who missed the game winning field goal in the final seconds of the rivalry game with Army. This is a story of courage, teamwork, and grace. Even as the kick sailed wide and the game was lost, Bennett Moehring felt the energy and support of his teammates:

I'll never forget my team wouldn't let me fall, even though I'd just let them down, he recalls. Over the days and weeks after the kick, Moehring heard from generations of Navy football players, offering him their support, saying he had tried his best and that was all Midshipmen could ever ask for. He observed, "It felt like a giant network of brotherhood was catching me."

It turns out Moehring had also taken a course in leadership at the Naval Academy: *New York Times* writer Juliet Macur wrote: "In class, he had practiced how to put a positive spin on bad news and motivate people who were struggling. His professor, a former Navy Seal, often talked to him after class, giving advice on resilience and relating how the Seals would succeed in missions that did not go as planned."

"It's all about how you are going to respond," the professor would say. "People are going to see that and they are going to say, Is this a guy worth following?"

By the end of his two weeks of conversations and reflections, Bennett emerged more strong, confident, and assertive.

"I'm just like, thanks guys. I'll hit it next time."

We need a spirit of readiness, expectation, and vitality to stay alive to the moments that either teach us the meaning of life or allow us to share that vision of generosity with others. We need in these upcoming two short months to seize the beauty of winter as powerfully as we embrace the spring. How? By going on the offensive for moments of creativity, serenity, and human connection; by supporting one another unconditionally; by living lives of integrity; by honoring the soul, spirit, body of every single person; by looking for the light of epiphany to shine in every classroom; by rejecting the false allure of drugs and alcohol; by continuing a school year that honors and respects the spirit of St. Andrew's; by tackling February with the greatest assertion of joy, vitality, and exuberance ever witnessed here, by finding beauty in the slow and gorgeous awakening of life we can observe even in the apparent darkness of winter.

The goal of life is aliveness, for then we are awakened to the beauty, majesty, dignity, and promise of every human being and our natural world.