

Jon O'Brien Eulogy
Central Congregational Church
Providence, Rhode Island
Sunday, April 22, 2018

In the years 1964 and 1965, the great American writer John McPhee wrote a tribute to Frank Boyden titled The Headmaster. It is a book Heads of School read every summer, for in many ways McPhee not only captures a man, a time, an era, and style of school leadership; he reminds us all of what we in education should be doing and thinking about every single day.

If one were to write the same kind of book to celebrate the best Headmaster in the late 20th century era in American boarding schools, the subject of the profile would be Jon O'Brien. I would like to write that book, but a prologue will have to suffice today.

In my grief and sadness over the loss of my father figure, mentor, and exemplar, I have thought for the last month about all the qualities that made Jon such an inspiring, dynamic, and charismatic leader. I have tried to understand the source of the love, loyalty, and trust I and so many of you in this church felt for this man, literally from the first time I met him in May 1979 to our last conversation in December 2017.

From the beginning, he was compelling: young, vigorous, enthusiastic, passionate, brilliant, and visionary. I had never met a leader, or for that matter a Headmaster like him, and therefore I watched him carefully everyday, listening intently to what

he had to say, and how he said it. I studied his work ethic, steady, consistent, powerful, reliable, and capable of astonishing leaps of energy, creativity, and courage when the day to day work of school grew more urgent, more complex, more difficult.

I watched and realized he had the brilliance of a lawyer, architect, land planner, environmentalist, teacher, parent, coach, and principal all at the same time, and I was astonished at the range these skills provided in his daily work as Headmaster. I watched him carefully in crisis situations, moments that test the courage, vision, and strength of a Head: some tests were public, decisions on suspensions and expulsions for students; decisions on faculty retention, promotion, and development. Other struggles were more private, the ones that test the soul: the loneliness associated with changing the course of the history of a school; the inevitable displays of adult envy, jealousy, narcissism, bitterness, and anger a visionary leader necessarily confronts. Change and the cultivation of excellence are not easy, he knew.

Even as I worked more and more passionately each of my 15 years as his Assistant Head to strengthen and support him in such moments, I was overwhelmed by the indomitable spirit of this man. The source of that courage and energy came most of all through his love of family and partnership with Joan, whose spirit, courage, work ethic, and warmth and love of people eventually melted the rough edges of the St. Andrew's community, whose companionship and love made it possible for Jon to be the articulate, confident, and courageous leader of the School.

For what Jon and Joan O'Brien proposed to do here was truly audacious--this was not designed as a mere stop in Delaware to prepare for another headship; this was to be a bold, a revolutionary project: to take everything he and Joan had learned in their lives to move a small school in Delaware into national and international prominence. For St. Andrew's sake, Jon was determined to redefine and expand the very notion, scope, and transformational impact of the Head position. He set a new standard for excellence by committing heart and soul to the project named St. Andrew's.

When he called us, we all came, at first it seems in retrospect, against our better judgement: Delaware, Middletown? I first learned of the school as I scanned the faculty profile at the desk of my college's career center. Then, I read the Jon O'Brien introduction, looked at his photograph, and immediately sensed his energy, intention, creativity, exploration and expectation of teaching excellence.

It was his credo from the beginning: something miraculous was about to happen: a school transformation, a culture shift, a turn towards enlightened and progressive education; the cultivation of hospitality, enthusiasm, trust, and love. Do you, he asked us all, want to be part of something inspirational and illuminating? When I prattled on about going to law school, he made it clear that if I did, I would miss the drama about to unfold in the cornfields. I stared at him, realized he was deadly serious, and knew far more than I did. I never looked back.

It did not matter if you were young or old: the hierarchies that paralyzed prep schools no longer applied. If you worked harder that you had ever worked in your

life, if you understood that you had to be brilliant and engaged not only in the classroom but in every aspect of boarding school life, if you realized that St. Andrew's financial aid program gave teachers the opportunity to work creatively with the most exciting, diverse, and talented group of students in the nation, if you could be inspired and stay up with the energy and goodness and grace of the O'Briens, you could lead, grow, flourish here.

And in turn and in appreciation, Jon and Joan would supply the fortitude, courage, and love. That meant that they took on the early adult anger, negativity, and bitterness directed against them as they changed the School; that meant they confronted student entitlement when senior privileges, hierarchy, and authority became instead senior responsibility, stewardship, and humility. As individuals and as a couple, they took it, endured it, confronted it. They knew that when the right people got into the right places at the right time, the tide would somehow turn. Oh yes, people came after them, tested them, tried to intimidate and break them, and they never succeeded. At first Jon and Joan took it on themselves, and then we as a group, team, and family won the day. We found unity, common purpose, and a spirit of possibility and potential. St. Andrew's arrived, emerged, and prospered just as Jon predicted in the early days of his tenure.

Now, Jon O'Brien could speak with passion, and he ranged from eloquent prose and poetry to epic expressions of his values and expectations. Both rhetorical styles emphasized the extent, the depth, the reality of his commitment to the School and its mission. The voice came from his heart and soul, and we understood its authenticity and responded in turn.

He had an infectious laugh, a love of all people, and an impatience for prep school arrogance, entitlement, and narcissism. He had no patience for bullies (he confronted them immediately and effectively) or for teachers who were cold, sarcastic, condescending, mean, or self serving. He had all the patience in the world for students and teachers who demonstrated that they understood, even imperfectly, the responsibility they bore for the St. Andrew's movement. He did not demand perfection; instead he honored the human mind and soul in process towards grace.

Jon was a teacher of both students and adults. Yes, he represented to his students an ethic of concern, love, and expectation that helped them grow in maturity and grace. Yes, he gave each adolescent as many chances and opportunities he could create (sometimes faculty could not understand his patience!) for he believed in our kids and their potential.

But he was dynamic and inspirational with adults as well. He always found time for me in his office, and each time we met I learned so much about life, about teaching, about leadership, about courage. He knew when to challenge his faculty and leadership group; he knew when we needed new opportunities and responsibilities; he knew how to cultivate school leaders. He did the little miraculous things that made all the difference: taking us out for dinner and expressing his thanks for our work, writing us handwritten notes to congratulate us for a game, theatrical production, or Chapel talk, showing up to virtually every game in every sport, racing to our side when anything happened in our lives that was distressing or upsetting, turning his office lights on before anyone else and

turning them off long after everyone was asleep--a sign always that he was protecting and honoring and developing his school.

It was quite an experience: having an apprenticeship with the best Headmaster of his time and then for the next 21 years, walking the path of leadership Jon created for me--working in the same office, living in the same house, articulating sacred school principles, celebrating the accomplishments of our incredible extended community.

Elizabeth and I know now both how exhilarating and exhausting this work can be; we realize the physical, emotional, and psychological toll of such leadership. It is all consuming. It is complex; it is joyful; it is emotional; it is real.

But every day, as we build and celebrate St. Andrew's, we realize that our work and vision simply would not have been possible or relevant or powerful or meaningful without the courage, wisdom, vitality, dignity, and sacrifice of the O'Briens. We stand together now for over 40 years of leadership, founded by the man we love and honor today: Jon O'Brien.

And therefore we are grateful beyond words for his life, his gift to education, community, citizenship. The seeds of the O'Brien revolution in education reside in the very center of St. Andrew's and in all of you who were taught, inspired, and fortified by his example. And his spirit, wisdom, and example radiate throughout the world of secondary education in the 21st century. His influence and legacy are exceptional.

In the cornfields of Delaware, far from the center of boarding school prominence, prestige, and acclaim, a school emerged, strong, coherent, authentic, and good--Jon's very best painting of all.

"He was a man. Take him for all in all.

I shall not look on his like again."