

A Reflection on the 2010-2011 School Year from Headmaster Tad Roach

Will Robinson, Jul 1 2011

All of us here at St. Andrew's send you and your family our best wishes for a great 4th of July weekend and a wonderful summer. I hope you have had the chance to follow the exciting news from Henley as our boys' varsity eight represents St. Andrew's and the United States in international rowing competition. I am very proud of the character, spirit, and dedication of this group.

For several weeks now I have had the opportunity to reflect on the 2010-2011 year at the school and study the 2011 Commencement speech delivered by Sarah Abbott, '99. In this essay I would like to share a few observations with you.

During the course of the 2010-2011 year, St. Andrew's studied and discussed our best collective approach to educate for leadership, integrity and service to our school, nation and world. We have never been content to aspire to be a school that prepares students only for college admission and college work – we believe a St. Andrew's education should be one that sets a powerful and reliable, moral and ethical foundation for life. We want a St. Andrew's education to come alive powerfully in the most dramatic, compelling, stressful moments of all graduate's lives. We want the St. Andrew's spirit and ethos to serve as a guiding force through the struggles of our lives.

We welcomed a number of speakers during the year who gave us their perspective on education for leadership. In the spring alone, President Elizabeth Kiss of Agnes Scott College, Bishop Wayne Wright and Sarah Abbott addressed the community, and in their own distinctive ways they agreed that the way to foster integrity, leadership, courage, generosity, empathy and service is to practice on a daily basis, with the same intensity and commitment we bring to the mastery of academic, artistic or athletic habits. To be men and women of integrity. President Kiss suggested we master the habit of telling the truth and refusing to cut corners in every situation we confront. To be “instruments of God's peace,” Bishop Wright encouraged us to practice the virtue of empathy and compassion until we have such habits of heart mastered. To be citizens of the country and the world, Lieutenant Abbott challenged us to break through our – provincial lives and serve through sacrifices of time, energy, effort and attention. Shakespeare expressed the power of habit in his great play Hamlet. As the prince counsels his mother in Act III, he suggests she break the cycle of her sin with Claudius by committing to a new custom:

That monster custom, who all sense doth eat,

Of habits devil, is angel yet in this,

That to the use of actions fair and good

He likewise gives a frock or livery,

That aptly is put on ...

For use almost can change the stamp of nature,

And either lodge the devil, or throw him out

With wondrous potency.

Our year at St. Andrew's helped us to understand that the embrace and pursuit of "actions fair and good" can lead us to more fulfilling, engaging and powerful lives.

Sarah Abbott's speech gave us a remarkable perspective and understanding of the power of education to guide and inspire us in our complex and stressful lives. First, she reminded us that we as citizens must do more than thank the remarkable men and women of our armed forces who fight to protect the American homeland and spirit in the world; we must take on responsibility for the tasks we ask servicemen and women to perform:

Above all ... please, please serve your country by being reasonable and educated voices amid the constant political posturing and emotional debate that seems to overwhelm the national dialogue. Recall that people like me get sent all over the world to fight wars and drop bombs; we put ourselves in harm's way and do some very harmful things, all at the behest of our government ... On this Memorial Day weekend, think of the kind of service that requires such sacrifice, and remember that there is a teenage airman controlling aircraft over Kandahar on the night of his birthday, or a sailor deployed on a carrier right now missing the birth of his child.

Sarah's words remind us that the purpose of a liberal arts education is to empower students to express responsibility for the health and vitality of our democracy by developing analytical skills necessary to develop reasonable, intelligent, discerning answers to vital questions of national security. To do this well, schools must teach the skills of argument, analytical thinking and good writing – students must come to not only understand the conversations and controversies of our time: they must be willing and able to enter such discussions effectively.

Secondly, Sarah Abbott spoke to us about the "toolbox" education must provide us as we step into our roles as adults in a democratic society. In a brilliant metaphor, of a parachute, Sarah taught us that we need remarkable people and institutions in our lives who will help us develop the skills and ethical attributes that will serve us in our most frightening moments. Those people, those experiences, those lessons, Sarah argues, are the essence of our educational experience, and if we have the benefit of great teachers, great examples and great schools, we will be ready when the tests we face are stark and dramatic. For Sarah, one such moment emerged as she struggled one evening to land on an aircraft carrier – three times she failed to execute the landing:

I couldn't pull over to the side of the road and call my mom, believe me, I wanted to, and there's no time or gas to take a break when the entire deck of an aircraft carrier is manned and waiting for you; I had to keep trying to land. Naval aviators call this "a night in the barrel" and nearly every carrier pilot has one at some point; we say that 'there are those who have, and those who will.' But pilot or no, everyone has a point like this sometime, where you are strained to your limit - tired, worn out, vibrating from the effort of it, and your mental toughness comes to task. It is in these moments that you will define your own success; you will find out how well you packed your parachute, and who's there with you as you conquer the sudden extremity of a routine task gone bad, a dramatically life changing event, or the simple daily grind of adult life. It won't be any amount of talent or potential that saves you from the danger that being tired or worn out presents to your goals, it will be your tenacity in hanging on.

These are wise words about life, about education and about America. We might think about taking them to

heart as we celebrate the 4th of July and prepare for a new School year.