

Chapel Talk
Wednesday, May 17th
Betsy James

I remember my high school days well. I was classified as a rebel or as Sarah Maclachlan would say, “a train wreck waiting to happen”, and so my friends are shocked when they hear about my job because, in their minds, I am the most unlikely candidate for someone who enforces things like room inspection and dress code. The truth is, I wasn’t really a rebel. I liked to think of myself as more of a carefree spirit, one who was not detained by a high fence and a sign that said, “DO NOT ENTER.” I often came to the incorrect assumption that, if people went to the trouble of putting up such a fence and sign, that they must be hiding something really good, and I was determined to figure out what it was. So, I jumped many a fence, and I roamed the earth as if it were mine.

My high school boyfriend was equally fearless, and I remember vividly the moment in which I fell into “like.” A group of us were in the process of rolling one of our friend’s yards after skipping the homecoming dance when a big, white van with no rear windows slowly approached. All of us jumped into the bushes, hiding for our lives, except for the object of my affection. He just stood there and stared at the big, bald man who emerged from the van. “What do you think you’re doing?” the man roared. My boyfriend-to-be looked him straight in the eye and said, “I’m rolling a yard. Want to help?” and then proceeded to throw the roll of toilet paper back up into the trees, a true symbol of his defiance, before he took off running down the street, the large, bald man chasing after him. That was the moment when all of the other boys paled in comparison.

Needless to say, I didn’t quite fit in a few years later at a big southern university, but I had a great time by making the best of my situation. But by the end of my four years, I was ready to explore and ready to get out of Alabama.

I journeyed to Los Angeles because I needed, “wide open spaces,” and I found myself in an intensely competitive math graduate program. I loved advanced math, which is a

study of logic surprisingly similar to philosophy. I found comfort in the fact that math was pure, it was un-jaded by a chaotic world. It was also incredibly challenging, and I felt that I was giving my mind a workout. I was relieved being around others who had similar academic interests despite the odd quirks that come with mathematicians.

I soon grew weary, however, because I realized that studying math all day every day was not enough to sustain me. And, at the same time, I grew ill of the people in Los Angeles. I was tired of living in a city when going out to a bar included dressing up and being approved by the bouncer. I hated the “industry” and the pettiness and vanity of the Hollywood world. I needed a change. As Green Day says, “I begged to dream and differ from the hollow lies.”

I arrived at Saint Andrew’s terrified that I would not be able to survive in rural Delaware with no adventures and no friends. A few months after my arrival, I was walking down the corridor in Founders when a bunch of seniors pulled me into the classroom. It was a typical Monday night and they were blasting music and dancing on the tables during study hall. Without a thought I joined in not knowing that there would be rumors the next day that “Miz James was going crazy last night.” But I realized something. I realized that it had been way too long that I wanted to dance on a Monday night just because. It’s not that I had become older (even though most people use that as an excuse), but rather that I had forgotten what it was like to really love being alive. I realized that in my pursuit of a college and graduate education, I had not stopped to ask myself what I wanted out of life. I was pursuing these accomplishments, these degrees that amounted to nothing more than pieces of paper. And I began to re-define my accomplishments.

I wanted to see the world, to not just accept what I am told, but to actually see it and search for understanding. Since I have been here at St. Andrew’s, I have traveled to almost every continent.

I went to China, and I know what it feels like to stand in Tiananmen Square. I went to Vietnam and sat on the sidewalk with a Vietnamese man about my age as he shared with me his life, his reflections, and his dreams. I went to Morocco and felt the oppression of women as I dodged men in the street, always having to look down and ashamed. I went to Zambia and saw the intense poverty and vulnerability to diseases as someone living next to me contracted malaria. I went to Peru and stood on the amazing Manchu Picchu completely overwhelmed as to how it was built as well as the sacrifice that went into building it. I went to Israel and learned that a wrong turn in the road could lead you to a town of people that adamantly and earnestly despise and want to kill you.

I learn a lot by traveling, but traveling in and of itself does not satisfy. After all, traveling is not really an accomplishment because it's easy to jump on a plane and spend small amounts of time in another world. I get to come back to take multiple showers, use a toilet instead of a hole in the ground, and throw away the clothes that I bought at Wal-Mart for the trip. I've met many people my age who have been traveling around the world for years, bumming from one country to another. Sure, they acquire interesting stories, but it seemed as if they were escaping reality more than anything else. And maybe I was guilty of that too.

I questioned what my accomplishments were, if any. And I have concluded that the only true accomplishments involve the people in my life. It is an accomplishment to love when you've been hurt. It is an accomplishment to choose grace over pettiness. It is an accomplishment to not replace faith with maturity.

Dave Matthews said that we "wake up ..., making plans to change the world, while the world is changing us." I agree. I sought to change the world, and I feel that I am the one who has changed. And that's okay.

I am no longer the same person I used to be, and for this reason, some of my friendships are strained. I often feel a disconnect between the older generations of my family who want nothing more for me than to be married with children. I am the only person in my

entire extended family who does not currently live in Alabama. I feel, at times, at odds with the world; I feel like I am sitting on the edge of my seat.

This is the beauty of our generation, this is the one thing that we have done right. We have said, "I'm tired of being what you want me to be, feeling so faithless, lost under the surface." We have dared to question the wars of our fathers, dared to hold on to the idea that there must be more to life. We may not convey our message very eloquently or gracefully, but the lyrics of our music reveal a struggle within ourselves to be free to pursue the dreams of our hearts. Our music is considered confrontational as we admit the broken state of our society. But we are honest.

No one changes the world by being silent. No one changes the world by following in the footsteps of someone else. No one changes the world without truth. Even Matisyahu sings, "If I forget the truth, then my words won't penetrate." And the most important truths revolve around 2 simple questions: "Who are you?" and "Why are you here?" If you think that God is nothing more than a Family Guy reference, you might have a hard time answering them. But if you actually believe that God exists and is, by definition, the God of the universe, then have faith that He is interested in your life and that He wants to you to pursue the dreams of your heart because they stem from Him anyway.

Your dreams, your passion, your hope, your innocence. That is what is inspiring. Fight to hold on to these things. Don't allow yourself to become numb. Don't wait until you are 22 to ask yourself what it is that you want out of life. I'm not talking about where you are going to college, or what you will major in, but I mean the dreams of your hearts. Only you can know what they are. Only you can stop yourself from pursuing them.

During my time here at St. Andrew's, you have inspired me and thus I have tried new things. During my first year here, I wrote my very first rap, and, in closing, I would like to read the chorus.

”Got to travel around the world just to think, because these voices have got me on the brink. Of not being who I am, of taking someone else’s plan. And all I really want is to live, to give my life away, to display a greater cause, to not be confined to these walls, because every empire falls, and mom and dad, what you did was okay, but today is an even better day.”