Chapel Talk
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Over spring vacation, I read papers my V Form students had written on Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, essays about a possible change Heathcliff, the central figure, goes through at the end of the novel involving his love for Catherine. I will not reveal the book's final chapters, but Heathcliff appears to give up on 18 years of revenge, greed and material gains. Why? Well, you will have to read the novel, but as I studied these 25 essays that were trying to explain this complex and confusing transformation, I was gifted something more profound than just logically and coherently argued essays. Such moments happen when students wrestle with the author's and the book's core questions – when they keep asking "So what?", when they invite the book to speak to them as a creative force, when they realize the book is no longer merely a text to decipher but a human landscape to inhabit and explore.

In his concluding paragraph, Peter Geng observes that on Heathcliff's tombstone, "the name 'Heathcliff' and the date of his death are carved onto his grave as if he never existed before and the date he dies is when he truly starts living." Peter argues that Heathcliff and Catherine experience a love "exceeding the ordinary notion of love, time, and life" – a love beyond this world, a love that obliterates the boundaries most of us accept about life and death. Peter challenged my view that time and love and life finish with death, because Peter asserted that's when life, paradoxically, begins.

In her paper, Campbell Nicholson declares: "Ultimately, Bronte shows the reader that especially when it comes to love, nothing that truly matters in your life is physical." Campbell's daring perception proclaims that what's most valuable, sustaining and nourishing to us as humans are emotions, not property; are joys and hopes, not successes or achievements; are relationships, not possessions. Campbell understood, like Peter, that genuine love is boundless, intangible, priceless.

Towards the end of her essay, Nicole Saridakis states:

> Emily Bronte includes Heathcliff's change, to highlight the fact that the most powerful things in life are invisible and unattainable until we let go of what makes [them] impossible.

Let me read this sentence again:

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Nicole's audacious vision contends that, once we let go, we gain. She's tapped into St. Francis's prayer: only by dying are we born, only by giving do we receive, only by loving are we loved. Nicole's counter-cultural wisdom gives us a clear path forward, a way to live with intention, hope, connection, fulfilment. "The most powerful things in life are invisible and unattainable" – so if your happiness right now depends on what you can touch, then soon you will have nothing, because it's "impossible" to fully love and live while we vainly clutch and hoard and covet.

Peter's, Campbell's and Nicole's radical insight echoed in small and big ways for me over break. A friend told me she decided to give her young granddaughter skating lessons because she thought her granddaughter had too many toys. Instead, she wanted her to have an experience – not something she could hold, but a gift she couldn't out-grow.

Two nights ago, Mr. Roach spoke about the FBI probe that recently indicted 50-60 people – extremely wealthy parents, college admission officers and college coaches, family doctors and test prep teachers – for giving and taking bribes up to $1.2 million. What are these parents desperately trying to buy? A hollow acceptance to elite colleges for their children, based on fabricated applications, fake accomplishments, inflated test scores, monetary bribes to college coaches and admission officers. Sadly, these parents don't realize "that the most powerful things in life are invisible and unattainable until we let go of what makes [them] impossible." There is nothing authentic, true or enduring in their approach, unlike how you seniors have journeyed through this admission process. We can't lose sight of what we know lasts. We can't forsake hard work, riveting curiosity, vibrant passions and abilities, for idle fancies, for fleeting status.

Over break I realized almost every book I teach confronts this indiscernible world – this non-physical, spiritual universe we don't see but can sense. There are ghosts in *Hamlet, Beloved, Wuthering Heights, Sing, Unburied, Sing*; spirits exist in *Anna Karenina, Salvage the Bones, As I Lay Dying*, and *There, There*; my juniors began *The Chaneysville Incident* yesterday, where the narrator seems to hear people as he listens to the telephone wire, "whining, crying, panting, humming, moaning like a live thing" (page 1).

Have I been subconsciously drawn to writers who wrestle with this demarcation between the tangible and the intangible, between the temporary and the eternal, between the observable and the imaginary? Maybe these literary works appeal to us because we so easily fail in our attempts to live without vanity, greed or materialism. Maybe I return to them year after year to learn again that "nothing that truly matters in your life is physical."

Remember how on "Sesame Street" Bert trades in his paper clip collection to give Ernie a soap dish for his rubber ducky, while at the same time Ernie exchanges his rubber ducky so that he could give Bert a box for his paper clips? The courageous, persistent stories of humanity within any religion or culture teach us that what ultimately bestows significance and happiness and decency into our lives can't be held or purchased. Rather, these narratives celebrate feelings that unite us, ennoble us, raise us up out of pettiness and into purposes more magnificent than ourselves. It has nothing to do with a cell phone or social media or a resume, and everything to do with conversation, communion, community. We have to be with people, not objects; it's about kindness, not ownership.

Every memorable St. Andrew's story I've witnessed or known manifests this veiled but tenacious emotional paradise. Every meaningful human story illustrates this timeless creed – that any item you can't relinquish becomes false and toxic; that what actually lasts, perhaps past our physical life itself, remains friendship, love, laughter, gifts of self, moments of care and listening, spontaneous and crazy acts of generosity.

My hope for us is that we can experience a spring without things – a spring of connections on the Front Lawn and in the dining room; a spring of dynamic visions of creativity that crescendo on Arts Weekend; a spring of resilience and discovery, engagement and response in the classrooms and athletics; a spring, and a lifetime, of lasting bonds forged and cabled together by silliness, wonder, grace, love; a spring, and a lifetime, of "unseen things that do not die" (McCosh archway, Princeton University).