

Convocation Address
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Framing Possibilities

Ever since I can remember, I've believed that, given the right prevailing winds and atmospheric conditions, I could fly. My childhood was full of aeronautic experiments that involved pitching myself from tall slides and garage roofs out into the blue sky, a brightly colored, make-shift cape sometimes snapping behind me, and a pile of mattresses below, just in case. At night, I could feel the earth curving beneath my feet and space in my dreams expanded with the yearning to soar over the treetops – I would repeatedly run and jump as high as I could manage, hoping for lift-off and, although I often woke-up tired from all of the exertion, I did frequently catch air in these reveries, and gravity would lighten as I rose of the cusp of a hill, a wild thrill swelling in my throat and spilling from my mouth in a chortling gasp that surprised me every time. My head pushed through the clouds, and I was soaring over the landscape, shot through with a giddy joy that was boundless.

This desire to reach beyond our natural limitations is, I think, common to us all. We are charged in every cell of our being with the desire to stand out, be recognized and extend ourselves into the world. The call is to create value, to rise to the instinct for heroism that drives our species. The cultural anthropologist Ernst Becker, in a Pulitzer Prize winning book entitled *The Denial of Death* has this to say about the root purpose of the societies we build:

The fact is that this is what society is and has always been: a symbolic action system, a structure of statuses and roles, customs and rules for behavior, designed to serve as a vehicle for earthly heroism. It doesn't matter whether the cultural hero-system is frankly magical, religious... or secular; scientific and civilized or primitive. It's still a mythical hero system in which people serve in order to earn a feeling of primary value, of cosmic specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakeable meaning. -Ernst Becker

This is why we are here together, adults and students alike: to be stretched by challenges and develop experiences that will excite our desire for larger vistas. Becker describes a successful society as a collective enterprise that serves both the individual and the common good; it is the frame out of which we are meant to rise and seek our most expansive selves. St. Andrew's is a microcosm of the American Experiment of which we are a part, and everything we do is meant to enshrine Respect, Freedom and Opportunity as our primary set of values. In our embrace of these expectations of support and trust, we create the conditions for our mutual growth here at school. We need one another to work with, and to work up against, refining the questions that matter. Nurtured here, stretching abilities to see and understand our lives in new ways, whether

its in Freshman Bio, Physics, History, Photography or Greek I, we grow in our abilities and press against the limits of the known world. Our daily commitments that unfold in the classroom, the dorms and studios, on the sports fields and countless van rides, frame possibilities for us. The pressure of schedule propels us along corridors and walkways, and the tower bells excite the clip of our steps, by my proposition for you all today is that the expectations and boundaries we often chafe against are, in fact, the frame around opportunity; an invitation to create balanced rituals. As an artist, my fantasies of flying up over the rooftops and sailing into the radiance of bluer air still serve me, but they are necessarily wrestled into the painted rectangle-flight, my adult mind keeps insisting, happens for me within the confines of the canvas and, as I practice this act of focus, I get better at what I've chosen to do. How maddening this contradiction seemed to me when I was younger, though: that only in giving myself over to the practice of one or two activities, could the sweet liberties of my life begin to unfold. As scholars, artists and athletes, we are seasoned with this ambiguity: only from the structure of commitment is the freedom fit for heroes born.

It's not for nothing that the Founding Fathers are also called The Framers. I would argue, in fact, that what the writers of the Constitution and Bill of Rights did for our country, setting up the framework that enables each one of us to embrace our personal freedom in conscientious, inspired ways, you must all now do for yourselves. We are here to frame questions and possibilities, whether it is around the Harkness table, in the lab or studio or out on the playing fields or simply "chilling" in our common rooms. This engagement with each other, with the world of ideas and action, demands a listening attention; and once we start to listen, we begin to really care about how we use our time – this is what I call living creatively. Happily, creativity isn't a rare gift bestowed on a few lucky souls – we are all heirs to the Apollonian love of form, that intense engagement we feel when our thinking hands fashion something new: I see a landscape, I listen to birdsong, I catch the scent of honeysuckle or bite into a crisp Macintosh apple and I am moved to recreate this experience in a poem, a painting, a melody, a beautiful chair, a dance, an orchard, a park. To create is to grow – literally. The Italian root, *crescere*, means just this. We are transformed and affirmed by our engagement with the world, when the creative spirit frames it.

As a visual artist, I have a license to look; I can stand out in the middle of a field for 3-4 hours without moving, and no one is going to call the cops. I can look closely at another person's face, noticing how light casts their features into relief or how the colors of their shirt reflect across their neck and cheeks, and not feel wildly awkward at the same time. But this is also your birthright; the right to yield to the beauty of the world; to risk involvement and to be touched by, to listen to and gaze at what attracts and holds you. Our embarrassments about being "caught looking" at some one in the dining hall, for example, or being brought to a standstill to listen more raptly to a voice in a room we are passing by, to smell something more deeply, investigate a texture more keenly – these embarrassments fade away when we enter the creative mindset. The spirit stirs and we connect. The mathematics of creativity, then, looks like this: $1+1=3$. We are moved to translate our encounter into a form so that it doesn't disappear, we have allowed ourselves to be transformed by merging with something or someone else and new life is born.

Now consider how deeply rooted this instinct for creative involvement is inside each one of us. Beyond the imaginative games we play as children, whether it's rehearsing the adult

relationships to come or single-handedly saving the world from darkness as a super hero, many of our daily rituals spring from the drive to refashion our surroundings in personally expressive ways. E. Gombrich, in his survey, *The Story of Art*, refuses to describe art as the lofty practice of a few divinely inspired individuals, and points instead to this natural impulse in all human beings for design. We are all invested in presenting and recreating ourselves – the fabrics we make and the clothes we wear; the arrangement of furniture, rugs and the domestic artifacts with which we populate our rooms; the shoes and hats we sport; our temples, gardens and garages; our electronic desktops, games and websites – all of these areas reflect our eye and aptitude for design. Ikea, Home Depot and Lowe's exist for a society of dream-weavers. You don't have to salivate over a pair Christian Louboutin Miss Penniman 70 Patent-Leather sling-back shoes or a SeanJohn short sleeve dip-dyed Cambrai shirt to have taste. The person who sports a white T-shirt, jeans and sneakers just as assuredly enters the domain of fashion as the student who dons a plaid jacket, red popped-collar polo, yellow khaki pants and tasseled loafers with no socks. These are choices. We project our personalities, and we are driven to arrange the things we own so that they reflect some type of personal value. We frame the possibility of ourselves.

Style, attitude, rhythm, the drama of color and light, the cadence of joined voices, the arc of flight; these are the beats of the performances we aspire to mastery in. We are all disciples and apprentices, at work on improving our skills, our balance and focus, and this equation is how St. Andrew's will challenge and push you: Work = Practice = Play. We aspire to play music, to play sports and no one here will deny that to play well, you've got to practice. A LOT. Mr. Geiersbach or Mr. Gold, Coach McGowan or Coach Hamilton, all of them push you to stretch yourselves in remarkable ways. Martha Graham, a great, 20th Century innovator in the tradition of American dance, has this to say about the preparations a dancer makes in anticipation of performance:

*I believe that we learn by practice. Whether it means to learn to dance by practicing dancing or to learn to live
by practicing living, the principles are the same. In each, it is the performance of a dedicated precise set of acts,
physical or intellectual, from which comes shape of achievement, a sense of one's being, a satisfaction of spirit.
One becomes, in some area, an athlete of God. Practice means to perform, over and over again in the face of all
obstacles, some act of vision, of faith, of desire. Practice is a means of inviting the perfection desired. -Martha Graham*

Every day presents us with the opportunity to improve our mastery of the moves we choose to make our own, and the field of play is the frame we build to test our agility and acumen. Professional football players, to take what Sports Illustrated claims as the most American of pastimes, must learn to compete on a stage that is called the gridiron. A 100 yards of 10-yard hash marks and a pitch a little more than half as wide as it is long. If a player steps on a sideline everything stops, and the results of many plays are judged relative to the fraction of an inch. Time is strictly monitored and, it's calculated that from snap to whistle, the average play lasts between 6-7 seconds. Although players are often giant men bristling with aggressive energy, there are tons of rules about how they are allowed to touch one another. How is it that 60,000

fans can maintain a sometimes hysterical involvement in these tightly controlled contests that are bound by a stopwatch and a closed, regulated geometry? The game seems especially restrictive when it is compared to the American Indian form of Lacrosse practiced in colonial days by the Iroquois. Victories were considered supernaturally ordained and occasionally the field of play stretched out over many kilometers of country and would last a couple of days. Hundreds of men flying through the woods with long sticks, jockeying for the possession of a small deer-hide ball, poses a stark contrast to America's favorite sport; strict geometry vs a cross-country melee.

Only our post-industrial, urban world, however, could create the game of football and develop such a passion for it. An Eagles fan at the Linc can relate to the strict formality of ball movement, the impersonality of the time clock and the frustration felt at thoughtless penalties and turnovers by the home team, because the life of an adult in the American workforce is based on a repetitive schedule, the clock determines pace of our day and we have so much at stake in providing for our loved ones. Our hopes can live and die with our teams because we know what success looks and feels like and the hope for timely heroics that will bring us all safely through is never far from our mind. Similarly, only a rural, semi-nomadic group of hunter/farmer/warriors could make sense of an athletic engagement that spilled across wide stretches of open land and might involve a hundred or more players at a time. Both games demand discipline and seek a similar experience, which is the function of both art and sport: the transcendent moment, when boundaries vanish and play is elevated to a new, heroic dimension. We move beyond our limitations and leave the ground in our play – the frame has served its purpose.

For us to grow in this way, for you and me to design and create the geographies of place that we believe in and are challenged by, we have to be open to possibility and vulnerable to the passing world. This state of being receptive to others is often interpreted as weakness. Arguing from this definition, one could easily be persuaded to play it safe, to lay low, to not risk too much because what's worse than public failure? I still occasionally have dreams in which, not only am I not flying, but I've shown up to class in my underwear and I'm not sure if I'm a student or the teacher. Fear of failure never really vanishes and it can lead us to create a box for ourselves to hide in. Maybe this is why the activities and relationships we initially find the most difficult, are often the ones we commit ourselves to over the long run.

There's a rum afloat, for example, that our legendary teacher of literature for the last 35 years, Mr. Speers, actually got a 400 on the English portion of the SAT; as a boarding school student in England back in the 70s, I took "A" Levels in Art, English, Literature and Classical Civilizations and the 15-hour exam that I failed did not involve a lot of reading. Ms. Smith, beloved teacher of Spanish currently studying abroad, once wrote in a 4th grade homework assignment that, although she wasn't sure what she wanted to be when she grew up, she was dead certain she didn't want to become a teacher. She also tried to drop Spanish as a major after a disastrous semester abroad in Spain, but was counseled out of this decision by her advisor. Where is she now?... Mmm. Back in Spain learning how to be a better language scholar and teacher – everything she at one time had tried to run away from. Ms. Smith has embraced her central heroic challenge and the road in front of her gains definition.

This awareness of our fallibility, those moments of discomfort, humiliation and disappointment, constitute a challenge to our very being and the inner hero stirs within. We all experience these moments. Perhaps vulnerability is, after all, one of our greatest assets, because we are lured in

the profoundest way possible to the rituals of practice and mastery. We are compelled to work through what threatens to upend us, and the requirements of a chosen direction give us focus. We are forced to frame what matters by asking what are we capable of and what it is that we really want.

One of my favorite examples of troubled beginnings forming the roots of future strength is James Terrell, a contemporary American artist who was the subject of three simultaneous shows this summer in Houston, New York and Los Angeles. He spent the year after he graduated from art school in a San Francisco jail for coaching kids how to dodge the Vietnam draft. While lingering in his small cell, Terrell noticed how the light from the one window in the tiny room completely changed the color and atmosphere of the space as the days grew into evening and back to morning again. When released from prison, he began to experiment with how interior spaces might be transformed by light falling through different kinds of window surfaces. The rooms were like a light stage, transformed with each variation of aperture he arranged. Terrell was stunned by the possibilities of how light could transform space and eventually bought a used, single engine airplane and flew off to find a property with high elevations from which he could watch and frame the dome of the sky. The limits of his ambitions grew.

With grants from various Arts Groups, he bought Roden Crater, an extinct volcano on the edge of the Painted Desert in Arizona, and he has been at work digging into its surface now for over 40 years, using beautiful, sumptuous materials to frame his vision. The pictures are all of one particular room, taken from different angles and times of day. It has been called the single most ambitious artwork ever undertaken by one person. The work has been compared with other, more ancient temples to the heavens, like the Mayan Chichen Itza or the Druidic Stonehenge. Terrell explains:

At Roden Crater I was interested in taking the cultural artifice of art out into the natural surround. I did not want the work to be a mark upon nature, but I wanted the work to be enfolded in nature in such a way that light from the sun, moon and stars empowered the spaces...I wanted an area where you had a sense of standing on the planet. I wanted an area of exposed geology like the Grand Canyon or the Painted Desert, where you could feel geologic time. Then in this stage set of geologic time, I wanted to make spaces that engaged celestial events in light so that the spaces performed a "music of the spheres" in light. The sequence of spaces, leading up to the final large space at the top of the crater, magnifies events. The work I do intensifies the experience of light by isolating it." -James Terrell

Terrell has proven true this contradiction that resonates in all imaginative explorations: only by limiting the window you look through, can you glimpse with understanding what is far greater than yourself. In your history papers, the novels you read, the physics and chemistry labs that put you in touch with the tangible forces at work in nature, in everything that you press up against here at school and beyond, the greatness and mystery of nature asserts itself, and the lens you

look through focuses the truth you see. Terrell frames wonder in the simplest and most complex of terms and he asks us to look beyond the world we are familiar with and to imagine possibilities that are both unsettling and awesome.

To close, I'd like to share the story of a friend I visited this summer, and who had just recently lost her husband of 39 years. She chose to move out of the home they shared and had raised a couple of their children in. She moved to a completely new town in which she knew hardly anyone. Needless to say, my friend found herself in unfamiliar territory and was driven to frame this new chapter of her life with questions, not unlike how you all will embark on this new year.

She had just moved in two weeks prior to my visit and, although we had a great dinner together, her eyes misted over once or twice and I could see that the shock of the new was still pretty unnerving. What she then told me about how she managed her daily anxieties, however, blew me away: Every morning upon waking, she framed her day by first acknowledging the uncertainty of being alive and then wrote out in her journal all the questions that appeared before her. These are also questions you might be asking yourselves about now, as the possibilities of the year begin to unfold:

What were her short-term goals, what did she want from new encounters and connections with people, how social or private did she want to be? What kind of job or position should she go after, should she be ambitious or play it safe? Should she relax into herself and see what happened or join in the greater communal life with intention? The only way she could clarify the character of the immediate future was by asking questions that framed possibilities. These seeds of attention that she has daily planted and watered, will help to define places of connection for her.

I hold this same genuine anticipation for every one of you budding heroes in this room. Embrace the perceived limits of your world as an opportunity to achieve more than you thought yourself capable of. Make choices about where to channel your curiosity and desire and find a garage roof from which you can see the vastness of the sky and then throw yourself into the space in front of you. My friend's daughter shared this Rainer Maria Rilke poem with her, upon the advent of her moving into the next stage of her life:

*Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart
and try to love the questions themselves...
Don't search for the answers,
which could not be given to you now,
because you would not be able to live them.
And the point is, to live everything.
Live the questions now.
Perhaps then, someday far into the future,
you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.*