

Chapel Talk
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Dear Mr. Hutchinson- thank you for inviting me to open our Wednesday evening Chapel series. It is always an honor to stand here, before all of you. I want to welcome all of our students, new and returning, all faculty and staff to this incredible new academic year.

Unlike previous pre-pandemic years, no other year has felt more “special” than this year. I was grateful we could start and end last year at St. Andrew’s in person, but life as we knew it took a new form - it shaped us and challenged us in unimagined ways. Of course, life as we experience it today is not like the past either - and it shouldn’t be, it mustn't be. If it were, it means we have not done the necessary reflection to gain perspective on the disruption, pain, difficulty and loss. Unlike before, life has a new gloss, or a new lens if you will, that makes me aware of possibility, opportunity and intentionality that perhaps I had never considered before. Soon after my return to campus from my summer, I was mesmerized at the miracle that I could actually hug my faculty colleagues, that we could meet indoors, that we could share a meal together. That upon your arrival, we could also hug, shake hands with each other with a greater sense of safety and proximity that the virus denied us last year. Of course, the virus and the pandemic are very real, but the risks have lowered thanks to the vaccine and masking. Perhaps my new found sense and thirst for proximity comes from my culture where personal space is not even part of the vocabulary and socialization. We embrace, we tap, we talk very closely face to face, we dance holding hands. To me, physical distance became synonymous with half-emptiness and disconnection in ways that surprised me. Somehow, the lack of physical closeness had effects on our social and emotional connection. Perhaps many of you felt that loss as well. Since this deeper awareness of my need for closeness and connection, or maybe my greater appreciation for this possibility, I have been thinking about the meaning of space - how we take and make space.

The miracle and gift of us gathering here in community is sharing the space that the founders of the School chose after much searching in different parts of the State. Bishop Cook, in his book, *History of the Beginnings of St. Andrew’ School*, states that Mr. Denslow, a former Head of Donaldson School, “had been secured to make a careful survey of possible sites [for the school]. He visited practically every part of the state and the Comegys Farm on Noxontown Lake seems to offer just the desired location.” An ideal location, indeed, for its natural beauty of extensive land and the pond. The natural surroundings and the school’s buildings are, however, just grass and water, bricks and mortar, without what we individually bring to the space and collectively make of our school. How we take space goes beyond our physical presence. In fact, I argue that we truly take space when we can be our full selves in our voice, our thinking, our intellect, our crafts and passions, and our

representation of the most sacred and loved to us. This concept of space, the physical, the intellectual, the emotional and the spiritual space, is beautifully described in an art exhibit at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia that Ms. Pressman and I visited a few weeks ago. In the introduction to the exhibit *Taking Space* one reads, “The beliefs and practices of the world we live in establish boundaries around who has the right to space.” This exhibit was inspired by African-American artist Deborah Willi’s photo lithograph titled *I Made Space for a Good Man*, a series of photographs of the pregnant artist, reclining in a chair with the words her male professor once told her, “You took the space from a good man,” lamenting her presence in his art program, predicting that she would get married, have a baby, and “take up space that could have gone to a male student.” Through her art, Deborah Willi’s physically took space on the wall of the museum, but creatively, intellectually and artistically she took space to explore her own sense of self, as a woman, an artist, a mother, breaking through sexist, gender and political walls. The powerful concept of space that the exhibit proposes is precisely the individual space that seeks to exist and self-define away from societal constructs that limit the expression and exploration of our full selves.

Space, then, works on two levels. One at the individual level, that external and internal space that ought to be open and nurtured so we can explore, heal, grow and change in our journey of self-discovery and self-identity. This process is what the exhibit suggests as taking space. The second level of space is at the communal level—the exchange and interaction of each other’s spaces with the guiding principles of observation, caring, inquiry, listening, respect and empathy. This process I call making space. Only if space is thought of and practiced as fluid at these two levels without limiting or imposing beliefs or views as absolutes can we guarantee true understanding and proximity to ourselves and others, and thus, making a new space.

Perhaps because I love imagery and symbolism, I profoundly connect with art. Thus, during that same trip, Ms. Pressman and I saw the exhibit of the graduate students of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, one of which is our own Ms. Kelsey, our masterful drawing and painting teacher. Her series of large paintings are a beautiful example of taking space for exploration while at the same time making space for connection and dialogue.

At first sight, these enormous, vibrant and creative paintings assault our sense with an explosion of color, a chaotic and tumultuous background. With time and discernment, one starts to see that in fact there is a recognizable order in the images of nature, of cultural artifacts and of women’s bodies that come together in the merging of delicate strokes superimposed on splashes of color, creating a balanced integration on the paper. These series of paintings seem to have the same structures but different colors, artifacts, bodies and natural elements. To me, these paintings are a visual representation of the evolution and exploration that happens when taking space in each painting and from one to the other. Symbolically, it represents a personal journey, a

negotiation and representation that manifests background, beliefs, likes, the intellectual and the sacred. The presence of her five large-piece collection is jaw-dropping, forcefully drawing in its audience with its force, voice and size. These paintings actively invite to interact in a process of decoding, questioning and ultimately discovering to one's surprise the labyrinth and intricacies of Ms. Kelsey's personal and creative process, the fruits of patience, dialogue and thought. [SHOW PICS]

To engage her paintings, I must suspend my judgement and make the space to listen, to inquire and get to know Ms. Kelsey through her creative process as an artist and a human. Because she is part of my community, her taking space in the way she has chosen, Ms. Kelsey engages me in conversation and allows me to connect with and be closer to her, and in doing so, we together make space by listening, inquiring, respecting. Although it is not my story to tell, I have subsequently learned that the vibrant colors, images of deities such as Saraswati and Krishna, and natural elements come from her memory of growing up in the US from immigrant Indian parents. Ms. Kelsey states, "These forms are suggestive and reminiscent of the art I have witnessed in my childhood home: in the Hindu temple we attended, the illustrations in the stories I was told from the Mahabharata, Ramayana." In conversation with her, I learn that from memory she negotiates her own understanding of her cultural heritage with being an American, and the many roles she has as an artist, a teacher, a mother. Her story, through painting, is inspiring and through it, we have connected because - despite being from different ethnicities, and linguistic and cultural backgrounds - we have so many commonalities. I yearned to learn more about her, and the imagery that she chooses as an artist to depict her self-discovery and identity. Through this process, she teaches me to think of aspects of my own journey that I had not considered before.

We take and make space in many forms but to take and make true, genuine space is an act of courage and can put one in a vulnerable position. Also as a part of her graduate exhibit, Ms. Kelsey has the most extraordinary sculpture. This piece is a collection of beautiful sari fabrics, silks, embroidery hoops, an iron fish, a bike tire, cassette tapes, beads, wires, a propeller, cable plug connectors, a kum kum holder and sindoor powder. Because it is a 3-d piece, one can walk around it, looking at it from different positions.

Clearly, these are artifacts that one can find in a home, in different spaces of a house and used by different members of a family. After discovering the Hindi tapes, and cultural artifacts such as the sindoor powder and the sari fabrics, I started to wonder if these are Ms. Kelsey's favorite things from her home, her culture, and perhaps even from her childhood. Once one reads the title of the sculpture, one understands the compilation of artifacts: *Would you like to go to Baba and Nani's House?* Ah! What a beautiful invitation to her world through the lens of her parent's house! Although Ms. Kelsey chose to represent her past and present in this sculpture, she did not choose her cultural and ethnic background. However, she immerses in it to make sense of the life as a child and mother in households where a hybridity of Indian and American traditions and cultures intersect.

As soon as I saw this sculpture, I thought of how we also take space from other sources that make us who we are: foods that feed our soul, music that awaken our spirit, smells that trigger memories, pictures that capture our loved ones. Those tangible artifacts that you choose to take space in your room, that represent parts of your life, are an extension of you. I wonder how many of us choose not to take space because the physical space we already take and cannot hide is already too different, that taking more space feels uneasy, uncomfortable, and perhaps a little scary of the possibility of being judged without the opportunity to explain.

Here is when making space, making community is essential to our development and self-discovery. Author, educator and activist Parker Palmer writes, “Community cannot take root in a divided life. Long before community assumes external shape and form, it must be present as a seed in the undivided self: only as we are in communion with ourselves can we find community with others.” Parker argues that only when we allow others to be themselves, when we communicate honestly without judgement, can we live in community. When we take away the right to take space in a genuine way- when we paint on another’s canvas if one will- is when we assume or misjudge. When this happens, we erode trust. We block the possibility of making space, of creating community. When someone is so different from us, when we don’t understand the space of someone else, and assert words, images and gossip, we take away the right to space. It takes time to trust a new space, a new community, but it takes less time when we commit to giving each other the freedom to take space, to be and express ourselves like the image of Ms. Kelsey’s sculpture and paintings, even when at first I may not fully understand them.

The ways we take and make space will measure the success of our school year. Just as Ms. Kelsey’s art work takes space to portray who she is, what matters to her and invites us to ask questions and get to know her better, we can also give each other the grace, courage and opportunity to live and express our individuality and make a community where we know each other in deeper and more meaningful ways. Whether you are new to our school or returning, we have ahead of us the task of sewing all of our personal canvases, embroidering all of our individual fabrics together to make this new space called home-St. Andrew’s School.

Thank you.