

Finding What Feels Alive

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Growing up, I sometimes mistook home for school. Strange, right? Well, not to me.

My mom taught English, and my dad was a principal, so home often felt more like another classroom. Dinner conversations became grammar corrections. Weekends turned into pop quizzes. Even report cards came back covered in red pen.

Because of that, I grew up with two unspoken rules: obey the experts, and speak just enough to earn approval. Communication, to me, was mostly about avoiding mistakes rather than expressing ideas.

Ironically, those beliefs were challenged when I arrived at St. Andrew's — specifically in Ms. Urbont's history class.

She didn't just return papers; she started conversations. Instead of circling what was wrong, she would underline an idea and write things like, "Expand here," or "What does this assume?" Suddenly, writing didn't feel like a test anymore. It felt alive.

I remember our first major assignment on Thucydides' Funeral Oration. There was no detailed prompt, no template, no checklist telling us exactly what to argue. I sat staring at my laptop thinking: What am I even supposed to do?

Panicking, I scheduled a meeting with Ms. Urbont. I walked into her office ready to record every expectation she had for the paper.

But instead, she looked at me and said:

"Why don't you ask yourself what you want to say?"

And honestly, I didn't know how to answer.

My usual instincts — listen, extract, deliver — suddenly failed me. But it also became clear that she wasn't testing me. She was genuinely inviting me to think for myself.

She told me, "The point of history writing is not to sound like someone else, but to think like yourself." Then she opened JSTOR and showed me several essays: not as models to copy, but as examples of how differently people could approach the same question. As our meeting ended, she said one last thing that stayed with me:

“Find what feels alive to you.”

When I walked out of her office, I realized something had shifted. For the first time, I felt treated not just as a student, but as a thinker.

After that, I started seeing feedback differently. Not as a verdict, but as a dialogue. I stopped treating peer review as damage control and started asking classmates what confused them, what interested them, and what they would have done differently. My writing became messier, but it also became mine.

That mindset slowly began shaping the rest of my experience here. For my final history project, I explored how geography shapes the rise and fall of civilizations. What mattered most to me wasn't even the final paper itself, but the conversations it sparked: conversations with classmates, teachers, and mentors that continued long after class ended.

And I began realizing that some of the most meaningful learning at St. Andrew's happens outside of assignments entirely.

Some of the most memorable conversations I've had didn't happen during class discussions or formal presentations. They happened sitting on dorm room floors late at night, when people stopped trying to sound impressive and started speaking honestly about homesickness, pressure, uncertainty, or the fear of not being enough.

Living in a boarding school surrounded by people from different backgrounds taught me that connection rarely comes from having the perfect response. More often, it begins with the willingness to admit confusion, ask questions, or simply listen. This community showed me that sometimes the strongest conversations happen when nobody is performing at all.

It taught me that learning is also about saying something unfinished. Asking questions without knowing exactly where they will lead. Having the courage to admit, “I don't know,” and trusting that someone else might help you understand.

I learned that communication is not about correction at all — it is an act of trust.

And I think that trust, the willingness to listen, to question, and to grow alongside one another, is what makes SAS feel less like a school and more like a community.

For the first time, school stopped feeling like a place where I was being evaluated and became a place where I was being understood.

And for that, I'll always be grateful.