

Chapel Talk
May 20, 2026
Alec Hill '12

On Not Knowing

Good evening.

Before I begin my talk, I'd like to briefly say thank you to Rev G. Eleven months ago, Ms. Saliba Hill and I stood in this chapel and said our wedding vows, and it was Reverend Giansiracusa who married us. In the time that we have known him, Rev G has been a confidant and mentor to us, as he has to many of you. And when I thought about how best to thank him, it occurred to me that Rev G is what a priest should be. He laughs, worries, prays, and grieves with us. He is at the spiritual heart of our school, but he wears his calling lightly. He is a good friend, while just being himself. Mike, I'm sad you're leaving, and I'm grateful for the time you've spent with us. Thank you, and we'll miss you.

I'd also like to thank Ms. Saliba Hill. Grace, this spring I have watched you heal from the ordeal of childbirth while nurturing our baby boy. Either one of these would have been a feat of strength on its own. I don't know how you've managed both at the same time. And in recent days you have let me steal hours away from you and Harvey to write this chapel talk. You are the most generous person I know. Thank you; I love you.

As you all know, forty-three days ago Ms. Saliba Hill gave birth to our son, Harvey. Tonight I'm going to tell you a little bit about that experience, and also share some thoughts on the power of not knowing what you're doing.

I will never forget what it was like to see Grace bring our little boy into the world. We drove to the hospital on a Monday, and she began laboring that evening, and twenty-five hours later, at 6:23 p.m. on Tuesday April 7th, Harvey was here. Even having seen it with my own eyes, I can hardly understand the miracle of a new life entering the world. One minute he was still theoretical, a figment of my imagination, and the next he was there in the room with us, screaming and crying and naked; unfathomably real and indescribably perfect.

We stayed in the room where the birth took place for about two hours. Then they moved us to a room upstairs, in the postpartum wing of the hospital. It was around ten p.m. My cousin is a doctor in another part of the hospital, and she brought us takeout sushi, Grace's favorite food. We were hungry and exhausted and at the same time soaring with adrenaline. I had only slept a few hours the night before, and of course my fatigue was nothing compared to the grueling physical battle Ms. Saliba Hill had been through. It was time to rest. But there was a small problem, an adorable little problem named Harvey: we had a baby to take care of!

We couldn't get Harvey to sleep on his own that first night: he wanted to be in his mother's arms, which makes sense when you consider that he had spent the previous nine months with her and within her. But it's dangerous to sleep while holding an infant, they could accidentally suffocate, and Grace herself needed rest. So after we finished our sushi, it was my turn to hold Harvey,

while the two of them slept. I sat in an armchair in a corner of the darkened room, just sat there thinking, taking it all in. Exhaustion began to eat away at the adrenaline. I felt tired, then really tired. It was almost three a.m. There were little green lights blinking in different parts of the room, and out the window I could see a few cars going by on the road. I yawned and tried not to doze off. It would be a bad way to begin fatherhood if I fell asleep with Harvey in my arms on the first night of his life. In that moment, I experienced a flash of understanding. What I understood was: I don't know how to do this.

There were two levels to this realization. On one level, of course, I didn't know many things a parent needs to know. I didn't know how to give Harvey a bath, or change his diaper, or comfort him when he cried, or whether that sound he was making in his sleep meant I should call a nurse. Uncertainty and doubt lurked everywhere.

None of that worried me, though. I knew this was one of those things that you figure out as you go. And this is one meaning I hear in the line from "The Waking," the poem that Burke read for us: "I learn by going where I have to go." We live first, and understand later, is one way of interpreting that line. At the same time, I was deeply frightened by a deeper meaning within my epiphany. For me, *I don't know how to do this* also meant: *I don't know if I have this in me. I don't know if I'm going to be a good dad.* To be honest, what I really thought, in my heart of hearts, was: *I don't know if I'm generous enough to do this.* I'm a pretty selfish person. I tend to be independent and self-reliant, and I love spending time by myself, whether that's going for a run on the school farm or spending hours in the library writing a poem. I'm just most comfortable by myself. Which is fine.

Giving myself the solitude I need, while giving my family, friendships, and work the time and attention they deserve, is a balance I seek every day. But balance went out the window the night Harvey was born. He is so vulnerable, so urgently in need of his mother and me. Taking care of him is a round-the-clock job—if you live on Moss or Pell and have heard Harvey crying in the middle of the night, you know just what I'm talking about. So how was I going to find my way? How was I going to become a father?

Before I try to answer that question, I want to turn it to you, as a question for your own lives. What is something you don't know how to do? Probably, like my not knowing how to change a diaper, there are many small things you don't know. But maybe there is a bigger thing, too. For the seniors, as you pack your things and prepare to drive away in four days, maybe it is: I don't know how to leave this place. Your friends, your mentors, the home this place has hopefully become for you. But life at St. Andrew's is also full of challenges, and so for those of you who aren't seniors, maybe your question is: how am I going to make it to my own graduation? Or maybe your question has nothing to do with SAS. It could be anything, but the kind of question I'm trying to describe probably has to do with who you are, and who you want to become, just as I wanted to become a father, but wasn't sure I knew how.

Questions like these do have answers, but they're not the kind you can put into the neat package of a sentence. And this is where I want to bring in poetry. If you've been in one of my English or Creative Writing classes, you might know that poems mean the world to me. It's a love I discovered here, as a student at St. Andrew's, when I took Creative Writing classes with a brilliant teacher named Mr. Childers. I want to talk with you tonight about poems because I think

they help us deal and even make friends with what we don't know. Poems find language for the unknown, which may be why they sometimes sound so strange. Once again, consider that poem, "The Waking," which Burke read and which is also printed in your handouts. Look at the first line: "I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow." Let's ask the obvious question: what is that supposed to mean? I don't have an authoritative answer for you. To me it means: there is a dreamlike quality to life. A strangeness or ineffability, a quality we cannot grasp—but don't have to, either. We don't have to know what it's all about. We don't have to know what we are doing. We can take our waking slow. Now, that might not make sense to you. And it doesn't have to. Even when a poem doesn't let us know, intellectually, what it means, we feel a meaning when we hear it, and as Roethke tells us, "we think by feeling. What is there to know?"

Maybe what I am trying to say is, poems teach us that knowing is overrated. Not knowing is where it's at. Recently I read that the poet Dean Young described his writing practice as "trying every day to get better at not knowing what he was doing." What a beautiful way to say it. How scary, and how liberating. What would it mean for us to live like this here at school? Maybe not knowing what I'm doing as a teacher in the classroom would help me forget what I think I know about my students, and to meet them in our next discussion with fresh curiosity. Maybe for you students, not knowing what you're doing might mean releasing some of the pressure you put on yourselves to have everything figured out. To know who your friends are, where you fit in, what you're good at or bad at. In this way, not knowing what we're doing allows us to pause, to breathe, and then to resume our lives in a more expansive, less rigid way.

I wish I had a lightbulb moment about fatherhood I could share with you as a way to end this talk. But embracing not knowing doesn't lend itself to epiphanies or final conclusions. I still don't know what I'm doing, and I feel overwhelmed plenty of the time. In the moments when I yield to these feelings, though, not-knowing-what-I'm-doing turns fatherhood into an adventure. Ms. Saliba Hill is my guide in this—she's less of a know-it-all than me, more comfortable in the flow. In the middle of some minor calamity—like trying to change Harvey's diaper while he simultaneously pees straight up in the air, poops himself, spits up breastmilk, and gives us condescending side-eye—we'll look at each other and giggle, delirious, half-miserable with lack of sleep, and we'll feel a little more connected to each other, to Harvey, and to ourselves. In such moments, Harvey is my teacher. Sometimes, he shows me, *you can't hold it in. It feels much better to just let go.*

And there it is: my first dad joke.

Thank you.