



## **OFFICE OF THE HEAD OF SCHOOL**

# **Appreciating Difference**

**Peter H. Quimby**

**Opening Chapel Talk**

**Moseley Chapel**

**16 September 2015**

Good morning, and welcome to the Moseley Chapel for our first Chapel Talk of the year. For those of you who are new to Governor's I should note that gathering in the Chapel on a weekly basis is a long-standing tradition at the Academy dating back well before my time as a student here. Then, as now, entering the Chapel in silence prepares us to listen carefully and give our full attention to the speaker, and it also offers us a very brief respite from the near-constant busyness of our lives. We have very few opportunities built into our week to sit quietly and reflect, and there are few more beautiful settings for reflection on campus than this. While the tone and content of Chapel talks can vary dramatically from week to week, and are often far from somber affairs, they all share one thing in common—they represent one community member's effort to share something that is meaningful to them with the entire school community.

As I thought about what I might share with you today, my mind kept returning to some experiences from my high school years that help to explain why I appreciate

Governor's so much, and the important role that the Academy played in my life when I was sitting in your seats.

If you've been paying attention to the news coverage of our 2016 presidential candidates, you may have noticed that Bernie Sanders, the liberal senator from Vermont who is seeking the Democratic Party nomination, gave a speech on Monday at Liberty University in Virginia, a conservative Christian University. In explaining his decision to address an audience whose views were likely to diverge radically from his own, he said: "It's easy for a candidate to speak to people who hold the same views. It's harder but important to reach out to others who look at the world differently." One of the things I love most about Governor's is that we all come to this small community in Byfield from different backgrounds, perspectives, experiences. This is an integral part of what makes the Governor's Academy an interesting place to live and work and study. Something happens at schools like ours that just doesn't in most other high school settings. We bring the world to our campus—inviting students, faculty, and staff members from a wide range of racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and geographic backgrounds to come together and spend hours living with and learning from each other. Discussions on our campus are more interesting, and more educationally valuable, because the people engaged in them bring their own varied perspectives on life to the conversation, whether those conversations take place in the classroom, or the dining hall, or a common room, or at a practice or in a rehearsal. Part of the reason that I love the start of the school year is that we shake things up. Not only is our community enriched by the

addition of new members, but those of us who are returning find ourselves in classes with teachers and students we might not have had a chance to get to know well yet. The trick is that that richness is only realized if people feel comfortable being themselves and sharing what makes them unique and special with others. If people feel that there is an important part of who they are—their religious beliefs, or political views, or gender identity, or sexual orientation—that they need to hide because they fear that aspect of their identity won't be accepted by others, then they suffer from not being able to be fully themselves, and others suffer because the community is deprived of the opportunity to learn and grow in their thinking.

As I look back on my own path through high school, I see these two issues of learning from others and being able to be myself shaping my experience in a powerful way. As a freshman at Whitesboro Junior High in Central New York State I had this vague feeling that I wanted more. I had a core group of friends I knew I could trust, but I always had this sense that there must be more to high school than what I was experiencing. Like many of you, before coming to Governor's I found myself in a school where I didn't feel that I was being challenged enough, and perhaps even more importantly for me at the time, I didn't feel that I could be fully myself in the community that I was in. I could be myself in some parts of my life. I sang in a men and boys choir where people respected and appreciated musical interest and talent so that was a safe space, and my church was also a place where I didn't feel the need to hide parts of myself to fit in or get by. School, though, could be a different story. I was a good student in a school where being smart was

decidedly not cool outside the small group of students in my honors classes, and as an average soccer player, I didn't have any abilities that I thought would earn me the respect of the "in" crowd. It didn't help my social standing that a guy in my biology class had an older brother, Steve, who had been mysteriously absent from school for what I assume was a stint in the juvenile justice system. For some reason Steve took an interest in me, where "interest" was defined by trying to push me into the boys room outside the cafeteria so that he could fight me. That always struck me a little bit like Voldemort looking to pick a fight with Neville Longbottom. It just wasn't likely to end well for me. And so I kept my head down, avoided certain hallways at certain times of day, and got by. Is it any wonder that I was looking to go to boarding school? But in the middle of my freshman year I had an experience that affected me in ways I didn't expect. The junior high put on a musical. I had seen two other musicals in prior years and I'd found the experience of watching the productions captivating. I figured that since I knew how to sing this might be a good fit for me so I decided to take a risk and audition. I was cast in one of the two leading male roles which was great, or so I thought. And then I started to think about the potential downsides and I was instantly terrified. What if I made a fool of myself?—a fear I seem curiously to have lost in the intervening years. What if people wouldn't accept me for expressing myself in this way? Or worse yet, what if Steve got wind of my being on stage and this only served to increase his determination to give me a swirly? As it turned out, none of those things happened. In fact, I had the time of my life. I enjoyed the other students in the play and got to know them well. They rapidly became my home base—the people around whom I

could relax and be myself. And while I was terrified of public speaking both before and after the play, I found it thrilling to be on stage as someone other than myself, delivering the lines that had been written for me. And most surprisingly of all, I found that other students who came to the production—kids I might not have had the courage to speak to on my own—started talking to me. I remember one girl whose locker was down the row from mine coming up to me in the week after the show and telling me that she thought I'd done a nice job. That was a new experience—and awesome. It made me wonder whether I should reconsider my plans to go to boarding school after all! Of course I still went, but the lesson I learned was that I could do things that I loved and made me happy and be accepted for who I was.

Then when I came to Governor's I at least had a sense of what might be possible for me here. I was more willing to put myself out there and I gained a confidence here that had eluded me to that point in my life. By the time I graduated from the Academy I had even taken on some leadership roles, something that would have been unimaginable to me when I first arrived on this campus. But none of this would have been possible had I not felt the freedom to be myself, and just as importantly, it wouldn't have been possible had I not been in an environment where other people felt the freedom to be themselves as well. As a blue-collar kid from central New York I can still remember the ways in which my eyes were opened by interacting with and getting to know classmates whose backgrounds were fundamentally different from my own. I remember being astonished to hear a

boy in my dorm say during our junior year that he wasn't particularly worried about the college process or what the future held because he'd be guaranteed a job after graduation—he was destined to take over a very lucrative family business, a family business that he runs happily and very successfully to this day. I don't think I'd ever met anyone who owned their own business, and certainly didn't have any friends who were affluent, so the concept of my classmate taking over his family's business was completely foreign to me. I remember long conversations with classmates from Saudi Arabia and Korea whose culture shock in coming to the North Shore of Boston was even worse than mine. I had never left the country before so hearing about their lives literally opened up new worlds to me. And I remember a conversation I had with one of my freshmen when I was a proctor on the third floor of Perkins. He told me at the beginning of the year that he was panicked about the dress code because just about the only pants he owned were sweatpants.

I learned from my classmates and the perspectives and experiences they brought with them to their lives at the Academy. My life was enriched because they brought their whole selves to our lives together here in Byfield, and I want to encourage each of you to have the courage to do the same—the courage to be yourselves in all that you do, trusting that others will respect you for who you are—and the courage to respect others for being who they are, knowing that they are adding new dimensions to your life by living their lives fully and authentically as part of the Governor's community.

We could spend hours talking about all of the ways in which we are different from each other, but I think it's worth remembering that there is at least one important way in which we're all the same: None of us have chosen the path of least resistance. Teachers could find jobs that would allow them to go home every day at three o'clock. Students could find schools that would give them the ability to get better grades for less work, or to devote less of themselves to their school community. None of us are here because it is easy. But as Bernie Sanders said, doing the harder thing is important. Choosing the more difficult thing offers the potential for far greater rewards as we engage with each other, learn from each other, and create spaces that allow us to bring our whole authentic selves to all that we do.