



## OFFICE OF THE HEADMASTER

# Diversity Matters

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Opening Chapel Talk

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In 1852, Frederick Douglass was invited to deliver an address in Rochester, New York, on the occasion of the 4<sup>th</sup> of July.<sup>1</sup> Let's contemplate the cruel irony of that event for just a moment. For those of you less familiar with US history, Frederick Douglass was an African American leader in the movement to abolish slavery in the United States. Having escaped from slavery on the Underground Railroad at the age of 20, he was invited during his 12th year living in the North to deliver an address celebrating the birth of American independence. Now, when those of us who are Americans look back on the founding of our nation and the Declaration of Independence, I suspect that one particular sentence comes most quickly to mind: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. From our 21<sup>st</sup>-century perch, these would seem to be the enduring values of our nation — a familiar part of what those of us in this room who are US citizens see as our cultural heritage. But from the perspective of an escaped slave who was born just 42 years after the Declaration of Independence was signed, I think we can safely assume that these words resonated quite differently. In fact, to a man born into slavery, who had lived for years in fear of recapture, seeing the plight of his brethren who remained enslaved, and lacking the rights of citizenship, the promises of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness must have been empty promises, indeed. And so, there Frederick Douglass was in the grand and stately Corinthian Hall in Rochester, New York delivering an address entitled: *What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?* He asked those assembled:

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<sup>1</sup> The address itself was delivered on July 5, 1852. For the full text of Douglass's address, visit the website for the University of Rochester Frederick Douglass Project. <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/index.cfm?page=2945>

What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence? Are the great principles of political freedom and natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us? and am I, therefore, called upon to bring humble offering to the national altar, and to confess the benefits and express devout gratitude for the blessings resulting from your independence to us?

Were the practical realities of life in America for black men different, he said, he would have been happy to celebrate. "But such," he said, "is not the state of the case."

I say it with a sad sense of the disparity between us. I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance

between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. The Fourth [of] July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn.

Frederick Douglass went on to challenge, even chastise those who had invited him to speak. He raged against the hypocrisy that he identified. And he made the case that until America had abolished slavery it could never claim to be a nation of freedom, justice, and equality. And yet, despite the anger and the frustration and the sorrow that understandably marked Frederick Douglass's observation of this national celebration, he chose to end his talk on a note of optimism, saying: "...notwithstanding the dark picture I have this day presented of the state of the nation, I do not despair of this country. There are forces in operation, which must inevitably work the downfall of slavery. ...I, therefore, leave off where I began, with hope. While drawing encouragement from the Declaration of Independence, the great principles it contains, and the genius of American Institutions, my spirit is also cheered by the obvious tendencies of the age."

Frederick Douglass simply and eloquently pointed out that he could not himself join in the celebration of American independence because the benefits of independence were not benefits to which he and his brethren were entitled. He reminded his audience that the values espoused in the Declaration of Independence were laudable, but that they had still not been realized for him. The nation's work was not yet finished, and he encouraged his listeners to continue on their journey toward the realization of the aspirations of the nation's founding figures, for themselves and for all people.

You might well be asking yourselves: So, what does this have to do with us? Why would I begin the first Chapel Talk of the Academy's 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary year by referring to the speech of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century abolitionist? It's a fair question. The answer is that in Frederick Douglass's speech and life experience, I believe we see critical aspects of the American experience, the experience of inclusion and exclusion, the experience of articulating lofty ideals, sometimes falling short of them, and then striving with renewed commitment to making those ideals a reality. That is the story of the abolitionist movement, it is the story of the women's suffrage movement, and it is the story of the civil rights movement. I would submit to you that this American story is also our school's story.

We are about to embark on a memorable celebration of our own. For the last 250 years, dedicated teachers have worked at this school to prepare students for rich and productive lives of education and service. As I re-read Douglass's address this summer, I wondered what we would point to as our school's Declaration of Independence? What are the core values against which we must measure ourselves as we take stock of what we have achieved as a school and where there is

work still to be done? And how does the progress that we have made as a community in realizing those values affect the ability of people to join in our celebration? In reading our mission statement, the goals of our academic program, and our statement of core values, I think a clear picture of the values describing the character of our school emerges. We say that at Governor's, "students flourish in a diverse community distinguished by enduring relationships with teachers," and that Academy graduates "embrace their civic duty and global responsibility." We say in our statement of core values that we create an environment on campus that promotes "respect for all people and cultures," and in our academic program goals we say that students will learn to "treat others fairly, honestly, and compassionately." These are important and meaningful goals, and we know from surveys and focus groups conducted last spring with students, faculty members, parents, and staff that we have significant strengths in these areas.<sup>2</sup> Those who know us best tell us that we are a warm and welcoming community where students are genuinely happy. They also say that we offer students close relationships with faculty members, and that we are a community that welcomes new members readily. These qualities all provide a critical foundation for the realization of the goals we have set for ourselves. And yet, we must reconcile this feedback with feedback we have also received from students through other channels who have told us that too often students on our campus feel excluded. Too many students feel that they have to hide important parts of their identity because they will not be fully welcomed for who they are. They experience their own version of what Frederick Douglass called "the immeasurable distance between us." The task before us is to identify where we have yet to fully realize our highest aspirations, and then, with steadfast determination, to close the gap. The challenges we face are by no means unique to our school. They are the challenges of all schools and of our society as a whole.

Frederick Douglass told those gathered before him that he could not join them in their celebration because he was not a part of the nation they were celebrating. While in some respects free, he was in no way a citizen. While he was certainly *in* the United States, he was not *of* the United States. And it is precisely this difference that I would like us to focus on today: the difference between being present *in* a community, and being a member *of* a community; the difference between saying "I *go to* this school" or "I teach or work *at* this school" and saying "this is *my* school." It may not seem like a significant difference at first glance, but I would argue that it makes all the difference in the world. When someone is a full participant in a community, they bring their whole selves to that environment. They can be themselves, share who they are, and feel, for lack of a better phrase, at home. They are residents, not visitors: hosts, not guests. In fact, I think this is a wonderful way for us to think diversity on our campus.

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<sup>2</sup> In May 2012 a marketing and branding firm, *Creosote Affects*, conducted a thorough qualitative study of our school's relative strengths and weaknesses in the eyes of all the school's constituents. These comments make reference to the confidential report issued by the firm.

We will spend a fair amount of time as a community this year thinking systematically about how we welcome people of all kinds of difference into our community. I define the term diversity broadly to include gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, national origin, religion, age, ability, and sexual orientation. In thinking about diversity, the central question we will seek to address is one of inclusion and exclusion. Who feels at home and who feels left out? Who feels that all of the richness and distinctiveness that they bring to our school as an individual will be welcomed and engaged and celebrated, and who feels that they need to check some critical aspect of their identity at the door because we have not created an environment that makes sharing that story safe?

When I was a senior, I was a proctor on the third floor of Perkins. Perkins was then a freshman dormitory. One of the freshmen on my floor was, like me and nearly 30% of you, receiving financial aid to make attendance at the Academy possible for his family. This young man brought a wide range of wonderful experiences, perspectives and skills to our school, but early in the fall he began to get into trouble with his teachers. Some faculty members felt that he was being disrespectful and defiant. In looking into the situation more thoroughly, it turned out that many of these conflicts were rooted in the dress code. In short, he frequently came to class wearing sweatpants or sweatshirts. What we soon learned in talking with him was that he didn't have enough clothes that met the dress code to be in classroom dress every day. So when his pants and collared shirts weren't clean, he wore what he had—sweatpants and sweatshirts. He was embarrassed to ask his family for money to buy new clothes, and he was embarrassed to acknowledge, in an atmosphere of relative affluence and privilege at the school, that the reason he was out of dress code was financial. This issue was a symptom of a larger problem. He was at our school, but he was not of our school. He felt like guest, not a host.

When Frederick Douglass looked at the United States of 1852, he took comfort in the aspirational nature of American ideals. So too, should we look for the unrealized aspirations found in our own core values and seek as a community to live up to our highest ideals. As we celebrate the rich history of our school, we should at the same time think honestly about our own history of inclusion and exclusion. Imogene Robinson wrote a thesis paper in U.S. History last year that examined the place of girls at the Academy. She identified a period of time over 100 years ago when the school admitted girls largely to help pay the bills. While girls were admitted and allowed to take classes, they were never listed as students alongside the boys. They were referred to as Annex Girls and were relegated to the back of the school catalog. The Annex Girls were not recognized as fully enrolled students, and they could not earn diplomas. As part of celebrating our 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary, we will identify the descendants of these girls and offer posthumously to their heirs the diplomas these girls worked so hard to earn but were denied simply because of their gender.

Like the United States, The Governor's Academy is on a journey. The work of realizing the full potential of this Academy was not finished at its founding, and neither is it finished today. It is our responsibility as the stewards of this heritage to forge ahead on the pathway of progress. It is our job, individually and collectively, to make sure that all members of the community feel like this is their home, that they feel like hosts rather than guests, that nobody at Governor's feels the need to hide some part of who they are because sharing their full selves would be too great a risk. Some of the work before us can only be accomplished through the concerted efforts of the school's leadership. Attracting a diverse range of students, faculty members, and staff must be a priority in our hiring and admissions processes. But making those individuals feel at home is the responsibility of every person in this room.

Our traditions are rich. Our history is vibrant. Our past is one in which we can and should take great pride. And our community is warm, welcoming, and nurturing. But have we fully realized the values we have set forth as the guiding principles for our shared experience as member of this community? I think the only honest answer is that we have not. It is not that we haven't tried. It is not that people don't care. It is simply that we have not yet focused our individual and collective energies on the important work of diversity and inclusion. Frederick Douglass had faith in the nation's core values, and he had confidence in the good intentions of so many citizens, and as a result he ended his address not with despair, but with optimism. My faith in the good will and generous spirits that you all bring to our life together allows me to end this address with hope as well. As we head into this year of celebration I invite you to join me in revisiting our core values with a renewed sense of urgency. Together, we can make a thriving community healthier still. As we leave this Chapel today and return to the routines of our daily lives, I invite you to ponder this question: As we consider how we can become a community that celebrates inclusion rather than exclusion, what can you do to help others feel at home?