



OFFICE OF THE HEADMASTER

Reflections on Character

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Opening Chapel Talk

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Before I begin my remarks this morning I would be remiss if I did not take a moment to acknowledge that today is the 12th anniversary of September 11, 2001, a tragic day that set in motion a series of events that have changed forever the lives of tens of thousands of people all over the world, not least among them the nearly 3000 people who died in the terrorist attacks in New York, Washington, DC, and Pennsylvania. The flag will be flying at half staff today in recognition of this anniversary. Please join me now in a moment of silence to honor the memory of those victims. Thank you.

On a less somber note, it is a pleasure to be gathered with you once again in this lovely space. As returning students know and new students will soon discover, this is a place of reflection, joy, grief, sorrow, laughter, and celebration as we come together each week to share and listen to each other's stories. Last year we heard students celebrate the joy of friendship, and challenge each other to be better friends. We heard Mr. Wann talk about the pernicious effects of gossip, and heard Mr. Whittier encourage us to take better care of our campus. Whether the chapel talks send us into fits of laughter or move us to the verge of tears, they all share one thing in common. They call on us to reflect on matters of character.

So what is character, and why does it matter so much in a community like ours? It won't increase your GPA or improve your SAT scores. It is unlikely to show up on your Geometry test or your French quiz. And yet, many adults in our community would say that it is one of the most important things we teach. In fact, Dr. Martin

Luther King, Jr., believed that character was an *essential* element of education. He said: "Intelligence plus character - that is the goal of true education."¹

The work that you do in the classroom to acquire knowledge and master skills is at the heart of what our school is all about. But there are lessons you will learn outside the classroom that may stick with you even longer. I think of these lessons as relating to character, and we teach lessons of character all over campus. In the afternoon program you learn what it means to work together with others to achieve a common goal. You learn how to persist in the face of defeat, and to be generous and humble in the wake of victory. You experience the satisfaction of serving others and working to make a difference in a world outside of Governor's.

Last year the faculty spent a good portion of the year working together to answer the question: What skills should every Governor's student have acquired before graduation? After a lot of brainstorming and refining, we came up with a list of seven skills, and many of them are precisely the ones you would expect to see in a school that prepares students for college: critical thinking skills, effective communication skills, strong analytical skills, and the like. But there's one skill that might surprise you, not because you wouldn't agree that it's important, but because it might seem to you to fall outside the range of things a faculty would consider in a curricular review. It's character. The faculty believes that every Governor's graduate should be able to understand themselves as members of a larger community and act within a moral and ethical framework. In short, one of the ways we as a school measure our success in educating you is grounded in character. The list of skills goes on to say that:

As students develop a clearer sense of self, they will better appreciate and respect others while coming to an understanding of the world and their own place in it. Students will access a variety of media and texts in order stay informed about local, national, and world events; this knowledge will help them develop their own understanding of issues of social justice. Students will gain a sense of individual responsibility within a larger social context.

This suggests a sense of interconnectedness that seems logical in a community like ours. I need to understand myself well so that I can better appreciate the gifts and talents and perspectives of others. Understanding myself and others will allow me

¹ <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/character/quotes/>

to see that I have some responsibility for the condition of my community and the well-being of those around me. I think that the inclusion of character on our list of skills suggest at least two things. First, it suggests that character is something that can be taught. It also assumes that character is central to the life of our community. If we list it as one of the skills we teach, we must think it's pretty important.

So, character education is part of what we do here at Governor's both in and outside the classroom, but how can we think about what character means? A number of authors have been credited with saying that character or integrity is "doing the right thing, even when no one is watching."² The dean of students at Princeton, Kathleen Deignan, told me that she would end her phone conversations with her children when they were in college by saying: "Make good choices, and cite your sources." I bet you wish your mothers told you that every night, don't you? As the person responsible for Princeton's disciplinary system, Dean Deignan spent a great deal of time working with students who had failed to heed this advice. What she meant by "make good choices," of course, was "do the right thing." On the one hand, that sounds easy. I know what's right, and I know what's wrong, so I just have to make good choices. But this assumes that in the vast majority of cases we can tell what the right thing is. When faced with a decision, we need to have some way of picking one, presumably, the right one. But what makes one right and one wrong? In a lot of cases, the answers will seem obvious. Let's say I want a new computer. And let's say that I see a new computer on Mrs. Fitzgerald's desk in her office. I am in my office late one evening, there's nobody around, and she has left her door unlocked. Should I take her computer? Of course not, but why? Because my values tell me that stealing is wrong. Doing the right thing means acting in ways that are consistent with my values, which in most cases are consistent with the norms and values of society. That situation seems like a no brainer because we are in broad agreement that lying, cheating, and stealing are wrong. That isn't to say that nobody steals: they do. But most people recognize that as a poor decision, as doing the wrong thing. The problem is that the question of whether to steal Ms. Fitzgerald's computer is the exception. Most decisions are significantly more complex. For example, what if the value being tested is not stealing, but kindness?

² Variously attributed to C.S. Lewis (<http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/185488-integrity-is-doing-the-right-thing-even-when-no-one>), Sir Francis Bacon (<http://www.worldofquotes.com/topic/Integrity/1/index.html>), Dennis Johnson (**<http://isacquotelog.blogspot.com/2010/08/dennis-janson.html>), and H. Jackson Brown (http://thinkexist.com/quotation/our_character_is_what_we_do_when_we_think_no_one/208050.html). A case study in the reliability of the internet!

Let's say I come upon a group of friends who are preparing to pull a practical joke on someone. The joke might seem to some to be insignificant, but I know the purpose of the joke is to embarrass this person because my friends don't like him. Do I go along telling myself that it isn't a big deal because the joke is really harmless? Do I walk away because I don't want to be associated with an effort to humiliate another student? Or do I tell my friends to knock it off because I believe in treating people with kindness. The decision I make will be a reflection of my values, and making decisions consistent with your values is a measure of character. The quotation I cited earlier suggests that doing the right thing when nobody is looking is a mark of character, but in this example, doing the right thing *despite* the fact that people are looking might be an even clearer mark. The West Point Cadet's Prayer reads, in part: "Make us to choose the harder right instead of the easier wrong."³ Doing the right thing even when it's hard, that's character.

As someone with a passion for history, one of the things that is interesting to me is that if you look back 40 and 50 years, you see that the focus on character and community are not new phenomena in our school. In 1957 a legendary director of admissions, a man named John Witherspoon who died last December at the age of 96, said, and here I paraphrase to reflect our coeducational student body: "No matter how fine the [campus buildings] or how strong the faculty, no school can be better than its [students], for the [students] learn as much from each other as they do from the faculty."⁴ Headmaster Val Wilkie, who served from 1959-1972 and for whom the Wilkie Center for the Performing Arts is named, commented: "Even if the Academy carries out all of the other parts of its job well, failure to instill in students a sense of obligation to their society and to themselves means failure to carry out a vital part of our function."⁵

So here we are, embarking on a year of education, and these towering figures in the history of our school are using me as a channel to tell you that you can learn as much from each other as you can from your teachers, and that our central job as teachers is to help you see yourselves as being connected to, and responsible to, a society larger than yourselves. The difficult question is, how do we do that? How can we learn from each other and discover a sense of obligation to each other and to our larger society?

Let me offer a simple answer to a complex question: by watching, listening, and sharing. Let's work together to do the hard right instead of the easier wrong,

³ <http://www.usma.edu/chaplain/SitePages/Cadet%20Prayer.aspx>

⁴ Ragle, p. 157.

⁵ Ragle, p. 170.

knowing that others are watching and that we will inspire each other through our actions. Let's take time to listen to each other, to hear each other's stories, and in that listening to gain a better perspective on who we are, what we value, and how we can understand our place in a world that is larger than ourselves. And perhaps most importantly, let's create a tone in our community that not only makes people feel that it is safe to share, but makes them want to share. Each of us has a story to tell, some message from our lives that, if shared, would add richness and texture to our communal story. We share our messages with each other all the time, over meals in the dining hall, in discussions in the dorms and student center, and in our contributions in class. And because we believe this sharing is so important, we have a time set aside every week when we come together as a community to share and to listen. Do you want to give a chapel talk? What message or story do you want to share?

As the year unfolds, remember to watch, to listen, and to share. And above all, make good decisions, and cite your sources.