



OFFICE OF THE HEAD OF SCHOOL

Practicing Empathy

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Opening Chapel Talk

Moseley Chapel

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Good morning, and welcome to this first Chapel gathering of our school community for the new academic 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. Entering the Chapel in silence 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, they all share one thing in common—they represent one community member's effort to share a story or perspective that is meaningful to them with the entire school community.

In some years I have started my Chapel talk with an amusing anecdote. Some of you may recall my description last year of jumping out of my kayak when a frog jumped into my shorts. Others of you may recall my describing getting out of my car without putting it in park and watching it drive up Elm Street without me. Given this history it may be a good thing that I don't have a new story for you this year. But it's also true that this year I want to take on a more serious subject—one that lends itself less well to humorous stories. Today I want to talk with you about empathy.

For me, the start of a new school year always leads me to think about all of the things we have to be thankful for as a community. We have staff members who care about providing us with spaces in which to live and learn, and with meals to nourish our bodies and our spirits. We have an incredibly dedicated faculty committed to working with students in all areas of their lives, and we have what is arguably the most talented student body in the history of this great school. We are all very lucky, indeed.

And yet, even as we look around to count the blessings we have in this community, we also have an obligation to stay engaged with a world outside of Byfield—a world that I know has many of you concerned or even fearful even in the midst of the security and comfort of Governor's. The news in our papers and on our screens this summer was not

particularly happy. From rising tensions on the Korean Peninsula to the natural disasters that have battered the Caribbean, Texas, Florida, and Mexico, there are many good reasons for people to be concerned. Closer to home, I know that many of you were deeply troubled by the violence that occurred in Charlottesville, Virginia last month.

One of the things I think you should know is that there is a clear sense among our faculty that it is important for you to be informed about what's happening in the world. They believe this because they know that you will help to shape that world someday. Our hope is that when you leave Governor's you will use the skills you've learned here to make our world a better place, and one of those skills is the ability to empathize with others.

I recognize when I referred to Charlottesville a minute ago, some of you knew exactly what I was talking about, and some of you had no idea whatsoever. So what did happen in Charlottesville and why did it occupy the attention of so much of our country this summer? Let me offer a brief overview. On August 12 a group of protesters gathered in Charlottesville for a Unite the Right rally to protest the city's plan to remove a monument to Robert E. Lee, the commander of the Confederate forces during the Civil War. The protesters included, among others, groups of white supremacists, white nationalists, and neo-Nazis who were armed and carrying swastikas, Confederate battle flags, and anti-Semitic banners. Counter-protesters gathered as well to oppose the hateful messages espoused by Unite the Right rally organizers. In the end, the protest turned violent and there were a number of casualties, most notably Heather Heyer who was killed when one of the white supremacists plowed his car into a crowd of counter-protesters. Nineteen others were injured. In the wake of the violence, business, religious and civic leaders, heads of state from around the world, and politicians from across the political spectrum rose with one voice to condemn the Unite the Right protesters.

What was most upsetting about this for many people was the fact that organizations espousing these hateful sentiments had been emboldened to speak out in such a public way. For several decades in the United States views like these, views so antithetical to our national values, would never have been voiced in our national civic discourse. They are broadly considered to be so unacceptable that they had been pushed to the fringes of our society. So why is the public appearance of these groups and the airing of their hateful ideas such a big deal? Why would I choose to talk about an event like this for my opening Chapel Talk? The answer is that I believe that events like these, no matter how far removed from Byfield, have an impact on our community.

When groups grounded in hatred speak out, members of our community receive a message that they are less than equal, or become fearful for their safety or the safety of their loved ones. This is not an intellectual or philosophical issue. It is a deeply personal one. The impact of racist violence, hatred, and bigotry on people's sense of belonging in this country is profound. Even if you don't personally feel marginalized by these movements, it is important that we are all aware of the larger impact of these events on those with whom we share this beautiful campus. You know from what I said a few moments ago that I do not believe our community to be a place that is either frightening

or unsafe, but events like these make it more important than ever that we speak out and *declare* what we believe. So let me be very clear on that subject today.

Whatever messages members of this community may be getting from outside our campus, I want you to know that whatever your race, or your religion, or your sexual orientation, or your gender identification, or your socio-economic status, or the immigration status of you or your family, you—every one of you—are welcome here. And I want you to know that we as a school community will condemn any messages to the contrary. Governor's is a community that stands for respect and inclusion and it is the responsibility of everyone in this room to ensure that we live up to these values every day.

It is one thing to say that we should do this, but it's quite another to think about *how* we will uphold these values. How do we realize this vision for ourselves as a school? It starts, I think, with empathy, with an open-mindedness that encourages us to listen to each other and try hard to understand each other's perspectives. And perhaps more importantly, it starts with our willingness to take the time to learn about one another.

In Harper Lee's classic novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus Finch gives some simple but powerful advice to his daughter Scout. "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view," he says "until you climb into his skin and walk around in it." What he's talking about, I think, is empathy.

Let me end where I started, on a note of gratitude. As we sit in this beautiful Chapel on a late summer morning, surrounded by people who have chosen to devote their personal and professional lives to the education of tomorrow's leaders, we have so much to be thankful for. My hope for this year is that we will focus on listening to each other, learning from each other, and really getting to know each other—that we will work to see what this community and the world around us look like when we climb into another person's skin and walk around in it. We have a community of diverse people from all kinds of backgrounds. We aren't always going to agree on everything. But if we can commit ourselves to practicing empathy, then our school, and our world, will be better for our efforts.