Opening of Fall Term Address
Headmaster Kerry P. Brennan
August 28, 2019

Not every institution gets to celebrate its 375th anniversary. It is our privilege and our pleasure, however, to do that very thing on behalf of the idea, the history, and the School, that binds us together. And binds us to countless boys and teachers and staff who have constituted Roxbury Latin in its earlier, various incarnations. Europeans are used to marking significant birthdays. Thanks to Western Civilization (the parade of history not the course) we have the pleasure of encountering regularly the antecedents of what we would boldly call modern. Our contemporary edifices and art, let alone our institutions, serve the whims and whys and wherefores of popular, current culture. And yet all that is now, all that is boldly contemporary is somehow connected to that which went before—either as an extension of or in opposition to. But the main thing is the acknowledgement that we are, like it or not, the products of that which preceded us. In Europe, the caves, and monuments, and churches, and graveyards evoke earlier times, values, and priorities. They indicate more primitive, but nonetheless impressive technology. They, for all their differences, however, all their primitiveness, they are nonetheless the product of a constant of humanity, a striving to be more, to be better, to advance the systems and the symbols that mark a culture.

Last April people around the world looked on in horror as Notre Dame de Paris burned. Thankfully, much of this remarkable building was saved—as a result of brave efforts by the Parisian firefighters, *les pompiers*—but much of the roof and ceiling was destroyed. The estimate is that it will take at least five years to restore the cathedral to a state in which people may begin to enter it again. You may know that France has become one of the most secular countries in Europe. While most French would indicate that their heritage is Catholic, not many are active churchgoers nor adherents to the rules and practices of the Church. Yet, when Notre Dame burned, all French people expressed horror at the potential loss of their proudest symbol. This was not about their religious commitment or faith even, but it was about a recognition that something created in the 12th century, a beacon for communicants who sought solace and reassurance, an aesthetic marvel in which stained glass windows brilliantly illuminated the interior with colors and narratives of the Old and New Testament, an architectural phenom in which flying buttresses and other clever structural features provided support for what mainly seemed to be a free standing, soaring interior, and a place where French kings as well as modern political figures went to affirm their Frenchness and their continuity.

Not many French could articulate what I just described as the reasons for their devotion to Notre Dame, but they could feel their connection to this continuity, through generations of predecessors (including the remarkable craftsmen who fashioned the cathedral over two centuries), through devastating challenges—both natural, and especially the result of war and the relentless bombing of Paris, and a staunch feeling of belonging, of community. The French people's feeling of resilience and an attachment to that which was meaningful, enduring, and beautiful was embodied in that Gothic wonder. But the anxiety and sadness associated with the burning of Notre Dame was felt by more than the French people. It was felt by more than Catholics or even Christians. It was felt indeed by anyone who had ever visited that space and been moved by it or even others, who though never having visited it, nonetheless

understood it to be a reliable, awesome example of humankind striving to express the unexpressible, to marry technology to beauty, to offer a space that allows for the expression of and discovery of faith.

Notre Dame de Paris is one of the relatively few institutions to have celebrated a 375th anniversary marked by continuous existence. Even in our own country there are plenty of organizations founded before 1645, but not many of them have been continuously sustained. We laugh at that obligatory phrase "in continuous existence," but it does speak of a characteristic of the School not to be minimized and that is its enduring, resilient nature. While you would imagine the whole world would want to celebrate the marking of our 375th anniversary, remarkably few beyond our community will do so. That is despite the fact that our school is emblematic not just of the kind of commitment made to education in the early years of our nation, but has been successful, it seems to me, at honoring our often distinguished past with reverence for history and traditions, while imagining a modern school, one that prepares all of you for meaningful lives and the possibility of affecting positively the communities in which you will live.

Today, as we launch this special year, with commemorations and celebrations, I want to pause to consider a few other phrases that are part of our distinctive catechism. Some of these emanate from John Eliot himself; most of them have been the phrases of others and gained momentum over many years to the point that most of us want to believe that who we are and what we do are somehow preceded by 375 years of similarly minded school masters proclaiming the same priorities and values. Alas, but such is not the case. If anything, Roxbury Latin has endured not because in 1645 John Eliot declared the formula for an exemplary school and his descendants have assiduously adhered to his beliefs, but, rather, that over the years the trustees and schoolmasters have been committed to the School's evolution, to incorporating values and traditions that seemed consistent with founding principles but served to shape a school that was ever modern, always eager to serve its current students and to anticipate the world they would inherit and fashion. The phrases I will expand upon today are the result of that evolution, and, if they have any merit at all it is not because they have mystical historical antecedents; it is because they inform who we are today and who we wish to become.

The first three phrases have to do with who each of us is, who we are one to another, and what values we represent. The final phrase has more to do with how we engage with the bigger, badder world, and the impact we hope to have on it.

KNOWN AND LOVED

When I first worked at the School in 1978, I was not admonished to "know and love" every boy. This has become part of the secret sauce of RL over the years, and I believe that Mr. Jarvis can be credited with making it essential. One of the greatest surprises I had when I became Headmaster was the testimonials of many alumni who had not had a great experience at RL. Especially for the oldest of these alumni—graduates of the 30s, 40s and 50s, they often felt that teachers were decidedly adversarial. Indeed as has always been true, I surmise, the teachers knew their disciplines well and had mastered certain ways of delivering their curricula to mainly brainy students, but they were not committed to the whole boy, to understanding and celebrating his personality, to finding a way to understand him and to affirm him. I would imagine that in the first years of the School, starting with the first class consisting of young

Johnny Eliot, that the schoolmaster understood his young charges fairly well. He doubtless knew their families as they were gathered from the same neighborhood, and they represented a narrow slice of the demographic of that time—white, Anglo, male, Protestant, smart. Given presumptions about how one teaches and how students learn I could imagine there was some effort made to ensure that each boy succeeded, that each knew enough Latin primarily so he could pass the exams for Harvard College, and then go on to life as a member of the educated, dare I say professional class of that time. But in the ensuing three hundred years, I expect masters cared most of all about their students' mastery of material—and I'll bet the measure of that mastery was through daily recitations and performance on tests and exams. There certainly was no consideration of learning styles or possible crises within particular households that might have affected students' ability to engage with the program. Even for graduates of the mid 20th century RL was seen as a Darwinian place, a place where you would sink or swim, and where there necessarily would be some who did not make it, who were not "invited back" for a subsequent year. The alumni of that time didn't feel great about their school. Those who were asked to leave (sometimes half the admitted class) felt resentful that they were not given more of a chance, and those that remained and graduated felt a certain degree of survivor's guilt, unsure often why they had been spared the sword of Damocles and been allowed to remain, always fearful that each "could be next." RL during those years felt much like the most rigorous of exercises, in many cases a joyless, airless regimen with the reward being survival, graduation, and admission to a desirable college.

That we insist each boy be "known and loved" contributes mightily to the attitude of the School, and the responsibility that adults on the faculty and staff feel for understanding, supporting, and celebrating each and every student. Perhaps sitting out there all of you may not feel as known and loved as you imagine others are, but the principal promise made your parents when you are admitted and the admonition given the adults who care for you and about you is that it be so. Our relatively small size fosters an intimacy that allows people to know each other, to encounter each other in different venues —gathered here in the Hall and the theatre, as part of an academic class, in athletics, in publications, debate, Model UN, theatre, musical groups, on trips, and as part of service. It is, therefore, conceivable that the covenant to "know and love" is not just fostered by the adults, but is part of our general philosophy, our mission, practiced by you boys yourselves. As you know from your families, loving is not the same as liking. On more than one occasion when I had not been my best self, my mother would remind me that "while she would always love me, she was not liking me very much" at that moment. We find plenty of ways to love one another—by acknowledging, by trying hard to understand each idiosyncratic person, by offering generosity, encouragement, recognition, approval. So much, especially for younger boys, has to do with older boys noting their presence, getting to know their names, and addressing them. I ask you to do that. It, too is part of the knowing and loving we ask you to realize. And even when you are welcoming and kind to strangers on the campus, you are offering a loving gesture, a helpful hand intended to make those who are new to us feel at home. In its most basic form "knowing and loving" has to do with a cadre of committed adults, often in their advisor roles, but as teachers and coaches and activities directors, or simply as alert neighbors in the school community, who extend themselves to get to know the students, to take a share of responsibility for their tending and feeding and growing up, and even to admonish when required, in order to ensure that each boy comes to realize his best self—in all regards. I find that if a boy feels trust, and affection, and care that he will benefit from any observation or suggestion even when those call him to task for behavior less than ideal.

DEMOCRATICALLY GATHERED

As I have already noted, RL at the beginning was made up of boys who had a lot in common—in their ethnicity, religion, gender, and socio-economic station. They even came from the same neighborhood. Eliot, in founding the School, cared selfishly about the educational fortunes of his own boy, but he was also aware that the new colony needed an educated citizenry to advance both the virtues of scholarship —as students and teachers—and also to utilize Classical exemplars especially in order to imagine a community, a colony, and a nation that appreciated the kinds of justice, freedom, and democratic ideals that caused many in fact to seek the openness and possibility of the New World. In other words, during Eliot's time and for 250 years after, the emphasis was not so much on WHO was being educated (a relatively constant parade of WASPish boys constituted the school well into the 19th century), as what content and skills were being taught them. Around the turn of the 20th century, things changed. The United States, and especially Boston, had experienced waves of immigrants, primarily from Europe, who came to the United States 250 years later for opportunity as Eliot and his compatriots did. Some of these immigrants came for religious and political freedom as Eliot had, but most were driven by economic concerns, pursuing better lives in America, the land of opportunity, where streets are paved with gold. At about the same time, in somewhat in reaction to the deluge of new immigrants, established WASP families retreated to enclaves of privilege and protection. Many of our country's great boarding schools were founded around the turn of the 20th century ostensibly offering educational opportunities based on the European, especially British model, but they ended up being more about preserving the STATUS QUO, ensuring that Protestant, monied families were given unique opportunities to preserve their standing in the culture and hobnob with the same small, subset of society that constituted its elite clubs, colleges, vacation spots, and religious hegemony. Certainly many of the predominantly boys who were afforded these opportunities were bright and went on to offer leadership of all sorts—especially politically.

Back in Boston, however, there were many who felt quite far removed from the Andovers, Exeters, St. Pauls, Deerfields, and Grotons of the world. In an era when those kinds of boarding schools offered few scholarships and were essentially for the well to do, many families in Greater Boston cared greatly about the educational opportunities available to their own sons. They could not afford those rarified boarding schools, and yet they knew that education was the pathway to success in American society, and they were eager to find secondary schools and then colleges that would give their children this ladder to upward mobility. Roxbury Latin took on new stature in those days. Thankfully, the Boston public schools then, as public schools across the land did, afforded excellent training and possibilities for a diverse population. In Boston, Boston Latin became the most famous school for offering this chance. It was swarming with bright, immigrant children and offered aspiring public schools in urban centers around the country an example of excellence. For those who wanted something more intimate, perhaps even more Classical, there was Roxbury Latin.

Well into the 20th century, Roxbury Latin was free for all those who lived within a cachement known as "Old Roxbury;" this extended to Jamaica Plain, Roslindale, and West Roxbury. In the first couple centuries, Roxbury Latin drew from its local neighborhoods, primarily because it was handy and it was free! The School, especially under William Coe Collar, began to attract national attention for the rigor and effectiveness of its academic program. Since its founding, the School had provided well-prepared

scholars to Harvard, and throughout the late 19th century and beyond, students began to consider other undergraduate options. The makeup of the School, though during all those years, foreshadowed what we have come to take for granted today—a school made up of boys from families of modest means. As Boston changed dramatically in the late 19th century and early 20th century, so, too, eventually did the demographic of the school. New waves of immigrants—from Ireland, Italy, and Central Europe—were drawn to Boston, and especially if parents made education a priority—they were drawn also to Roxbury Latin.

It would be fair to say that Roxbury Latin was not in the vanguard of accepting boys from "newly arrived" families. In the early 20th century, however, RLS accepted students representative of ethnic groups and religious groups that the most prestigious boarding schools were not. A few weeks ago at a local diner, I ran into a priest who had grown up in West Roxbury; somehow he had heard what my job was. "Do you have many Catholics there now? he asked. "When I was growing up, my mother said that was a school for Protestants, not for the Irish Catholic likes of me. It was always sort of a mystery none of us dared to penetrate its boundaries." I explained to this confused cleric that he and his mother had it all wrong. In fact, in the early 20th century, RL began to take the sons of newly arrived European Jews as well as a fair share of the sons of newly arrived Irish. They generally came from aspiring families eager for education to help raise up the next generation, and ones with little financial wherewithal. In each instance, the School made a point of considering the individual boy, and what he was capable of and what he could offer. While I'm sure when it happened there was a bit of controversy among the trustees and the Headmaster, I don't believe there was a specific, focused effort to admit a certain number of boys of various ethnic or religious persuasions. Organically, the School embraced all kinds of talented boys even at the end of the 19th century. Our records show Irish, Italian, and Latin names in the 1870s; names of boys who were likely Jewish began to show up around the turn of the century. Regrettably, it would not be until the 1960s that the first Black student was admitted. I'm not sure about Asians or other underrepresented ethnic or religious groups; I fear their arrival might even been after that. What I do know is that the tapestry of ethnicities reflected in our school population today is a good thing. And I also know that still students are admitted as individuals, not because of or despite the fact that each is a part of a certain ethnicity or religion. Once he arrives at school he may indeed get to know others who are from the same ethnic group, or the same faith tradition, or come from the same neighborhood. But, more important, he will get to know boys from many other ethnicities, faith traditions, and neighborhoods. Most important, each boy will come to realize that he was admitted for his qualities—for his smarts, for his interests, for his personality, for his character—and never because his parents could or could not afford the school. Unlike virtually any other independent school I know of, Roxbury Latin is a meritocracy, in which one is admitted, and then the financial aid officers determine how much money his family needs to come here and awards that financial aid. However "diverse" some other schools claim to be, there is none I know of that quite so dramatically claims this priority and affords this access and affordability. We must monitor closely the financial model that allows this to be true, but we know that that vigilance is worth it thanks to the dynamic student body that results. I say we are democratically gathered because no one has a special claim on the place except because of his talent and his ambition. And yet I am not bashful about boasting that 38% of our student body is constituted by boys of color.

DILIGENT USE OF ONE'S TALENTS

Given its founding principles, yet more important its latter-day emphases, Roxbury Latin is about an implicit deal. In essence, the School offers a superb education, access to great teachers, programs and facilities, and the boys give unstintingly of themselves. At our school that means that a boy does his level best in his studies—which are rigorous and unrelenting—and then also he freely offers his talents and determination to countless extra curricular activities, as well as being a model citizen. The covenant simply states: We'll do our best for you and you do what you can to make the community the best it can be. In recent years, we have celebrated the generalist. For me, being "the generalist" at Roxbury Latin does not just mean that a boy is expected to contribute what he can to enterprises that call for his proven gifts; it also means giving other things a try—ones with which one has no previous experience. This could mean playing a sport that he has never played before, but could also mean giving debate a try, auditioning for a play, singing with the Glee Club, volunteering for service opportunities, signing on to trips.

Truth be told, until the middle of the 20th century, there was neither much choice about courses one could elect (the big choice for decades was whether to take biology or German sophomore year!), let alone very many "after school" or "extracurricular options." You need only look at the athletic teams in the Perry basement to see how recently sports like track, lacrosse, soccer, tennis, and even basketball came to be offered. And there were no service options and very few chances to participate in debate, Model United Nations, or travel. Some semblance of a Glee Club has existed for a long time, and so, too, has there been a long-standing commitment to dramatic productions. But the array and the high quality of these offerings is something new. More and more we learn of athletes who are pressured to specialize very early on in their young careers. We have mainly successfully fought against this trend, but the work goes ever on. In each season last year, I had a conversation with a boy who was opting out of a non-required sport because of feigned commitment to spend more time on a particular out-of-season sport. And also in what seems an obligatory but wrongheaded contention "to spend more time on my studies." When a boy drops a sport to spend more time on his studies he virtually never does better at those studies. Indeed, he usually fritters away the time that he could have and should have spent playing the sport of that season. In each of my conversations I reminded the boy of his responsibility to the credo of the school—and to use his talents diligently—and I also suggested that selfishly he would be better off contributing something we needed and having the gift of camaraderie that would come from that endeavor. I was 1 for 3 as only one of these previously lunkheaded, selfish boys acceded to my strong suggestion.

Our commitment to the generalist philosophy—of participating in various activities in being good at some and not so good at others, at learning about teamwork and both leadership and followership, in taking risks and suffering occasional disappointments, even defeat—all of this we believe is good for you and helps you to grow into balanced, collaborative men. It is not so far, either, from another of our most popular dicta, "from those to whom much has been given much will be expected." In the assessment of what it is you have, indeed what it is you have been given, the expectation is that you will share those gifts freely, that you will satisfy the implicit covenant agreed upon when you arrived at our doorstep.

LEADING AND SERVING

Of course, the admonition emblazoned on the far wall of the Refectory suggests much about this category as well. One strong, distinctive statement made by Eliot about the school's founding was that RL's objective was to "fit students for public service both in Church and Commonwealth." We have extrapolated from that clear statement of its times a more general call to lead and serve. Given the gifts that you know—your intelligence, your determination, your discipline, your appetite, and now the training and exposure that comes from your participating in the life of this School, you have much to give, much to give specifically to help others who have less than we in all sorts of categories, and you have the capacity to inspire, persuade, and lead others to make our various communities and dare I say the world, a more just, fairer, kinder, more loving, more effective place. This reminds me of another conversation I had with a cheeky boy who had the audacity to tell me that he was tired of what he thought was our unrealistic expectation for leading and serving. He said, "Mr. Brennan, I'm just going to keep my head down and make lots of money. I suppose it will be great if I have a family and plenty of fun, but mainly I want to live a good life. And I suppose, if we're both lucky, your statement about 'from those to whom much has been given, much will be expected' will be honored because once I figure I'll have enough for me, then I guess I'll give some of my dough to the School because I know you'll be panting for my millions." You can imagine a relatively long talk, in fact several talks followed that declaration. By the time the boy graduated he allowed as at least he wasn't so sure what in his life would make him happy and that some of my points about money not equaling happiness might be true. He said he'd let me know when he tested the proposition. I had tried to suggest that there were plenty of ways to lead and serve, and that some of my favorite leaders and servants also had a boatload of money. He had set up a binary proposition that was never intended. More important, however, I suggested that he would be squandering his numerous and obvious talents if he narrowly applied them to his chosen career in finance; rather I suggested he be open to the idea of teaching and leading others, of helping his community by serving on committees and boards, by volunteering for his kids' organizations. Though this boy, now a man, has not come back to tell me I was right, I happen to know that he is both successful at his profession and meaningfully involved in his community, in his church, and in his family. I expect because of all that he is closer to achieving happiness.

All that said, you know that I value greatly our involvement in the civic life of our nation. As I look at RL's history, except for its first two centuries, there are far too few public servants, men who offer themselves for elected office. For you then comes the additional charge that you take leading and serving much more literally and involve yourselves in our nation's political life. In an election year, I am bold to ask you again to pay attention, to understand the issues, to get to know the candidates, to support a candidate who reflects your priorities, to make a financial contribution, to work on a campaign, if you're of age to vote, and if you're not to get others to do so. And as adults I want some of you to run for office—locally or nationally—in order that your good thinking, balanced approach, and values might more broadly influence the communities in which we live. Lead and serve. And you can also work in the helping professions, discover cures for diseases, ensure the world has clean water, advocate for social justice, sacrifice in order that others might know better lives, work that all children might go to good schools and have bright futures.

FINALE

You will hear plenty throughout this year about Roxbury Latin, its history, its distinctive qualities, the impact it has had. As was proven with Notre Dame, however, just to be old, to have survived, is not enough. While we are grateful for such a firm foundation, for people, and values, and aspirations that have allowed us to be here today, what ought to inspire us is our own promise, our own willingness to take responsibility for honoring the phrases we have mentioned—known and loved, inclusive, broadly engaged, and leading and serving. Today we begin as we do every year with great optimism and great hope that we might write yet new, impressive chapters in this grand old School's history, ones that resonate with us individually and collectively, and speak of our audaciousness, simplicity, humility, integrity, and excellence.

O Roxbury, old Roxbury, ever dear since the days of long ago,
May the luster of thy Glory through thy children ever brighter grow.

K.P. Brennan
28 August 2019