

Opening of Spring Term Address

April 1, 2020

When I woke up this morning, my first instinct was to do an inventory of my physical well-being. Was the little cough I had “wet” enough? Did I have a headache? Was my throat sore? Was I able to take full, deep breaths? I expect that many of you did the same thing. And that people waking up all over the world enacted a similar routine. Depending on our cohort, we are either reassured or alarmed by the reports that older people and people with weakened immune systems or chronic ailments fare worse under the assault of the viral infection, and that others would likely suffer no more than one would with a common cold or the flu. Whatever the anticipation and analysis, we are all affected by the threat of this pernicious illness—as individuals, and on behalf of loved ones, but also as members of various communities—our school, our neighborhood, our city, our country, the world. Today, I want to share some thoughts on what is happening to us and how we should be thinking of that, but, also, importantly how we should think of us and our lives going forward. (And I use that term advisedly. In the past I resisted using that as a synonym for “in the future,” but here “going forward” seems more apt. It indicates agency, resolve, and positive motion.) My maternal grandmother used to say, “There’s a reason for everything.” She was acknowledging that stuff happens—that our lives are often turned upside down by surprises, failed expectations, and disappointments. She was asking us, “What can we learn from this? How will we behave, think, and imagine as a result of what we have experienced?” I intend to go there today.

Over the past few weeks, commentators have been eager to remind us of other cataclysmic events that have challenged Americans, and sometimes citizens of the whole world. The Great Bubonic Plague was a prolonged, devastating scourge in Europe of the 1500s. This went on for more than 300 years and, in sum, took the lives of 25 million Europeans. You can imagine that the awful hygiene and primitive medical responses of the time contributed mightily to this plague's impact. But, so, too, did the paralyzingly slow systems of communication; often a written letter would have to be carried by horseback across great land masses or by boat across seas. I grew up hearing of the Spanish Flu of 1918. My grandmother almost died during that epidemic. But she battled through it even to deliver her first child in January of 1919. Six hundred thousand Americans died from the Spanish Flu. We have recently heard plenty about WWI given the 100th anniversary of that devastating conflict in which more than eight million Europeans and Americans were killed. On Veterans' Day every year we commemorate the service of Roxbury Latin boys and the supreme sacrifice made by so many of them. WWII brought a different set of challenges; coming on the heels of the Great Depression (a widespread economic and social calamity), WWII required a country-wide effort to fight off the enemies in two theatres—European and Pacific. Seventy million Americans, Europeans, and Japanese died in that war. In my own time, we have lived through the devastating epidemic of HIV/AIDS, which claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Americans in the 80's and 90's. Because it was a virus affecting initially and principally the gay community, there was ambivalence and bigotry associated with the slow response to eradicating this illness. Blessedly, in the early 90s retrovirals were

developed that saved infected people's lives. This scourge was personal for me, as many men I know died of AIDS, including my best friend. On September 11, 2001, terrorists commandeered planes to crash into the World Trade Center towers in New York City, as well as the Pentagon in Washington and a site in Pennsylvania. This is the most recent event to frighten the Nation broadly and to offer stunning reminders of our vulnerability. In New York City, where I lived at the time, I was consistently inspired by the sense of solidarity and common victimization, even if it was simply fear and uncertainty that bound us together. On September 11, and each day for about a month following the attacks, people came together: We joined hands and hearts, churches were filled, shrines and prayer cells sprang up on street corners. We were reminded of what drew us together and what held us together: a simple human need to be cared for, to care for others, to feel included, to be loved. In that situation, strangers offered those reassuring feelings, and strangers asked for them, without regard for the person's age, gender, social status, sexual orientation, race, religion. The binding characteristic was that of humanity—humanity with all its idiosyncrasies, with all its individual needs and biases, stripped down and simple in its affirmation that we are all the same. That when it comes to surviving on this planet, we are in it together.

Whatever there is to say about these awful tragedies and demanding challenges throughout history, they are not quite like what we are experiencing. This Coronavirus is our epochal tragedy, and our unusual opportunity.

I have, like you perhaps, been transfixed by the Coronavirus for about the past three weeks. I have watched too much TV—mainly MSNBC and CNN, and occasionally even a little FOX; I have scoured the newspapers;

I have sent and received countless messages from friends and family—checking in on how people are doing, but also wondering what this was all about, how it would end, when we would return to normal. The running tally of reported cases offers a grim reminder that misery is visiting a growing number of people, and that our medical community and civic authorities are struggling to keep up, to test, to offer encouragement, to save lives. Alongside that ominous ticker typically stands another one, monitoring the stock markets—all sobering reminders not just of the impact the virus has had on our economy, but the extent to which some are more concerned about the Dow Jones and S&P than the most recent deaths in Massachusetts. Our economic health, our ability to live the lives we have gotten used to living, even the ability of schools like ours to throw open its doors, is indeed dependent on that stock ticker. But in times like these, we have to be reminded of what matters most of all: the well-being of our fellow citizens, here and around the world.

At times like these, when answers are elusive, we are inclined to look to other events in the world's history that represent similar characteristics of widespread challenges, potential despair, communal enterprise. I had the pleasure over the break of reading *The Splendid and the Vile*, written by Erik Larson and edited by Amanda Cook, Aidan and Oliver's mother. This book beautifully chronicles Winston Churchill's response to the Blitz, the most intense bombing campaign by the Nazis against the British, and, specifically, Londoners during WWII. One of the things I noted to my school community in New York in the wake of 9-11 is that as a Nation we are not used to being attacked on our own soil the way Europeans have been. Thanks to 9-11, we were reminded of our vulnerability. This is a good, if not welcome, reminder. As fairly

talented, responsible people we usually feel as if we have it all together. We have the confidence that we can endure—even benefit from and contribute to—the exigencies of the world, eager both to do our part, but also expecting we will derive benefits from that. We've been told over and over that we were bound to be successful people, and the certitude of how our lives would play out was informed by that feedback. Occasionally, my reminders from the lectern in Rousmaniere Hall have focused on those values, characteristics, skills, and ways of looking at the world that contribute to our own satisfaction, productivity, and happiness as individuals. Living, working, and playing in close company here, we also come to appreciate the special satisfaction (and occasional challenges) that result from working on teams of all kinds—academic, athletic, artistic, service projects, friendship groups. There are so many ways in which one's skill as a team player comes into play. In this pandemic, our experience as a team player is stretched to imagine us a part of our Boston community, our region, our Nation and the world. Truth be told, we talk a good game about our place in the “web of human experience,” but rarely are we challenged to acknowledge that we are the beneficiaries and sometimes the victims of that interconnectedness.

Citizens of London knew what that meant. During hundreds of bombings (and on 57 consecutive nights) in one year, they faithfully, and without complaint, evacuated to safer places—sometimes in the middle of the night as families in pajamas left their homes for air raid shelters located underground in Tube (subway) stations. Though their motivations were mixed and included the instinct to save one's own life, there was a selflessness in the way Londoners went about looking out for the other guy. There was an acknowledgement that sometimes

number one ought to be the group, the community, and not you alone. Unlike us Americans, they endured a war that was in their backyards — their shops and streets, even living rooms—living always on the knife’s edge of being hurt or killed themselves. For the Brits there was a period of preparation and expectation for their dangerous situation. In our own predicament, we did not have the luxury of time to prepare, to get medically and civically and psychologically ready for a scourge that would challenge us in so many ways. And yet here we are. We have had no choice but to heed the advice we have been given about how to prevent being harmed individually. Perhaps more important, and a greater challenge to our ego-driven selves, is what all this has asked for us in community—community writ large, the largest of teams. We have been admonished to stay in our homes, to quarantine, to isolate, in order to break the back of this infectious epidemic, and not to contribute to the infection of others, some of whom, like the elderly, are far more vulnerable to it. We are reminded, more poignantly than ever, that whatever freedom we have is inextricably tied to responsibility—a concept and a covenant our Nation’s founders knew all too well.

Grit

I return to my Grandmother’s observation that “everything happens for a reason.” As a teacher I would extend that thought to pose the question, “What can we learn from this?”

One thing we have learned is that we have stockpiles of physical and emotional sustenance that we may not have known we had. People have been asked to do things they are not used to doing. They are asked to live without some of the comforts and diversions that marked

our daily fare. Individually we are having to limit our mobility; we have curbed our independence; we have curtailed choice. Many of us are not used to hearing “No” in our lives. And while those rare instances of being denied our wishes are usually personal and private, the big “No” we are experiencing now is public and common and material. No you may not gather at sporting events or concerts or plays or in shopping malls or at parties. No you may not go to school. No you may not have contact with a loved one if that person or you are infected. No you may not hang out in person with your pals. No you may not go to work. No you may not go on vacation. No you may not travel on planes. No you may not participate in a sports season to which you have looked forward all year. No you may not be able to enjoy the typical celebrations that mark the springtime and end of the school year.

How do we manage disappointment? How do we endure sacrifice? How do we accommodate the solitariness that is implicit in much of this? To a certain degree, as in all things, we can learn from the model of others—people we love and admire who show us ways in which responsible, loving, caring, mature people face adversity. From all of us, however, these times require grit. You all have demonstrated grit in countless other situations: You may have ventured beyond your comfort zone; or sacrificed your reputation or physical well-being on behalf of a greater cause; or perhaps you’ve simply persisted, having been greatly disappointed. Sometimes you show grit by risking ridicule and extending friendship to an unpopular schoolmate. Sometimes you show grit simply by getting yourself to school each day despite the hardship of getting here and the urgent concerns at home. Often grit is exhibited when we don’t get what we want and we forge ahead anyway. Sometimes grit is present when our hearts are broken by the

death of someone we love, or as the result of a ruptured relationship, or a dream deferred. We dig deep and discover a wellspring of courage, resilience, and positivity deep within us that not only allows us to go on, but to do so with determination, effectiveness, optimism, and good will. This Coronavirus pandemic has demanded grit.

Grace

I have spoken before about Grace as a gift from God. Grace is a gift that's unearned, a benefit we receive that comes to us sometimes despite our unworthiness. In these times, we experience plenty of grace—in the form of good things that might not have been present to us were it not for this global and personal emergency. Today, however, I want mostly to emphasize another kind of grace—the grace that we show when we are kind, and cooperative and generous and empathic and neighborly and understanding to and of others. This is the instinct, sometimes deeply hidden, that propels us to do the right thing. Usually as was the case with 9-11, the right thing has to do with coming together, gathering as a sign of our common values, our commitment to a greater good and to each other. Because the current pandemic demands that we in fact guard *against* gathering in traditional ways, we are challenged to imagine how we can be grace-full people. Online and in our virtual support of people and worthy causes we are exhibiting grace. Grace causes us to be more selfless, more forgiving, more other-oriented. Grace is when in our families—despite challenges and discomfort, despite perhaps having had enough of our siblings in those close quarters—we nonetheless demonstrate cooperation, patience, affirmation, joy, and love. Grace is when we extend ourselves on behalf of worthy people or causes and expect no recognition. Grace is present

in our humility. Grace is present when we show both class and caring. This Coronavirus pandemic requires grace.

Gratitude

Finally the Coronavirus pandemic has inspired gratitude. I have often, especially during the Thanksgiving Hall, spoken about how gratitude is a particularly difficult characteristic to cultivate. But an attitude of gratitude makes sense—both because we owe our thanks to certain important people and as a result of countless blessings we enjoy, but also because expressing gratitude is healthier for us in mind, body, and spirit.

Perhaps closest and most urgently we ought to be grateful for what health we do enjoy. While the spectre of the disease looms ominously, we, nonetheless—thanks to where we have happened to be or with whom—has not directly affected most of us. We owe thanks especially to the medical community for turning out in force and with generosity and courage—often exhibiting a willingness to put themselves in harm's way, and given shortages of critical supplies and equipment, to improvise. Especially here in Boston we are blessed with a medical community and a hospital system that represents state of the art medicine, and a diversity of health care options that seem to be serving our sick neighbors well. But look, too, at health care professionals in hot spots around the country, especially in New York City where thousands of sick people are needing care, hospital beds, and equipment that can save their lives. I marvel at and am grateful for those health care professionals, some of whom are RL graduates. I am grateful, too, for others in our community who continue to work despite potential danger to their well-being: grocery store workers,

restaurant owners, convenience store and gas station operators, mail carriers, public transportation operators, utility workers, and first responders—police, firefighters, emergency medical workers. We should also be grateful for what is available to us online. Even 19 years ago, during the shock of 9-11, we did not have what we have today. Email, texting, social media, the Internet have generally allowed us to be in communication with each other and to hear from helpful sources, sometimes from around the world. Because we can be online, we're able to keep school. To be able to call up virtually any movie or series on our television or computer is a great blessing, and a welcome diversion. Thank God for Netflix and Amazon and Hulu, among others. In my own sheltering-in-place, I'm grateful for music—for a piano and recordings—for my beloved pet, Rascal (who insists on practicing canine distancing!), and for aspects of daily life that work—electricity and plumbing—as well as books and newspapers delivered to our computers or our doorsteps. I have watched a lot of television news over the break, and I am grateful for those news people and commentators who keep us up-to-date and help us to imagine how all this will play out. Given worldwide coverage it also keeps us apprised of how others are doing around the globe, and what patterns seen in other countries may foreshadow or advise about our own futures. If there was any question in a climate of rabid nationalism about the global family, this pandemic underscores our connection to and dependence on each other around the world, for better or worse. We should be grateful for families and friends whose company we are experiencing in new, intense ways and the way they love us. Finally, I am grateful to my colleagues who teach and offer their goodwill and talent on behalf of the boys of this school. It has not been easy to make

the transition to an online learning platform (some of us are old dogs, and it's not easy to teach us new tricks), and yet given your teachers' professionalism, their creativity and adaptability, and mostly their commitment to all of you, they have worked hard to modify what it is that they do. I am convinced that this will be an adaptation born of ingenuity and innovation that will serve us well, even as in time we return to a more normal rhythm of life. I am grateful, too, for our tech team—so versatile and helpful. And I am grateful within our school and our community to those who have offered leadership; they have suffered countless sacrifices, in some cases vacations with their families, in order to ensure that we were in good shape as we face this brave new world. Leadership in our state and nation is more variable, but when it is present and effective we both know it and benefit from it.

Finally, I am grateful for hope. Hope was going to be the topic of my whole talk before this peril visited us, and it will bear repetition and elaboration at another time. But, for now, be grateful for hope. Hope allows us to imagine that brighter days are ahead, that eventually we will lick this enemy and return to the kind of life we have come to value and count on. Throughout this ordeal, we have seen countless, heartening stories of people who have stepped up, who have exhibited optimism, and who inspire others as a result. Walking through the campus last week I believe that I have never seen it looking more beautiful. Poignantly our fields are ready to go—begging for balls and boys and cries of joy. This is a time of year that bursts with hope—as winter turns to spring and birds and trees and flowers return tuneful, bright, bursting with blossoms and promise. It's vexing to imagine that nature as responsible for the plague that is battering us, and that

nature is also the source of so much beauty, so much promise, so much life. This challenge reminds us that we are bound together with millions of people the world o'er, joined to us by the environment that depends on our care, and by philosophy and faith that strive to explain our presence on this planet, and especially joined by the shared commitment to family and relationships and life.

As we have launched this new approach to teaching and learning, I'm especially happy that together—though apart—we can continue to support and inspire each other. To you boys goes my gratitude for your willingness to swallow your disappointment (even as you understandably may feel the seeming unfairness of being robbed of celebratory events that mark this time of year in our school), and instead consider counting your many blessings, and helping where you can. Of all the forces that give us hope, the greatest source of energy and optimism and can-do spirit, for me, is all of you. You know intuitively that we cannot guarantee a perfect world, that neither school nor the world in which we live is a lumpless pudding, and all of us have a responsibility, an opportunity, to make our times and our challenging futures and our relationships better. Do that with a bright spirit and remember that we are all in this together. Thank you.

K.P. Brennan

1 April 2020