

## Opening of Winter Term Address January 6, 2022

A few weeks ago when I was visiting New York City, I was confronted with a variation on what it means to live in the age of Covid. Everywhere I went—bookstores, restaurants, department stores, coffee shops, movie theaters, clubs, gyms, hotels, theaters—all of these venues had representatives as gatekeepers ensuring that I had been vaccinated. Living in Massachusetts, which has not enacted such a requirement, I was not used to and easily bothered by the pain of having to go in my wallet every time and presenting a pretty beat-up piece of paper that chronicled my two Modernas and a booster. Of course, I could summon up the logic to understand why what was being done was a good thing. Frankly, I would rather show proof of vaccination than run the risk of infecting someone or getting infected. Also, I will gladly put up with the inconvenience of presenting proof of vaccination if the alternative is what we went through from March 2020 on before vaccines were available. The reason I bring this up, though, is not simply to offer a gentle rant about how I was put out by this protocol. What got me thinking was the idea that perhaps the presentation of my vaccine card, and usually my driver's license, offered some more data points to track me and potentially invade my privacy. Today, we know that we are constantly being tracked and followed, usually thanks to the Internet and sophisticated means by which every one of our characteristics is captured and then leveraged to offer data to some commercial enterprise. For example, I bought two sweaters from Brooks Brothers online in 2018 and so every single day I get notices advertising sweaters or other clothes that might be of that same style. Countless other keystrokes and site visits help technology spelunkers to know us but not to love us. Our every move is noted, analyzed, and then marketed. This realization inspires me to return to the question it takes a lifetime to answer: *Who am I?* There are many ways to answer that question.

One popular pursuit these days has to do with DNA and genealogy. I have always been interested in my ancestry and especially eager to go beyond my European immigrant grandparents and learn who their (and my) forebears were. A few years ago, I spit into a vial and a month later the company 23andMe sent me an analysis of my origins. I was amazed. Close relatives like my brother and my cousin showed up on my list of family members. I did not know that they had participated in this endeavor. Their identification suggested to me that there was validity to this process. In the meantime, I have heard from a handful of purported third and fourth cousins. Just last week a woman with the surname Brennan announced to me that we likely had the same great-great grandparents. Indeed, she was able to fill in some of the blanks on my own family tree. Will I ever visit this person who lives in the UK? Will we become best buds? Will we see each other and notice the same peculiar characteristics? I don't think so. But for now our connection has made for a remarkable revelation. Of course the Internet makes any and all of this possible. Previously one would have to examine dusty record books in sketchy village archives or dusty church attics to come up with any clue as to one's heritage. For me at least, I hope that my research will yield some hyper interesting ancestor—a hero or a rogue, maybe someone who played a role in some historical event, and as was true with some of my Irish family a couple generations back who acted nobly on behalf of an admirable goal like achieving independence for Ireland.

The more common ways we are identified these days have to do with a host of data collection systems and algorithms that spit out our info on a regular basis. These days I present a credit card for most purchases. Online I visit various sites often purchasing something from those sites. Even if the site is not selling something tangible, it is indeed selling access to a set of information or experiences. I have a hard time remembering all the access codes and passwords. Several times during the day we are expected to offer identifying numbers and letters in order to affirm our identity. Throughout history there were situations in which one's identity was critical, sometimes mitigating a matter of life or death. One need only think about what did or did not save you from the persecution of the Nazis in WWII, or what immigration papers would allow you to remain in this country even if you had been involved in an activity that might have been frowned upon. Certainly, these days the challenges of immigration consume our national dialogue and do not begin to capture the poignant drama of the people who are caught up in a system that sometimes is not fair, and certainly not welcoming. Go to another country and you will be asked to "present your papers," usually a passport and occasionally a visa. These days you will also have to show proof of vaccination for Covid or a negative test.

Who am I? Am I suitably represented by any one of those documents? Any one of those data points gathered by online retail operations?

Who am I? The DNA that's gathered and then matched to other potential relatives? Am I defined by the websites I visit, and do these patterns suggest anything about my personality, tastes, or character?

Who am I? We are such creatures of our times, so automatic in the way that we unthinkingly respond to requests for information that we minimize the possibility that such participation could lead to inferences that may not be flattering or indeed potentially harmful. A friend of mine who recently applied for a job somehow learned that his potential employer had seen everything he bought off the internet over the past month; he had seen every picture posted on Instagram; and he had made inferences about the candidate's suitability for a position based on that data.

Who am I? Am I any or all of those things? We know that college candidates are routinely rejected because college admission officers need only click a few buttons to learn a good deal about a candidate, his or her judgment and maturity, based on pictures chronicling his social life.

My reason for bringing all this up is not mainly because I want you to exercise discretion and good judgment in deciding what to post on various apps and websites. I do want you to do that. But mainly I mention all these because they obscure the question I have already asked: *Who am I?*

This question ought to be asked by each one of us every single day. It's also on the minds of those with whom we come into contact as they wonder, "Who is he? What is he capable of? What does he stand for? Would he be a good person to know or befriend? What are his gifts? How would we get along?"

The pursuit of the question “Who am I?” is asked throughout our lives. The questioning does not end even when one is a geriatric like me. Let me share an example of the kind of questioning of who one is that ends up not being instructive or affirming but, rather, can dissuade us from being the people we are capable of being. This is something called the imposter syndrome.

Over the years, several boys have visited me in my office concerned about a particular doubt—sometimes at my request, sometimes thanks to their initiative. The individual circumstances vary, but the core issue is the same: the boy questions why he is at Roxbury Latin. The statement usually goes something like this: “I just had another disastrous test. I’m bound to get a C this marking period, if I’m lucky. I saw the teacher. He yaps and yaps and yaps, and it’s like I have no brain to which his words can attach. I sit there and listen and nothing sticks. I’m an idiot. Everyone else seems to get this stuff with ease. Their hands fly up in every class. They seem to each have read a thousand books and know everything about the world’s history. And seem to have visited every country. And while I’m stuck thinking of what the question was that the teacher asked, five guys have jumped in and then we move on. Occasionally, because I know the teacher thinks he has to involve everybody in the class, he calls on me. Oh my God. I look like such an idiot. I don’t have a clue. Why am I here? The admission committee must have misread my credentials. Or they think I’m a better lacrosse player than I actually am. But my life is miserable. Every day I think that I’m the beneficiary of some cruel joke that put me in this school so that everyone can laugh at me. I’m stupid. I’m an imposter. I don’t belong here. I’m a fraud. And everybody knows it.”

Throughout literature and history, the imposter has held a special position. Sometimes the character himself is pretending to be someone else. And sometimes, through no fault of his own, others believe him to be another person. In the Gospels, when Jesus returned from the Resurrection in order to commission his apostles to continue his work on earth, Thomas, Doubting Thomas, presumed that the image of the Lord before him was a hallucination or some other kind of fraud. That was when Jesus admonished Thomas to put his fingers in the nail holes in his hands, and to put his fist in the hole in his side. These were the confirming marks of his crucifixion. Subsequently, Jesus taught one of the lessons of faith when he declared that Thomas believed because he saw and the truly faithful would believe even if they could not see.

Some of you freshmen have just finished reading *The Odyssey*. After 20 years of wandering, Odysseus finally returns home, but the ever-faithful Penelope has a hard time believing that the man before her is her husband. Odysseus uses his knowledge of their marital bed, its derivation from a tree stump and its inability to be moved, as proof that he is indeed Odysseus, Penelope’s husband. He proves he is not an imposter.

Let me offer another example that will end up being close to home. The winter musical, *Catch Me If You Can*, chronicles the antics of an especially skillful imposter. The play (and then the movie) are patterned after the real-life story of Frank Abagnale, Jr. who, over several years, commits some amazing acts of fraudulent identity including posing as a physician, a professor, and an airline pilot. I hope this early commercial will inspire you to be sure to attend one of the

two performances of *Catch Me If You Can* at the end of February. You will meet an amazing imposter.

I can say with some assurance that each of us has at some point in his or her life felt like an imposter, someone who didn't belong where he or she was. For most of us, that revelation comes when we are on the brink of something new, when we are attempting something we have not attempted before, when we're daring to do something hard or different, or when we are thrown into a bunch of new people. I've had those experiences myself, and here are some of them.

When I was 7, I was riding my Stingray bike down our street when I saw a bunch of boys playing baseball on the field across from my house. I rode up closer because I wondered if there were some game that had erupted that I had not gotten wind of. In fact, this was early April and was a Little League tryout. The coach was a friend of our family, Poochie DiNola, and he called out to me, "Kerry Brennan, you should be out here. Go get your glove." I was 7. To play Little League you had to be 8. Nonetheless, I trusted Mr. DiNola and rushed home, got my glove, and returned to the field. The coach quickly incorporated me into the drills and we played on for about another hour. All the other boys treated me strangely. I knew these guys but they were a grade ahead of me in school. Correctly they were wondering what the heck I was doing there. At the end of practice, after reminding us that we would do it all again the next day, the coach called me aside. "You did well, Kerry. Why didn't you show up earlier?" "Because I'm 7," I said. "Then what the heck are you doing here? You can't play if you're 7. See you next year." Of course I knew that. But he had told me to get my glove. So I did. And I was an imposter. An unwitting imposter, but an imposter nonetheless. I scrupulously avoided any contact with those 8-year-old boys for a good long time.

Another time I felt like an imposter was when my mom thought it would be a good idea for me to audition for a part in the Schenectady Light Opera production of *The Sound of Music*. I had seen the movie but I had never at that point seen a live theatrical musical. All I knew is that I liked the music. And my mother admired my singing and thought I was cute enough for a role. I knew nothing about what was expected in such a situation. And neither did my mother. I arrived and filled out the form. There were a bunch of other kids of all sizes and shapes there—most were dressed up, some were actually wearing Austrian looking garb like lederhosen and frilly skirts. I was dressed the way I would be when I went to school. My mother and I sat in the hall outside the auditorium. "Kerry Brennan." I stood and followed the summoning guy into the room. I had not seen or heard anyone who had gone before. "How old are you?" "10" "Where do you go to school?" "Pleasant Valley." "And what will you sing for us?" What? What kind of question is that, I thought? "I'm not sure." "Did you prepare a song? Don't you know that in the audition notice it said you needed to prepare a song?" "I did not know that and neither did my mother." "Well do you know *Edelweiss*?" I did....sort of. And so I sang *Edelweiss*. They checked my range (what I would spend the better part of my professional life doing as a choral conductor). And out I went. I was an imposter. I did not belong there. And, no surprise to me, I was not cast in that season's dazzling production of *The Sound of Music*. We did go to see the show, however, and when I saw those kids perform, I thought to myself, "I can do that."

Subsequent to that episode, there were plenty of times I could have felt like an imposter, but didn't. Trying out for a basketball team, auditioning for a solo in chorus, improvising on the trombone, leading choirs at my church, running for office. In each of those situations I felt I had a legitimate right to be vying for the opportunity. The greatest instance of my feeling like an imposter came, however, when I arrived at Amherst College. No one from my high school had ever gone to Amherst. In anticipating my attending, I didn't have a lot to go on. I had been fairly successful in high school in any number of ways—all measured by the context and the standard I realized later. College was a different story. First, the setting was beautiful with gorgeous vistas, impressive facilities, and remarkable resources. Second, the other students were fascinating...and a bit intimidating. On the first day of orientation, their parents pulled up to the dorm in fancy cars sporting license plates from around the Northeast. Out came fancy luggage and equipment, like typewriters, mini refrigerators, and stereos quite different from my own. They were dressed casually but in elegant clothes. My older brother had gone to college several years before, so I thought I knew the drill. But I didn't. I was anxious. How would I get along with these guys? Would they like me? Or would I be seen as an imposter, someone whose high school grades signaled a capacity to excel academically, but was clueless about what it took to succeed socially at a place like Amherst. Thankfully, the guys on my floor were friendly; we went as a pack to meals; and we hung out in each other's rooms trying out albums and offering opinions about music we liked. I could not have known then, at the beginning, the different backgrounds these guys represented and the fact that my own story may not have been as anomalous as I thought it was. The impression they all made, and that their parents made, suggested they were of another class, more sophisticated, more in the know, more moneyed, maybe even smarter. What added to the anxiety was the fact that my roommate did not arrive for orientation. My parents, of course, were eager to meet him, but he did not show up. What's that all about? When Scott did arrive I found him friendly, funny, and cocky. He had gone to Hotchkiss, a prep school I had only heard of when I saw it printed next to his name in the freshman facebook. I later learned that Hotchkiss was then and is now one of the most prestigious of high-end boarding schools, mostly in those days for moneyed students whose fathers and grandfathers had also attended the school. Scott was perfectly friendly but his patterns were troubling.

Scott's personality and confidence were one thing, but the overall academic tenor of Amherst was decidedly different from what I had experienced at Mont Pleasant High School, where now I realized I had not been challenged, and I thought, not been taught what it took to succeed in a college setting. I was totally intimidated by this academic opportunity. I presumed every kid in my class was a genius. I wrote in my notebook practically every word that the professor said—I recorded his words but I didn't listen. The information washed over me. I was no better when I did the readings for my courses. I had never learned to annotate a text. Stupidly I used a marker, not a pen, to highlight large swaths of the book. When it came time to review what I had highlighted I had no idea why I thought it was important and might as well have re-read everything that had already taken me plenty of time to read. Anxious about surviving, let alone succeeding, I would go to my carrel in the library whenever I could and start on a particular assignment as soon as it was given. I had no idea how to measure how long something would

take so I started it right away in order to have as much time as I could to get it finished. My roommate approached his work, however, like he was from another planet. Scott was enrolled in English 11. He routinely waxed eloquent about Aldous Huxley and Bertrand Russell and John Hume—philosophers and writers I had never heard of. But for his English 11 class, he was to write an essay due each of the three days a week the class met. The class met at 9 a.m. The night before Scott would have been playing The Grateful Dead at high decibels until even he understood it was time for quiet and bed (about 1 a.m.!). He was not doing school work. At 8 a.m. the next day he would sit at his typewriter at his desk and bang out the essay for the class. He had 50 minutes to get it done. I was amazed, and I thought that I must be such a dope because, though I was not in that class, assigned writing for other classes took me forever. I was an imposter. Scott knew how to do it. He was endowed with the smarts and had been given the training that would allow him to succeed.

I had no idea what kind of grades Scott got that semester. We were in none of the same classes. I had elected introductory courses in political science, psychology, sociology and French 5. I was drowning. I got a C on my first psych paper. I had no idea what I was doing. And given my feeling that everybody else had this down, I did not share my disappointment, my anxiety, my fear with anyone. Nor did anyone, least of all a professor, care enough to ask. I was an imposter. I never asked a question or made a comment in class. The French professor in a class of 10 knew me. The other profs teaching lecture classes of 60 hardly knew me at all. To my mind, I was better off that way.

Little did I know that indeed Scott's approach was not successful. Apparently, he was getting terrible grades. I knew nothing of that and his work-play pattern stayed the same throughout our freshman year. We went off to different fraternities for sophomore year and I saw less of Scott. And then I saw nothing of him. You see, this handsome, well-dressed, paragon of preppiness and preparation had flunked out. Amherst sent you away with the option of coming back after you had had the time to re-evaluate your commitment, but Scott never came back. I felt bad for Scott, but selfishly I felt like a bit less of an imposter. And especially I did because I began to understand what it took to succeed. I was managing my courses with greater competence, having success in the Glee Club and an a cappella group, got into the frat of my choice, and had good friends. I felt like less of an imposter.

There have been countless times in my life when I felt like an imposter, or at least lesser than. One important instance of this occurred when I was hired to teach at Roxbury Latin. Practically fresh out of college, I applied to be Director of Music, but there was another part to the job, a need to teach something else, as well. I had majored in music and political science. I had not majored in English, nor frankly had I taken very many English courses. When Mr. Jarvis decided I should teach two sections of English 8 that first year he wondered aloud what kind of writer I was. I suggested I thought I was competent. His confidence in me I'm afraid was greater in that moment than my confidence in myself. In fact, in order to feel that I could competently teach the students assigned to my English classes, I had to work exceedingly hard. Eventually I would teach English 10 and English 11. A new colleague left a stack of books on my desk in my old classroom (now Mr. Lieb's room) a few days before classes started and wished me well. I

sometimes felt like an imposter because there were esoteric features that were common in literary analysis that I did not know. Over time I learned to teach grammar and usage, and, mainly because I believed that learning these things was good, if not essential, for my students, I tried hard to be clear, creative, and effective in ensuring that they did indeed learn. I also fell in love with certain literature we were reading and each successive year offered a yet more robust, thoughtful approach to each of those experiences. I started as an imposter as an English teacher, and over time became less so.

We started this talk today with a boy who felt he was an imposter at our school, that he ought not be here. I can tell you for starters that our admission process yields results that ought to be heeded. The faculty and staff who constitute the admission committee are especially analytical about a candidate's promise and only suggest an "accept" if they are confident the boy could thrive. The boy I mentioned earlier deserved to be here, as do each of you. Would there be other boys who were better at some things than you? Or would there be some for whom the work came more easily? Yes. Definitely. That is bound to be the case. Would there be lacrosse players who were more natural athletes, whose bodies matured more quickly? Were there lacrosse players or any other kind of athletes who had been given opportunities to play the sport at a high level from a young age? Yes. Definitely.

However, you, in your particular gifts, in your limitations, in your experience, and especially in your desire and passion have the capacity to grow and change and improve. You have the capacity to fulfill your ambition to be excellent at something, or, perhaps, many things. You have the capacity to contribute, to make a difference.

In our lives we are seeking authenticity. We want to be real. We want to be the same person regardless of whose company we are in. We want to feel competent, and contributing, and lovable. Virtually every day, we will ourselves to confront a novel situation or make the acquaintance of a person we did not know before. My parents had different but similarly instructive advice about how I ought to imagine the challenge of pursuing that which is new and daunting and strange. They suggested how I might see myself in the world. My mother admonished my brother and me that we were neither better than someone else nor were we lesser than someone else. Of course, in certain particular ways each of us is better or worse—with some skills, or in some subjects, or applying our knowledge to problem solving, or making friends even. Her point was more of an existential one: We, all of us, are children of God and therefore deserve respect and kindness and love. I am imperfect in the way I encounter and judge people, but I strive for her ideal. My father, on the other hand, advised that half the battle is won not just by showing up but by signaling that you belong there. Some of that, especially if someone feels out of place, or an imposter, requires projecting oneself as confident and committed and concerned. And that one does not betray that he may be, or at least feel, out of place. In those situations, I find myself striving to quickly imitate the patterns and protocols that most others already seem to know. My father's point was that once an opportunity is offered and accepted that each of us has the chance to prove our legitimacy, or even our excellence in that realm.

Today, as we all face the New Year, 2022, a year in which we hope that we can know normalcy and health and happiness in our lives, I wish us a few things. I wish that we grow to know and love ourselves in such a way that we can push forward at moments when we might feel most vulnerable, when we have the greatest doubt. I hope that we will know the confidence and ambition that will allow us to grow into the people we are capable of being. Every day we are challenged in significant ways. When we try out for a team; when we volunteer an answer in class; when we audition for a part; when we run for office; when we wonder at what table we will sit in the Refectory; when we first meet new classmates or teachers; when we are in a social situation in which we want the other people or a special other person to like us—usually the liking comes before the admiring and the respecting; when we worry that no one will want to spend time with us over the weekend or the break; when we apply for admission to a school or college; when we apply for a job; when we pursue a relationship with a particular person who might become our life partner; when we wade into any room, a meeting, a reception, a bar. In all these situations, I hope you feel the opposite of what the imposter feels. I hope that you humbly and confidently will imagine yourself anywhere, with any person or group of people, regardless of the circumstances or the prestige or fanciness or the consequences of the situation. For us to evolve, we have to take risks. We have to put ourselves forward. We have to believe that we are worthy.

We have to summon courage even when we are most fearful. We have to have both the knowledge and courage to ask for help. Over time, we grow more confident not just in who each of us is—our one true, authentic self—but we become eager to project that persona, to risk rejection or ridicule even as we are also risking the possibility of making lifegiving, lifelong connections, of feeling challenged or affirmed, or even falling in love. I wish you all of that in the New Year, and will be especially glad to be part of a community in which no one feels himself or herself an imposter.

Thank you.

K.P.Brennan  
6 January 2022