

Gratitude

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Thanksgiving Hall 2022

There I was, sitting in a horseshoe formation for my English 9 class in what you boys now call the Student Center, but at that time in the 1990s, there were no official gathering spaces dedicated to students. That hallway was simply a row of academic classrooms. Our English class was embarking on a discussion of the *Odyssey*, after we had one of our regular reading quizzes to start the period. The teacher guiding that discussion is in this Hall today. As a new ninth grader, I was just trying to adjust to my new school. I had an advantage over my fellow new ninth grade classmates, because I had three older brothers who went to RL. But I still did not feel comfortable, and I was learning quickly that academic life here was not going to be easy. I was anxious about finding a way to enter the conversation while my talented classmates were carrying the discussion. I felt a bit like Odysseus attempting to steer clear of Scylla and Charybdis, burying my head in the text to avoid eye contact with my peers across the room and that teacher standing near me. I was waiting for the bell to ring. Thankfully, on that day one of my classmates had decided to make a snarky comment and proceeded to talk back to our teacher. Remember, we care most about what type of person you are. The teacher quickly emphasized that point by walking over to that young lad's desk, picking up his backpack, opening up the window, and depositing it and all of its contents onto the hill overlooking the football field. I will get back to this in a moment.

When Mr. Brennan asked me to speak to you boys about Thanksgiving, I was not sure why he asked me, but I humbly accepted. I will tell you that one of the aspects of your education for which you should be grateful is our Hall program. Mr. Brennan and Mrs. Berg work extremely hard to bring experts from various industries and walks of life to impart wisdom, offer life lessons, and hopefully spark passions in you. I am self-aware enough to know that I was not at the top of their "we-hope-to-get-that-speaker" list. The co-founders of VulcanForms, Dr. Joshua Bennett, and Mr. Puleo on Founder's Day are recent examples of the exceptional people who enrich your educational experience. Sorry...today you got me. Also, having been in those seats as a student, I remember well that there are mornings, after a long night of studying, that you want that extra sleep and do not want to be in Hall. That said, bear with me as I try to keep it brief.

Although Thanksgiving brings back wonderful memories of family traditions—such as attending the local high school football game when my father was coaching, or snatching the final sweet potato from the table before one of my four older siblings grabbed it—Mr. Brennan wanted me to focus on gratitude. My first thanks goes to him, for letting me speak and, more important, for giving me a job at RL in 2006 when I had no right being hired based on my experience.

Now, back to the story. The man with the golden arm who launched the book bag was... Mr. Randall. He may not recall the details of the story, but annually around this time of year I gather with a group of my RL classmates, who are still my best friends, and we inevitably tell old stories; this one is near the top of our list. Mr. Randall, in this season of gratitude, I want to

thank you for giving us this memory that we will always cherish. But joking aside, Mr. Randall was my teacher, coach, and advisor, and I have immense gratitude for the way he shepherded me through my RL experience. My initial transition to RL shook my confidence as a student, but he was there to guide and encourage me, as he believed that I could find success. Thank you, Mr. Randall.

I would be remiss if I also did not thank the two other veteran teachers in the room who taught me during my time at RL: Mr. Pojman and Mr. Sugg. I had great respect for both of them when I was a student, but my appreciation for their dedication to the school grew when I returned as a faculty member. When I was 17 years old, I did not realize the amount of time they put into their work. Whether it was countless late nights working on the *Yearbook* or *Tripod* for Mr. Pojman, or Mr. Sugg reading piles of applications after coaching wrestling in the winter season, these men have made a difference in the lives of generations of RL students. Now I get to see behind the curtain and understand why, when I travel to visit with alumni across the country, time and again the Pojman and Sugg names come up as teachers who positively influenced their lives. I am grateful for their friendship, although I will note that Sugg gave me a B+ and Pojman gave me a B-.

Mr. Brennan had you send a "thank you" text at the start of Hall. My charge to you is to thank a teacher who is helping you on your journey here (in person, I prefer, but an email will do). I know that not every boy in this room is having the easiest time at RL, nor loves the school at the moment (that is simply not a reality in any community), but I can tell you without question there is an adult here (many, actually) who care about you and want to see you thrive. Offer thanks to a teacher, coach, or your advisor today.

Mr. Puleo's Hall talk on Founder's Day, and our subsequent trip into the North End to discover the layers of history and immigration (and don't forget pastries), got me thinking about my own family story. I have not traveled down the *Ancestry.com* path, but I do wish to gain a better understanding of my own story after that talk. What I do know is that my father was an immigrant from Luxembourg who came to this country soon after WWII with his mother and his sister, who had married an American soldier. The goal was simple: To seek a better life. My mother was born here, and her father was part of that wave of Italian immigrants from the late-19th to the early-20th century that Mr. Puleo discussed. My parents knew nothing at all about independent schools. My oldest brother only landed at RL because my dad, who was a public school teacher and administrator, was looking to supplement his income, so he took a job coaching basketball and football at St. Seb's and learned about RL through ISL competition. My father was also a basketball referee, and in 1978 he ejected an upstart Roxbury Latin basketball coach who was complaining about too many calls during a middle school game. That coach was none other than Mr. Brennan.

This introduction to the ISL paved the way for my brothers and me to attend RL, and I am grateful that my parents sacrificed by scraping and saving to give me this opportunity. Both of my parents were educators, and they saw that Roxbury Latin would reinforce the values of hard work, accountability, humility, and respect for others that they strove to instill at home. Your

parents want the same for you. All of you should thank your parents tonight for the commitment they have made to send you here.

Steve Ward was a beloved history teacher and coach at RL for 38 years, and sadly he passed away last January. He was one of my favorite teachers and made such an impact on me that I invited him to my wedding. (Harry Lonergan, no pressure to invite me to yours in 10 years.) For you students, next time you step into the Palaistra you will see a plaque on the wall to the right as you enter. Read it, so we don't forget Mr. Ward. When Mr. Ward retired, he gave a speech in which he thanked boys who had the strength of character and courage to take risks. Boys who tried a new activity or sport, went out for a play or Glee Club, or bounced back from a poor grade. Similarly, I thank you, the students, for the effort you put forth in all of your endeavors, as we as a faculty and staff are blessed to work with such committed kids who are invested in this experience. Mr. Ward in his speech singled out Billy McDonald, RL Class of 1980, as the student who showed the most remarkable display of courage. I must confess that I did not know Billy at all, but I want to end my talk with his story.

That said, I know this is about the time I will start to lose you (if it hasn't already happened), so I am going to put BONUS points out there for you to grab. To my colleagues, I apologize in advance for asking for your help in awarding these bonus points, but please indulge me. Students, there is a plaque across from the Penn Fellows' office on the way up the stairs to Dr. B's room in the Ernst Wing. This plaque bears Billy McDonald's name. You will earn those bonus points on your next quiz/test/paper, if you can translate the Latin found on Billy's plaque.

Here is why I mention Billy. First, Mr. Ward closed that aforementioned retirement speech by indicating that he wished to preserve Billy's memory at this school. I want to honor Mr. Ward's wish. Billy McDonald collapsed on the way to the bus stop in 1979. He later learned that he had an inoperable tumor that ended his life during his senior year at RL, after a ten-month battle with cancer. He had earned acceptance to Holy Cross and had a full life ahead of him, but he lost his fight. We all have ups and downs in our lives, and there are some boys in this room dealing with greater hardships than others. I want to acknowledge that. I hope that you will reach out to your parents obviously, or to a friend, or to a faculty member to help you navigate those challenges. People love you here. However, there are times when we all get upset about trivial matters, or we don't think we got what "we deserved" in terms of a grade in a class or playing time on a team....whatever it may be. We begin to lose sight of what matters. When that happens, please take a walk by Billy's plaque to gain some perspective.

The second reason is personal. During my senior year I was awarded the Billy McDonald Scholarship, which was established in Billy's memory by RL parents, alumni, friends, and family. It was the generosity of those folks and, in general, parents and alumni during that era that allowed my family to be a part of this community. I am grateful for those who gave me this opportunity. Each person in the room today, whether you are a student or a member of the faculty and staff, whether your family needs financial assistance or not—each one of us is benefiting from the support and investment of the larger community of alumni, parents, and friends who care about this place, ensure its long-term welfare, and want to give you this

opportunity. We are all blessed to be here and we should not take that for granted at any time, but especially in this season of giving thanks.

In closing, I know that I have failed to thank everyone who should be thanked, such as my colleagues in the alumni/development office. Please know I am grateful for your efforts on behalf of the school, and I apologize to those I have not singled out this morning, but know that I will say a prayer of thanks to you during this season. This upcoming week is a chance for us to press pause on our busy lives and show gratitude. I wish you all a peaceful and relaxing holiday with your friends and family.