

Opening of Fall Term Address

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Kerry P. Brennan

At the start of each new year, I try to offer some thoughts on what it is we're about to do and why. Ours is a distinctive, some would say "quirky," enterprise given to hieroglyphics that attempt to describe a small, secret society in which its history and its ways are passed down—sometimes directly, other times obliquely. For those of you brand new to Roxbury Latin, our gathering here and now has to seem strange, and perhaps even intimidating. Where else are a gaggle of adolescent boys crammed into century-old seats that creak and moan and offer uncomfortable stiffness to those seated in them. And where there are incantations in various languages on subjects elusive. Where there is singing, mainly tuneful and with gusto, and similarly clad lads in mullets and polos and khakis and cryptic smiles. How do they stand this? How do they will themselves to pay attention, to take it in, to give it out, to participate, to engage, maybe even to delight in this distinctive ritual?

Alas this is but one of the ways in which our school seeks to be itself, but from the world's eyes, a way our school is distinctive, maybe even a throwback, surely a product of accumulated boys and teachers and ideas about gathering, and ideas about community and rituals that bind us one to another—together in our illustrious caper. Our illustrious, bizarre caper. Would all this be impressive to a visitor from another school, or from another realm—the greater neighborhood, the greater City, a different business, or way of life? Would all this be impressive, or simply strange? I frankly don't care what a Martian who landed here thinks. I do, however, care what we all think, and feel, and choose to contribute to. Here we are at our most natural, our most RL, our best selves—collected and compressed.

I intend today to discuss further what makes RL, RL. But I also am going to dare to describe what I believe to be a good school, a good teacher, and a good student.

Unsurprisingly, much of what I say will sound familiar, will remind us of who we are, and who we ought to be.

The Good School

I was reminded this summer of a remarkable phenomenon. It occurs both with literature and with art. Given the sophisticated technology of our times, it is not surprising that scholars are often hard at work re-examining ancient texts that were already thought to be adequately perceived, interpreted, and understood. Sometimes scholars (and scientists) discover that there is more to a document than what was previously thought. More than

what initially meets the eye. In fact, given the scarcity of materials—papyrus, vellum, stone, plaster, paper—writers routinely re-used existing surfaces for new texts, new ideas, ones that were thought in some way to supersede that which was written before. Often, especially with Biblical documents, and the scrolls on which they were inscribed, there was certainly evidence of something that had been written before. In a famous scientific discovery, various theories and theorems of Archimedes were disclosed and helped scientists to understand his sense of the world. Often these documents written in Latin and Greek illuminate previously incomplete scholarship like determining the way different solids float in fluid, one of the revelations that came from reading the text a layer below. The principle of writing over an existing document is called Palimpsest. Palimpsest. The word comes from the Latin “palimpsestus” meaning “again” and “scrape.” The term, however, dates back to Ancient Greece, in which they used wax tablets like scratch pads. With a stylus, writers would write and then smooth the wax over and start again.

There have been similar revelations concerning works of art. Regularly in restorations of ancient spaces, including and especially religious spaces, there have been important discoveries. Restorers were working on the Sforza Castle in Milan, Italy, when they discovered a lost daVinci mural under almost 20 layers of whitewash. Below all that paint was a massive mural depicting trees that grew from the walls up into the ceiling, where they formed a pergola of branches. Now the painting is being carefully restored to its former glory. In this case, new occupants of that space had little regard for daVinci’s work. Sometimes the artist himself, desperate for a canvas on which to work, paints over his own previous work. Picasso was famous for this, and in the well-known painting “Old Guitarist” one can see a ghost image of a woman. Whether Picasso was dissatisfied with his effort on the previous painting, or simply that in his early poverty he was desperate for a fresh canvas on which to express his current ideas, one does not know. Doubtless frescos, painting directly on walls, are lurking beneath more contemporary art all over Europe. Terahertz spectroscopy—the same type of radiation used to take one’s full body scan in airports—is revolutionizing this search and discovery adventure. In art this layering is called pentimento.

Apoorva Yadav, a contemporary critic wrote this: “I’ve been quite taken with the idea of a work of art not being able to escape its past. I’ve seen literature, all literature, as palimpsest and visual art as pentimenti. *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, forms a palimpsest with any work of romance fiction written in English since, whether or not the writer has read Austen. When I read, I look for echoes of what went before. I fall in love with entire genres hoping to find traces that the authors have hurriedly rubbed out in the

pursuit of some romantic originality but that form the backdrop of everything they create regardless. Palimpsests and pentimenti give me the reassurance that nothing comes out of nothing, that everything has an origin story. It also gives me hope that everything matters, and if studied carefully enough, it is possible to see how they contribute to the final picture. I see myself as a palimpsest of the readings, experiences, people, relationships, and places that I've lived through. I'm working toward a masterpiece of courage, resilience, and emotional security, but it seems essential to first draw the pentimento of fear, breakdown, and insecurity, because without getting it wrong first, how will I ever get it right?"

Surely our school, Roxbury Latin, is the result of such a phenomenon—the relevant presence of that which has gone before juxtaposed with what exists in the present, or even what is introduced in anticipation of what is yet to come. A recent book I read about Mozart suggested that he was a socially observant musician “constantly in dialogue with his culture and his times.” I feel the same way about our school, our good school. In my about-to-be-20 years in this role, I have seen RL build upon its past by acknowledging eternal values—character, academic striving, inclusivity, quirkiness—and wrapping these in new packaging that suggests greater appreciation for being known and loved, celebrating the generalist, preparing boys to lead and serve. My first point then I guess is that a good school knows its past and consciously preserves that of the past which is worth preserving, and evolves in order to equip its students with skills and exposures to certain subjects and knowledge and, especially, an ethical foundation that will serve them and their communities well. In doing so, the school affirms its reality as a dynamic organism, always recreating itself, acknowledging the needs and ambitions of its students and the culture they will inherit and shape. In conversation with our times.

Second, while a school necessarily has as its gathering priority the offering of an education, part of that education has to be the result of advancing a microcosm of how life should be, how ideas should be formulated, how premises and pretenses should be challenged, how one realizes self-improvement. But equally as important is the school offering a dynamic example of community. This facet, understandably for some, is the most consequential of all. Certainly for us at this good school, our commitment to community sets us apart. We thrive because we find satisfaction not just in the selfishness and narcissism that would be our companions in our natural state (and even especially in today's greater culture), but rather because we care about and for each other. In the way we are structured, in what is required of all of us, in the guard rails having to do with honesty and kindness and generosity that we provide, we are signaling and nearly always guaranteeing a community, an intimate neighborhood that mimics the best of family life

and offers our graduates a touchstone for the way to be in the world. A good school honors a responsibility and an opportunity to shape individuals into empathic citizens, neighbors, colleagues, partners, fathers. A good school provides consistent, clear reminders in the microcosm it is of ideal life beyond the experience and the walls of the school and one's time in its midst.

A good school is clear in its mission. It understands the ways in which students should be both challenged and affirmed. A good school should always be asking itself "why." I'm not sure that this good school is as responsible as it should be in this regard. Too often the trains move so fast around here that it's difficult to pause and consider and discern what best we should do to optimally honor the ambition of our mission. There is plenty of momentum. Don't get me wrong, I am not a fan of inertia. Nor am I a fan of doing things a certain way simply because we have always done them that way. I hope that our rituals and recognition of our history and embrace of traditions make sense. That these result in the affirmation of our mission. I hope that our program—and by that I do not just mean the curriculum of our various courses and our requirements, but the whole of our program including extracurriculars, Halls, special events, and everything we do to and for students—is reflective of what we believe to be in the best interests of our students. And that makes sense given the ongoing "conversation with the culture and our times."

Sometimes we can be awfully insular, victims of the "we've always done it that way" school, or of the "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" school. Ideally, we should always be alert to what is happening in other schools, to borrow shamelessly those things that would make us even better, and to dare to get rid of parts of our program and of our ways that do not optimally honor our mission. Why do we teach all the things we do, and why do we teach what we do in the way that we do? These are questions that we gently ask year after year. They are essential not just to a school's being relevant, but to a school's being distinctive in its putting the best interests of its students and the world they will lead and serve first.

A good school should be a lifelong resource for its students. Surely in the way that lessons learned about life and living, not to mention problem solving, and scholarly esoteria enrich students' lives into adulthood. Alumni should also depend on the ethical lessons of a good school to nurture and to bolster in the buffeting challenges of our times. Personally, however, as is true in our good school, alumni are enriched by and even depend on the relationships forged here—relationships first and foremost with fellow schoolmates, but with faculty and staff, as well. A good school does not lose its influence once a student crosses the stage at graduation. A good school is an eternal wellspring of life giving relationships.

A good school aspires to academic excellence—but not the kind of excellence measured by grades, scores, National Merit laurels, or college acceptances. A good school can translate scholarly striving for its students. While often the academic ambition of the school might seem only that which is right before students—memorizing the Latin declensions, applying the mathematical formula, putting in chronological order the events leading to the Revolutionary War—the greatest gift of a good school is modeling and inspiring a lifelong interest in ideas, a willingness to challenge preconceived notions, a thirst for knowing more, and an ability to marshal facts and experiences on behalf of an understanding of and appreciation for the world in which we live.

A good school is constituted of all kinds of kids. It realizes that it is the door through which those who step forward will enjoy a different kind of life. A good school teaches its students to leverage the opportunity they have been given. It ensures that kids from all parts of town, from all kinds of backgrounds, and traditions, and circumstances are incessantly side by side in the classroom, on the playing field, and on the stage. A good school reminds its students that they are all in it together and that their job is not to emphasize what makes them different and to seek protected siloes for others like them, but to join in the greater enterprise of creating a common, united organism of fellow travelers. A good school finds its energy and validation and dynamism in the students—all kinds of them—whom it coalesces into a thriving, regardful community. A good school celebrates the quirky, the idiosyncratic, the odd even, but never sacrifices the greater potential that results from a unified effort for the aggrandizement of the individual.

A good school is structured and committed to know and love every student. In doing so, it will recognize what makes people distinctive. And it will care enough to hold people accountable—especially if they seem not to be realizing their potential in one area or another, or they're unkind or dishonest or cynical—in order that they can be both productive members of this community or go on to make a difference in their later lives. A good school recognizes effort and improvement and is eager to celebrate souls who are trying hard and improving. A good school always feels more like a family than a business.

Finally, in thinking of a school like the pentimento—layer upon layer of experience and contribution and personality—a good school is both affirmational and aspirational. It affirms that which has been and is worthy to be preserved, deepened, enhanced, and it aspires to something different, better, and relevant—eager to arm its students with a

perspective on life that mirrors their school experience—regardful of the past and hopeful for the future.

The Good Teacher

School is a word with many meanings. In most instances when people use “school” they are talking about the schoolhouse, as in “I’ve got to go to the school tomorrow,” or “there’s a school on the top of the hill.” They mean the building. Several years ago, I made the comparison between this confusing phenomenon and what is meant when someone talks about “church.” Again the temptation is to think of the church as a building, like St. Theresa’s down the hill. “There’s a church at the bottom of our street.” People who make their lives in churches—in the leadership of churches—are persistent in reminding the faithful that as members they are the Church. The simple inference is that in gathering together like-minded followers of a particular brand of faith or religion, the individuals inevitably constitute the church. In that understanding such a commitment doesn’t even need a building in which to assemble; it makes it easier, however, for like minded people to gather comfortably and reliably and benefit from the common rituals and reminders that unite them. And so it is true about a school, a good school, our school even, that the school is the people who make it up. Those people are influenced by a mission, and a history, and a culture, but it is they who breathe life into the very notion year after year after year. And so we do today. So, given that essential understanding, let me comment on the good teacher and the good student, the two categories of people essential to any good school.

Good teachers love their students. It starts there. They love their work. And they appreciate both the opportunity and the responsibility that their work suggests. Good teachers see their work as a calling, as a vocation. They have an existential sense that what they do to and for the students in their charge will make a difference, that it can change the world even. Good teachers love their disciplines, but they love their students more. Good teachers see themselves as partners in the learning process. In education circles there is the disparaged image of the “sage on the stage,” a kind of teacher who simply professes and fails to engage. Mark Hopkins, one of the founders of Williams College, a sleepy little aspiring college in the distant extremes of the state, described beautifully the simple act of teaching. In his day, he talked about the effective elegance of “a student on one end of a log and a teacher on the other.” My favorite good teachers are good listeners. They see their jobs as experts but are more concerned with sustaining and enlivening a conversation. Their big goal is to cause students to think, to consider, to discern. They are responsive and provocative. They are willing to have their minds changed thanks to the good ideas of their students. Good teachers benefit from their

experience, but they are most delighted by the newness, the freshness, the novelty of a given class, a given student, the chemistry of a section in a given year. Good teachers create excitement in their students, by not just imparting knowledge but affirming that education is a set of endless possibilities, of encountering ideas, of discerning truth, of falling in love. Good teachers are empathic, and because they, too, were once students, I hope that they always will communicate the idea that regardless of whether one is called a student or a teacher, that we are all in it together, playing for the same team, eager for our shared transformations.

The Good Student

And finally, the good student. Were I a different kind of hall speaker, I would now turn it to you in the way I would hope to run an enlivening classroom. But today, we shall proceed more traditionally. What makes for a good student? Are you a good student? How will you measure that? How will you know it? Let me share some thoughts on that.

You would imagine, I would hope, that I would affirm some things you already know and feel and believe. A good student is responsible. A good student does his job—he is open to the learning process; he prepares for class, for discussions, for assessments. I have a feeling, for example, that our good students don't always prepare for the discussion, for contemplating ahead of time how that class might go, and more urgently, how the good student might help to shape that experience for his classmates and his teacher. A good student engages with the material. A good student suspends his wariness that certain material is important or helpful and nonetheless engages, tries to understand, tries even to appreciate. A good student puts himself in the place of the teacher and imagines why the teacher should be so enthusiastic about an aspect of the curriculum. A good student appreciates what makes his or her teachers tick. A good student imagines a future in which scholarship—the exposure to or study of disciplines like English, history, math, science, languages, the arts, technology—can sustain us, inform us, inspire us, offer answers when we are puzzled, and lead us to work and play and relationships that prove meaningful. They can help inform a good life. In contemplating a different incarnation in our adult lives of the subjects we are studying now, we should step back and see the big picture, and imagine all of this in the context of big questions: Why am I here? What are my goals? What inspires me? What do I want to do? Most important, who do I want to be?

While I was preparing this talk, I came across an article in *The Wall Street Journal* by an author named Lewis Hyde—maybe Dr. Hyde's long lost cousin. In this case, I was happy to play the game of hyde and seek in pursuit of a different understanding.

I don't know how you feel about butterflies. I expect I'm not alone in saying that I appreciate butterflies. I like them when I see them. I understand a bit about the biological process that yields butterflies. I like the metaphorical potential of the bland, unimpressive cocoon that eventually yields a startlingly beautiful creature—soaring and free. I know that butterflies symbolize life in many cultures. I don't think I saw a single butterfly all summer. But neither was I out looking for them—wading through bogs or wheat fields in the hope of spying one. Mr. Hyde, however, was in pursuit of butterflies—not just this summer, but always. I like the way Mr. Hyde thinks and I like the way he writes. He wrote:

“If you have ever gone bird watching or looked for wildflowers or mushrooms or hunted for deer or rabbits, you will know the strange enchantment of searching for nature's hidden treasures. I first knew it in childhood, hunting for butterflies in the farm fields of Connecticut, a pursuit that sadly ended when my family moved to Pittsburgh and the dense fogs of puberty and higher education descended on me, obscuring the swallowtails and skippers.

“Only decades later did the air clear. Fully quit of school and finally in love, I had been offered a cabin in West Virginia for the summer. One day after a swim, my sweetheart spread our beach towels on the open porch, and soon we found them shingled with fritillaries, dozens happily feasting on the salt of our sweat and batting their orange and silvered wings in the sun. Within the month, I had restocked my childhood armory—net, killing jar, spreading board, pins, display cases—and was again out roaming the fields.

“Early on, I was out to learn the names of the local fauna, to make a collection, to know the science—what the caterpillars eat, for example, or how they survive the winter. Over the years, however, those purposes have come to seem more and more beside the point.

“Over the years, I have given up the killing jar and the pins. My collection I gave away. The one thing I have not yet discarded is the butterfly net. Walking with the butterfly net alters my perceptions. It produces a state of mind, a kind of undifferentiated awareness otherwise difficult to attain. It is a puzzle to me why this is the case—why, that is, I can't simply learn from walking with the net and then put it away and transfer what I know to walking without it.

“Perhaps it has to do with the way the net declares my intention, which is to apprehend what is in front of me. Walking with the net is like reading with a pencil in hand. The pencil means you want to catch the sense of what you are reading. You intend to understand, put check marks and exclamation points in the margin and make the book your own. You may think you can read with the same quality of attention while lying in

bed at night without a pencil, but you can't. The mind notices your posture and models itself accordingly.

“As with the pencil, so with the net. Both declare the possibility of action, and that possibility changes the person holding the tool. In hunting, the declaration sends awareness out toward the object of the hunt. Jose Ortega y Gasset once suggested that game hunters borrow alertness from their prey. A hunted animal is perpetually on guard, even when nothing is stalking it. The hunter's acuity and stealth are responsive: As much as the animal is alert, just that much, and a little more, must I be. The ears of the deer are great cupped sound scoops, and if I hunt the deer, I would do well to walk as if those ears were always seeking me. To borrow on the prey's alertness requires a kind of self-absenting. Hunting stills the hunter's self-regard.

“When I walk with the net, my footsteps and my breathing fall into a slow and coordinated rhythm. I place my feet, each step slightly more deliberate and cautious than otherwise. When I walk without the net, my footsteps speed up, and my mind leaps ahead like a witless hound. Without the net, I am above it all, interested only in some future time and place to which I am headed with quickening breath. With the net, I pause and conduct a full search of each milkweed head; without the net, my gaze glides over the surface, absorbing nothing.

“Without the net, I have few links between my imagination and the outer world. With the net, I form an image inside me, and even if nothing appears to match it, I have a point of contact. Hunters—of fossils, seashells, birds, crickets, ginseng, mistletoe—know what it is to carry a mental picture of the desired object and how magically the image helps you find the thing in fact. The seasoned mushroom hunter sees morels invisible to her companions.

“But the pleasure of hunting derives from something more subtle than the congruence of image and fact. By virtue of looking for butterflies, you are differently aware of everything that is not a butterfly. Once the eyes adjust, many wonders are illuminated by the halo of your search image.

“To see that there are no butterflies on the bark of a tree, you must see the bark of the tree and, by a curious inversion, the thing not hunted suddenly is freshly revealed. The search image is wholly mental, after all, and all that fails to match it is strikingly not. There it is, the bark of a tree! Vividly it is not in the mind. Often I find myself staring in a seizure of wonder at some simple thing—a disc of moss on the path, a column of ants in a crack of dried mud, deer scat in sunlight—that I would never have seen so clearly or with such surprise if I were not hunting for something that is not those things and is not there.

“Capture is a very tiny part of hunting, but its possibility activates the field, so that for the rest of the time there is the rest of the world, spread evenly around the hovering, delighted mind.”

Finally, I would suggest that a good student prone to “stare in a seizure of wonder at some simple thing”—in the good student’s case comprehension of a mathematical principle, an ability to manipulate Latin syntax, or memorization of English vocabulary—not forget that his job, and much of the pleasure of learning, resides in all that complements those important, but not exclusively important, priorities. Hyde writes beautifully of that which surrounds the focus of one’s search. “If one did not discover the absence of the butterfly on the bark of a tree, he would not appreciate the bark of the tree.” If learning has to do with determining what it is that one is supposed to learn, to apprehend, to master, let it also, and perhaps more important, be about the broader context of the focus. Let learning for the good student be about being wide awake to all possibilities, to the surprises that lurk next door to the thing you thought you were learning. I have students confess that they have fallen in love with a poem of Emily Dickinson and gone on to devour all that she has ever written—far beyond what any teacher would prescribe for his curriculum; I have had students who were mesmerized by coding in MSI go on to imagine new ways of capturing knowledge and imagine companies they could found that would expand upon all that was originally known about coding and programming. I have had modern language students catch a glimpse of Charles DeGaulle in some passing reference to a vocabulary infused passage in French go on to be an expert on the resistance in World War II. Mr. Hyde was looking for butterflies, but in doing so, he found so much more. He discovered nature in its fullness and generosity; he also found himself—curious, appreciative, aspiring. The good student, and I hope each of us is that good student, approaches every instance of teaching and learning with that same sense of possibility, of an eye and an ear and a heart that digs deeper but also imagines more broadly, sensing the interdependence of things. And willing to be delighted by the unexpected, the richly configured surprise. Look for surprises this year, good students. Don’t be satisfied with what the teacher suggests is all that you should learn and know. Be your own teacher questing to apprehend the world and all its wonder every single day.

Having thought of the good school, the good teacher, and the good student in these ways, I realize what I have offered is just a start, that there are other qualities and priorities reflective of each of these categories. You can fill in the blanks that you perceive. But I should say that my choosing the adjective “good” to describe school, teacher, and student was intentional. Twenty or so years ago, many of the self-help books having to do with

business and financial success claimed to know how to go from “good to great.” In effect, these books were intent on explaining how someone could expand a modest business into one that was wildly profitable. Occasionally, they touched on how one would feel great as opposed to good if he or she followed some formulas related to success. I care more that each of us is *good* than that each of us is *great*. There is understandable confusion in my making this distinction because one interpretation of great and good suggests that great is better than good. “Guys, I don’t want you to just be good players today; I want you to be great players.” That is a fair, rhetorical differentiation between the two. What I’m talking about when I talk about good is not some second tier gradient on a scale. In seeking to be good, for the school, the teacher, and the student, I am signaling we should put character, good will, generosity, honesty, teamwork, empathy, love even, first. In pursuing whatever goal a school or a teacher or a student may have for achieving and measuring success, it should never be the result of sacrificing that which makes us fully and appealingly human. At least in the way I have heard “great” trumpeted and abused in society and in common boasts—often bragging of winners over losers—I will take “good” over “great” any day. When all is said and done in our personal and professional relationships, we will always be more impressively admired for our goodness than for our greatness. This year and always, let our essential goodness be among the things that surprise and arrest us and be part of our plan for our wild and precious life.

K.P.Brennan
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