

Opening of Fall Term Hall
Head of School Sam Schaffer
August 26, 2024

As I said earlier, I am so happy that you are here ... and that *I* am here. What a great place to be as we exit the summer and merge into the school year. I know it is going to be a great year.

This summer, given the circumstances of my own situation, I've been thinking a lot about the beginning of new school years. About beginnings and about newness. And since a few days ago, after I met the Sixies during their orientation, I've been thinking a lot about what it was like to be a rising seventh-grader and beginning a new school year. As I told them, that summer for me was the summer that the *original* Air Jordan IIs had come out. But it was a very important summer in the life of Sammy Schaffer for other reasons too.

Indeed, the summer before my seventh-grade year was the best of times ... and it was the worst of times.

I headed into the summer before seventh-grade with my first girlfriend ever. Ashley was her name. A green-eyed beauty. Brilliant, athletic. Dreamy. A potential life partner. The best of times.

I also got a letter from Ashley that summer on her camp letterhead. "I don't want to sound like a fool or make you hate me," she wrote, "but after [three] months you have become more like a brother than a boyfriend ... and you seem to really like me seriously and I just don't ... so I feel like I am leading you on and I know it seems low to break up in a letter but I just respect you too much to let it drag on. Please don't despise me or call me names behind my back..." The worst of times.

I grew six inches that summer, rocketing to the high 5 foots, and my future in professional athletics seemed imminent. The best of times.

I also got Osgood-Schlatter's disease from all that growth, which put me in excruciating pain and meant that I couldn't play football in the coming fall. The worst of times.

But perhaps the most important thing that happened to me that summer—and sealed the deal on the best of times—was that I had Coach Mitchell in the final season of my Little League career. Coach Mitchell was one of those great coaches—like the coaches you have here. He taught us about situational baseball, and hitting the cutoff man, and double steals. We made it to the league championships, and I made the all-star team. But that wasn't why he was a great coach. He was a great coach because he was a good man. A kind man. A man who could tell when I'd been having a bad day and would know if I needed to be left alone or if I needed a quiet word. A man who I could talk to about my recently developed stutter. A man who wanted me to become a good person. He was also a man who held us to high standards, and one of the most important things he taught me—and one of the most lasting—was to give a good handshake.

“Sammy,” he said, “a good handshake is everything. It's your first impression. It's about respect and honesty and being upstanding. Look the person in the eye...really see them in the eyes. Grasp their hand like you mean it. Be firm. Not limp, like a dead fish. Not aggressive, like the Incredible Hulk. Just be firm and solid. Do that, and that's a good handshake.”

It was a powerful lesson. A small one, but an important lesson that came at the right time and that has stuck with me always. A good handshake means a lot.

And a good handshake, of course, is something that I have been thinking about as this day—our opening day—approached. I have been learning a great deal about Roxbury Latin these past few months. I am at something of a deficit here, of course. I haven't lived this school as you have. I don't know it as well as you do. But I am eager to live it and to get to know it. And I am eager to learn from you and to get to know you. And I hope you'll be eager to get to know me (and to help me, especially, to learn your names—which I will, but it may take a little while—*please be patient!*). But I do know some things about this school that a lot of very good people—you, your teachers, your relatives, your fellow alumni—have told me. About what we value here. About what we do here. And one thing I have learned is how important traditions are here. And in particular a tradition we are about to take part in...the All-School Handshake.

And so I've been musing a little bit about handshakes—ever since Coach Mitchell taught me their importance, of course, but also these past few weeks. It may be something that you've thought about too...or maybe you haven't. They are such a part of our culture that perhaps they're one of those things we do and don't think about. And there are so many kinds of handshakes out there. I'm sure you can think of many of them.

There are *Handshake Greetings*: when you meet someone, you reach out and grasp their hand. There are *Handshake Variations*: the fist bump, the elbow bump, the dap, the dance, the back-and-forth-up-and-down-wiggle-turn-around-hip-bump. There is the “*Old Bro Handshake*” that my daughter makes fun of when I see my friends ... big fist, bring it in, three back pats. There are, of course, myriad *Sports Handshakes*: the wrestling handshake before a match; the captains' handshake after the coin toss; the most elaborate NBA pre-game handshakes and wiggles; MLB post-homerun handshakes (or jump or handshake dance); the post-game handshake line; and so on. There are *Humorous Handshakes*: like the Key and Peele skit of Obama going down the handshake line (if you haven't seen it, Google it). There are *Famous Handshakes* (and photos of them): Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee at Appomattox; Stalin and Churchill and Truman at

Potsdam; Richard Nixon and Elvis Presley; Bill Clinton and JFK; Queen Elizabeth and Martin McGuinness; and on and on. There are even *Record Handshakes*, it turns out. Theodore Roosevelt set the modern record with 8,510 handshakes at a White House reception in 1907, a record that was broken by Atlantic City mayor Joseph Lazarow, who shook 11,000 hands in a single day for a July 1977 publicity stunt. For that matter, on May 27, 2008, Kevin Whittaker and Cory Jens broke the Guinness World Record for the “World's Longest Handshake” (single hand category!) in San Francisco by shaking hands for 9 hours and 30 minutes. This record stood all of three months until Kirk Williamson and Richard McCulley shook hands uninterruptedly for 10 hours at Aloha Stadium in Hawaii. It was broken three more times in the next eleven months, and the current title is held by Matthew Rosen and Joe Ackerman at 15 hours, 30 minutes and 45 seconds. Things to aspire to...

The handshake itself, as it turns out, has a long—and interesting—history too. It’s not a new thing. In fact, the handshake has been around for quite some time.

The earliest known depiction is from an ancient Assyrian relief from the 9th century BC of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser II shaking the hand of the Babylonian king Marduk-zakir-shum I to seal an alliance between the two leaders.

The Greeks too shook hands. Images on funerary steles appear in the 5th c. of two people offering their right hand to each other in a practice called “*dexiosis*” (literally to give the right hand). Sometimes it’s a couple, sometimes it’s two gods, sometimes a god and a mortal, usually pictured in farewell or in a reunion in the afterlife. Homer wrote (sang) about handshakes also: in Book 14 of the *Iliad*, Neptune takes Agamemnon’s “right hand in his own” and assures him that “the blessed gods are not yet so bitterly angry with you.”

The Romans and Etruscans too pictured the handshake in their funerary art, and there is a Roman coin from the 1st century AD showing two hands clasped together next to the name of the goddess Concordia. Ovid writes of how the Sabine women persuaded their fathers and husbands to stop fighting: “The men let their weapons and their mettle fall,” he writes in the *Fanti*, “and, having laid by their swords, the fathers-in-law shake hands with their sons-in-law and receive their handshake.”

Theories exist, then, that the handshake grew as a way of showing peaceful intentions. Reaching out with an empty right hand—one’s sword hand—symbolized a lack of threat and a peaceful gesture. Hence the Assyrian and Babylonian kings. Or the Sabine warriors. It has been suggested that Romans grasped forearms, perhaps, to make sure there was no knife up the sleeve. The shaking of a hand up and down—which emerged later—could be seen as a way to ensure the same.

The development of the handshake as a greeting took a little longer to develop, it appears. Courtly order in medieval and early modern England took precedent. Hierarchy prescribed signs of rank: kneeling, bowing, curtsying, removing one’s headgear to a superior. Class distinctions were important. There is—as one might imagine—a deep academic scholarship of the handshake. Digging into JSTOR will find you articles on the politics of touch, the semiotics of the handshake, the gendered implications of the grasp, the psychology of the business handshake, and so on. One academic referred to a “pioneering essay on the ‘hand of friendship’ in the Netherlands.” Fascinating, if you are enamored with that sort of stuff.

If you sort through that literature, it comes clear that handshakes have generally corresponded to two things. One, the demonstration of peaceful intent or friendliness—of greeting, parting, congratulations, gratitude, sportsmanship. And two, the sealing of a bond, whether business or diplomatic or symbolic, a sign of trust and respect. In short, as a sign of connection or as a sign of equality.

And it turns out that the custom of regular handshaking that eventually made it to us developed through two particular routes. One was composed of merchants and traders, particularly in Northern Europe, who routinely shook hands to confirm a deal. They were making agreements across barriers of class, religion, and nation, and the handshake for them created a framework of mutual trust, a trust which was necessary for the successful trading systems that were the root of our modern capitalist economy.

The second potent network was the Quakers. For them, the development of the handshake was ideological and even theological. The Quakers, you might know, were a relatively small minority in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, who believed in what was then a radical egalitarianism. They dressed plainly, avoiding outward shows of status. They addressed others in the familiar rather than the formal. They required no ministers for worship and were simply free to speak from the heart. And they declined to bow or to curtsy to their so-called social betters. Instead, all the “Friends”---men and women alike—simply shook hands as their daily greetings.

And when the Quakers spread to America, Americans embraced this greeting eagerly. The democratizing impulse of the late 18th and early 19th centuries was strong, as the ethos of the early Republic was to distinguish itself from the British monarchy, and the Jacksonian Era and Market Revolution and notions of an egalitarian society caught the American imagination. Such a gesture as a handshake among equals rang true. Of course, the paradoxes of American democracy brought the so-called democratizing imagery of the handshake into relief as well. A white enslaver would never have dreamed of shaking hands with an enslaved person. And poignantly, abolitionists famously used for their pamphlets the image of an African, kneeling in chains and holding up his hands asking: “Am I not a Man and a Brother?” Sometimes this was paired with an image of two hands locked in a cordial handshake (not unlike the Roman Concordia eighteen centuries earlier or the symbol of SNCC a century later).

And the very nature of hands shaking among equals was at the heart of the American idea of democracy, an idea that was at the heart of the Whitman poem that Cole just so artfully read. At the beginning, when the child hands the grass to the speaker, the brief contact between the two sparks Whitman's imagination. The "uniform hieroglyphic" that he describes, the grass "sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones, growing among black folks as among white" is a rumination on American democracy, at a time when American democracy was deeply threatened. Of Natives (Canuck and Tuckahoe), Congressmen, and former enslaved people, Whitman writes, "I give them the same, I receive them the same." And those sprouts of grass will grow, he hopes, just as democracy will. A powerful and poetic riff on a topic that is important to us—a democratically gathered community in a democratic society during an election year. And a riff that begins when Whitman touches the hand of a child.

And so handshakes play an important part in American history. And they play an important role in *our school's* history too. The very first All-School Handshake on the opening day of term, as it turns out, happened exactly twenty years ago today, on the very first day of Headmaster Brennan's long and distinguished tenure. The school had for many years kept the tradition of the seniors and departing faculty shaking hands with the school community at the end of the year. Mr. Brennan thought it would be a good and right symbol to begin the year that way as well, and the other night as I was rummaging around in my desk, I found the notes from his very first Hall—from back in 2004—that he had left me. In that Hall in which he gave nods to the Olympics, to the definition of a good school, and to what it means to be an RL boy. And at the end, after describing the process, he wrote, "This will be a token of our solidarity, of our sisterhood and brotherhood, and a promise to share in the collective fortune of this place as it is defined by our individual relationships."

What a fine sentiment, what a fine tradition, and what a representation of the core of what we do. As he told me last night as we chatted on the eve of my first Hall as Head, he told me, “It was something that I had done at every school I had been at since 1986, but nowhere did it take better than at Roxbury Latin. And that’s because of the intimacy of our community.” Indeed. (*I can imagine him guffawing right now and saying, “Sam, I hope the handshake is a tradition you can grasp... The handshake is a tradition you can grasp.”*)

But traditions are important because they mark the values we have, and the values that we feel worthy of passing down. Traditions at Roxbury Latin make up the core of who we are because as they are passed down, they symbolize what it is we believe in, what it is we find important about a place. And even our word “Tradition” is related to “handshake.” It bears its roots from the Latin verb “tradere,” which means “to deliver, to hand over” ... and “tradere” comes from “trans” and “dare.” A tradition, then, is something you literally “give across,” that you pass down over time ... a sort of generational handshake, if you will.

And so this tradition we have of the handshake—the All-School Handshake—is of our essence. It is essentially important. Because it is a connection, with our past but also with each other.

It is a physical connection. The touching of hands itself brings you in physical contact with each other. It is engagement, physical engagement, and that is as important as anything. Dr. Jared Cooney-Horvath—who spoke to you last year about the brain and learning—spoke to the faculty last week about tech, and one of his most salient points was that there are studies that show that touch and voice and physical presence cause the release of oxytocin, which creates good feelings in humans (and as an aside: reading a text or email, without the physical presence of another, releases tachykinins, which cause inflammation).

It is also a symbolic connection. A gesture of respect. Something we do to show trust, something we do to show warmth and welcome. Something we do to express mutual trust and feeling.

The handshake—and the All-School Handshake—then, is something that shows and creates community. And that’s why it works here. Our physical handshake is the manifestation of a more figurative and symbolic handshake. It represents an embrace and a connection with something larger than just the person in front of you. It represents a connection with the community. It represents the community.

It represents the physical community that gathers here—in this Hall and on these grounds—with great and meaningful frequency. Jostled, cramped, and smushed, but together. Listening to each other, praising each other, learning from each other. We are metaphorically shaking hands with this physical community.

It represents the intellectual community that dedicates itself to the life of the mind. That translates Cicero, graphs polynomials, declines verbs, and reads Frederick Douglass. A community that will figuratively shake hands with its studies and will fully embrace that intellectual life.

It represents the moral and spiritual community that sings and prays and laughs and cries and cheers together. That makes mistakes and picks each other up. That believes in doing what is right and that encourages each other to do so. And that embraces each other at all times. It is, in its own way, a sacred community.

Therefore, as you step out into the school year, grasp all these communities firmly and with meaning. Look the challenges in the eye. Don’t give the limp fish—you might as

well not even shake hands. Don't grasp too hard—that hurts you and it hurts them. But grasp with intent and empathy and true interest. Look people in the eye. And thrive.

This is a talk, then, about making a connection. About being a part of a community. About physical and figurative handshakes. About our traditions and what they symbolize. About how we grasp each other's hands, how we are a community, how we take on everything with that equality in mind. That's what's a democracy is. That's what a band of brothers is. That's what Roxbury Latin is.

We are poised on the edge of a great school year. I love this moment, this beginning, this newness. This is the best day of the year. Think of all the great things you are going to do. And so, just as we do at the end of the year with the outgoing seniors and departing faculty members, we are going to welcome the new members of our community—and each other—with a handshake. We are going to look each other in the eye, grasp each other's hands, and shake them in a symbol of our trust and respect and love for each other ... and in a gesture to the intellectual and moral and spiritual embrace we are going to offer each other and our studies and our school this year. The All-School Handshake, with all that it encompasses. What better way to begin?

Please bow your heads for the Opening of Fall Term Prayer.