

**Marlyn McGrath**  
**Thanksgiving Hall**  
**November 22, 2024**

Good morning—and happy pre-Thanksgiving break! I know you are all eager for that pause in the season's action. I recognize that I am the first obstacle to that on this last day. So, nothing complicated from me. But I do want to make Mr. Brennan's perennial observation that the only thing wrong with the Thanksgiving holiday is the notion that it is the only time to give thanks.

It is customary for this pre-Thanksgiving Hall to focus on thanks. Gratitude. I will do that. Before I do, I feel obliged to provide a bit of outside context: I have actually just learned that November is National Gratitude Month, established as such in 2015 with the exhortation "Give Gratitude a try!" I kid you not. It turns out that November has other official designations too. It is also "Peanut Butter Lovers' Month," and "Vegan Month." Enough of that.

Here I want to bring in gratitude's essential companion: memory. To be grateful one has to remember. Certainly, November is full of occasions for memory. It kicks off with All Saints' Day (honoring actual saints in heaven) and All Souls' Day (honoring those who have died and are not yet in heaven); then, here at Roxbury Latin, Founder's Day; and Armistice or Veterans' Day. I like the British usage, Remembrance Day. And next week, Thanksgiving. Most of us will have the good fortune to celebrate with our families and to do a lot of remembering.

My own long list of recollections includes items of family serendipity: My grandfather lost his first wife to the Spanish Flu, as she cared for soldiers as an Army nurse during the First World War. My grandmother's first husband was killed in action in that war at the terrible battle of the Argonne Forest in France. For those two survivors' subsequent marriage we feel gratitude—for resilience after tragedy.

I now understand that it is the dread of forgetting that makes us keep those stories warm. We want to remember, and we want to be grateful. We do the same thing when we celebrate a birthday or a wedding anniversary.

Here, because I think you will understand this, I have to mention my huge gratitude to my parents for their decision to send me to Winsor. That decision has been the source of many of the good things in my life. It was a gift made by them intentionally—but for me, the recipient, it was a piece of luck. I expect you can identify with this, and I imagine that decades from now some of you will say that about RL.

Speaking of luck: This might be the moment to tell you how I got here. I mean, truly, how I got here. When I was at Winsor I knew no boys—really—except the son of my parents' closest friends. Happily, he was at RL and, happily, he knew no girls (except me). He brought me to a dance in the space that is now the Admissions Suite. I remember nothing about that night except meeting his classmates and one in particular, whom I married. Today, my husband, Harry Lewis, RL Class of 1965, is among the folks whose portraits you walk by daily (near the

Admissions Suite, by the way). He is lucky to be one of the ones who are still alive. His devotion to this school parallels mine to Winsor. From the beginning we have shared a devotion to RL. It has been the greatest honor for me to serve as a trustee. So here I am this morning, with a chance to express my gratitude.

That tale brings me to the theme of our mutual gratitude to Roxbury Latin. A school's success, or endurance, should never be taken for granted. In the United States there are over 20,000 secondary schools, public and private. The range and diversity of those schools is one of the important features of this country—they really are diverse, and they have a wide range of goals and missions, let alone school cultures. And most of them have faced challenges of one kind or another—sometimes about mission and goals, sometimes about resources.

Roxbury Latin's history has been particularly challenging, you might say fraught, partly because it covers so many centuries. This morning, my gratitude—our shared gratitude—is focused on RL and on those who created and sustained this school over those centuries. It is not the same place it was in the beginning. The trustees—who bear the responsibility of supporting the school's life and protecting its future, in circumstances they can't foresee—have had to do a lot of adapting. The headmaster keeps the school on track. Believe it or not, there were periods in the early years when the school could not afford the luxury of a headmaster. Who am I to say that the trustees will never feel pressed to save money in the future by forgoing a headmaster? (Not a possibility we discussed when we recruited our own wonderful Dr. Schaffer...) But I stray from my topic.

I know that most of you have been thoroughly schooled in the miraculous foundation and development of Roxbury Latin. Even our wonderful school songs add depth, and appeal, to the story. If you would like to immerse yourself in a deep slice of American history as revealed by the history of Roxbury Latin, I commend to you Reverend Jarvis' magnum opus, *Schola Illustris*. (That is more Latin than I intended here.) You would see that hard choices had to be made—at every turn. We are grateful to those who made sure the school survived.

The origin story begins with its founding by John Eliot in the form of a one-room schoolhouse in the city of Roxbury. It was founded as a "free school" —that is, free from government control, independent. It had a difficult financial model of long-term investment by families. The budget was often under stress. It had several moves of location, and enrollments waxed and waned. For a couple of decades in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the school agreed to a degree of public control in exchange for a subsidy from the city of Roxbury. Part of the deal was that RL would admit boys from the public schools. Happily for us today, RL failed to admit enough boys from the public schools and was expelled from the public school system. The trustees rose to the occasion and carried on.

Another juncture where things could easily have gone wrong came in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century when the admission requirements for Harvard College suddenly became more rigorous and more specific. Harvard applicants would have to know physics, chemistry, modern history, and German, along with the traditional classical curriculum. I would bet that none of us in this room

today could meet those requirements. Roxbury Latin's trustees found a headmaster, William Coe Collar (known these days as the Second Founder), who would elevate the course of study and hire specialized teachers—and who would also add athletics, drama, the *Tripod*, a pretty diverse extracurricular program. That all sounds good, I expect we agree, but the new plan required budgetary finesse. The school quadrupled in size, ironically producing a suddenly competitive enrollment situation—and rapidly earning the school a new level of respect, well beyond Boston. The decision to move to our present beautiful and ample space was compelled by the larger enrollments and by the expanded program, but it required courage to do it. And here we salute two of the trustees who led the effort to move to our present address—Robert Hallowell Gardiner, Class of 1872, and Charles Hall Grandgent, Class of 1879. Their portraits are right here, on our wall. We thank them especially as we gather today.

Financial circumstances have almost always been a challenge. One thing that amazes me is how constantly, from the start, the school has been committed to prevent family finances from being a barrier to enrollment. That is a remarkable thing for a school of the quality RL has maintained over the centuries. All along, the trustees have protected the school's original purposes—even as every element of its environment has changed radically. Trustees elect their successors—they are a self-perpetuating body—and they have earned our collective gratitude. *Mortui vivos docent.*

I spent decades in college admissions, a gig that allowed me to visit and appreciate many schools in the United States and abroad. Roxbury Latin is unique in several ways. I use that word with care. I see the origins of some of the unique features way back in its history. The insistence that every boy be known and loved (not a phrase many other schools could get away with); the relentless emphasis on character (“We care most of all what kind of person a boy is”); the ideal of the *generalist*. These were here from the beginning.

I know a lot about a lot of schools. I can tell you that the ideal of the generalist is all but lost—and that that ideal is truly our distinction today. You may not actually be grateful for this now. But you should be grateful that RL does not force you to figure out what you are best at and make you put all your energies into that.

Most pertinent to today's theme, I have to note the centrality of gratitude as a notion in the school's ethos and its daily life. In sharp contrast to other schools—including some we know and admire—RL families feel, and express, their understanding that they are fortunate to be in the school. They support the school in every way. Students act as if the school is theirs. They are proud *and* grateful.

Back in the day my admissions office would bring a gaggle of staff and faculty out to RL (and to other schools) to interview candidates for admission. And we instructed them: 1) Wear an extra layer of clothing when visiting this coldest school in continuous existence in North America; and 2) Do not be surprised when you ask a boy the location of a restroom to be accompanied by him to the restroom, and then walked back to the interview room. This school feels different from all other schools, but, I think, it feels very much the way it must have been in the beginning. “We

are all in this together”—that is how it feels, and that is how it feels to all of us who are fortunate enough to be in the school family. You will hear that “family” metaphor used in other schools. But it is more real, more valid at Roxbury Latin.

For that we are very grateful.

I won’t get this closing just right.

The proper way to conclude these comments would be by naming all the people here who constitute our school and expressing my gratitude to each of you. Teachers and students. Please know I *would* name the names if we had time! A school is not a building, it’s simply a group of people, as schools have been in *any* time. You *are* the school of today and *that* is truly worthy of our thanks. That puts us all in the long line of those who came before us and who made, and kept, Roxbury Latin what it is.

Thank you for including me this morning. I hope you will not leave feeling pressure to meet a life partner right here at RL—but I thought you should be aware that it can happen.

I wish you all a happy Thanksgiving and a welcome break.