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Opening of School Hall Address
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Quiet the Noise, and Amplify What Is Within

I've been thinking a lot about football the past couple of days. Partly this is because of the smell of grass on a late summer evening, as the sun turns the sky orange and it just feels like August. Partly this is because you can't walk two feet around here without hearing about Drake Maye and Mike Vrabel. Partly this is because my Instagram feed is filling up with posts from my buddies back in Georgia about their sons' first high school football games. I even watched the livestream of my alma mater's game on Friday night.

Football is big in Georgia, and I want you to join me on a nostalgic trip back to the Peach State in the fall of 1991. In early September of that year, the Westminster Wildcats football team traveled up to Dalton, Georgia, to take on the Dalton Catamounts. Dalton was favored in this game. They were ranked #10 in the state. They had a 10,000-seat stadium (and this was thirty-five years ago). They sold season tickets to locals. They had a radio station that broadcast the game—my buddy Pridge, who was injured, listened to the game and told us what the announcers were saying about us. Their marching band had over 100 members. They were a traditional powerhouse (and have since produced such players as a guy you may have heard of named Jahmyr Gibbs). This was top-level high school football in Georgia.

That year, however, the Wildcats were sporting a new pass-happy offense nicknamed “The Green Gun.” They also had a secret weapon: a young, junior tight end named Sam Schaffer. He was hot stuff, he thought. He had played varsity as a sophomore. He had just gotten a recruiting letter from the Florida Gators, who at that time were ranked #6 in the country, and would go on to win the SEC championship. He had a cheerleader assigned to decorate his locker and provide him with baked goods and candy on game days. He was a strapping 6'2", 175 lbs. of twisted steel and what you lads might call “rizz” appeal. He was #87 in the program, #1 in your hearts. His vision of himself was glorious.

Anyway, this game was Friday Night Lights at its best. I wish I could translate the atmosphere to you. The electricity as we ran through the banner onto the field. The band, the crowd, the entire town out to watch. The game got off to a good start, and the Wildcats were hanging in there. In the third quarter, the game was tied 14-14, and your hero—me—got his chance. It was second down and we were on our own 30-yard line. As I approached the line, I noticed the linebacker inching up and out of position. I flashed Holden Sibley, our quarterback, the sign. He acknowledged. The ball was snapped. He zipped me a quick pass. I broke one tackle, juke

another hapless defender, my buddy William Bost threw me a knockdown block, and all of a sudden there was nothing between me and glory but 60 yards.

As I sprinted down the field, thoughts began to fill my head. Wouldn't Florida love to see this play? Maybe Georgia or Georgia Tech might get wind of it. 40 yards to go. Oh, look, the cheerleaders are going nuts. This is great. 30 yards. I wonder what the radio announcers are saying about me. They must be impressed. 20 yards. I'm so dialed in that everything seems like it's in slow motion. I hear the team manager cheering me on. I look to my right and he is. He's also running next to me. And then, he's passing me. Wait, what? Maybe it isn't slow motion but reality. 10 yards seems like a long way now ... 5 yards, 4, 3 ... and then *bam*. A streaking red Dalton linebacker pulverizes me from behind. And there, on the two-yard line, alongside my limp body lay my deflated dreams. We went on to score and to win the game. But there would be no college offers, no NFL contract, no adulation at all for this young athlete.

And sadly, my humiliation did not end there. In fact, on Monday morning, when we went to our 6 a.m. film session, things got worse. I dreaded those mornings anyway. Our coaches were relentless and remorseless in their critiques. Sarcasm was their chosen language. We usually watched the films with the volume down, so they could register their displeasure loudly and clearly. Yet when it came to my "play," they turned up the volume. Strange, I thought. You could hear the crowd in the background, along with a bunch of dads who were standing by the camera. When the ball was snapped and I caught it, the whole team could hear a voice, which sounded distinctly like my father's, begin to yell. "Hey, great catch, Sam!" he cheered, as we all listened to the tape. "Go! Go! Left! Right! Break it! Go! Go! ... C'mon, Sam ... C'mon, Sam ... C'mon, Sam ... Gawd, he's slow!"

So there you have it. The humiliation was complete. (To be fair, I *was* slow)

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But, lest you think that Opening Halls have simply become occasions for sharing my personal failings and humiliations, there are some lessons from this moment. Some lessons that might be worth thinking about. And that might take us from Atlanta, Georgia, in fall of 1991, to West Roxbury, Massachusetts, at the start of the school year in 2025.

So, the first lesson, of course, was one of humility. When you think you are the top dog, and you believe your own hype, you might be in trouble. You might have lost your perspective.

The second lesson, though, is the one I want to talk about—and may explain how I lost that perspective. It's about the noise. All the noise that was going through my head. All the distractions, all the things competing for my focus. Rather than listening to it, I would have been better served by quieting that noise. Letters from colleges. How I might look to cheerleaders.

Thoughts of radio announcers. And so on. Ultimately, it may not have made a difference to whether I scored or not—I was slow. But maybe if I had focused on the task at hand, if I hadn't been thinking about that other stuff, if I had quieted the noise, then maybe I would have cut one way, or varied my speed, or reached deeper inside for a burst. But I let the noise distract me from the goal. It was a valuable lesson.

And so, as we start this new school year, as we contemplate all the great things in store for us, I want to encourage all of us to *quiet the noise*. There is a lot of noise out there. More noise than ever. And I hope that as we arrive back on campus, and as we take on this new school year, that we can use our time together at Roxbury Latin as a way to quiet that noise, focus on what is truly important, and have a great year.

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What is “noise,” by the way? It's worth considering. Noise, in its most basic definition, is unwanted sound. It can be unpleasant, loud, or disruptive to one's hearing. From the physics side of things, there is actually no distinction between noise and desired sound—they are both simply vibrations through a medium. The difference arises when the brain receives and perceives those vibrations.

There are many types of noise, it turns out. In sound engineering, “audio noise” can be static in a transmission that needs to be tuned out. It can be classified as white noise or pink noise or blue noise. There is “occupational noise,” which can be harmful, such as loud sounds in the workplace like a mine or a welding company or a quarry. There is “noise pollution,” which can occur in urban areas near those airports or construction areas or highways. Or, according to my daughter, when I fall asleep on the couch when we're watching TV on Friday nights (and she kicks me and mutters, “Dad, can you just stop *breathing!*”). There is that sort of “cacophonous noise” that comes from putting together dissonant chords—like when my mom used to bang on the wall and yell, “Are you playing that noise again? Turn down that radio.” There is “artificial noise” that is created intentionally, such as at athletic contests. Yelling during free throws, piping in extra crowd noise when quarterbacks are calling audibles. Cowbells, vuvuzelas, thundersticks.

Noise can be harmful physically and mentally, obviously, and we try to find ways to reduce it. The 1972 Noise Control Act, for example, which established federal regulations regarding noise. Local laws against the use of gas-powered leaf blowers. Altered flight paths away from neighborhoods. Unsuccessful league bans on cheering during free throws. Ear plugs.

Noise can take other shapes too, beyond sound, in the form of any sort of unwanted, or troublesome, or random, or problematic signal. There is “image noise” in digital photography when extra or distorted pixels appear. There is “gradient noise” in computer graphics from overlaid lattices of random dots. There is “atmospheric noise” caused by lightning discharges.

There is “phonon noise” in material science, which arises from a random exchange of energy between a thermal mass and its surroundings. Noise appears especially in mathematics in the form of “statistical noise,” where random errors in data creep into results and can distort conclusions or predictions.

In these areas, too, we try to sift through the noise. Nate Silver, in his book *The Signal and the Noise*, talks about how to build mathematical models using probability and historical data to cut through the noise and make accurate predictions in areas from political polling to baseball to poker to the 2008 financial crisis. In a book on behavioral economics called *Noise: A Flaw in Human Judgment*, professors Daniel Kahneman, Olivier Sibony, and Cass Sunstein write about how noise arising from cognitive biases, group dynamics, and emotional reactions leads to poor decision-making. They suggest “noise audits” and “decision hygiene” as ways to reduce the noise so we can make better judgments.

One problem all these authors note, however, is that the amount of noise is increasing. Information—false and otherwise—is being produced at quantum speeds. Generative artificial intelligence is adding to it. Unwanted sounds, distorting voices, conflicting signals, distracting information are harder and harder to tune out. The cultural noise. The political noise. The podcasts and livestreams. The opinions and counteropinions and trolls. The news outlets and blogs. The buzzing in your pocket of a new message. The inane Tiktok video. The curated Instagram pose of the impossibly attractive and accomplished young person. The Snapchat filter. The loud sports prognosticator. The know-it-all-homegrown influencer. All this is noise. It can be overwhelming.

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And that’s where I return to Roxbury Latin. There is all that noise out there. But here, when we return here, we can create a place without that noise. This is one of the things that I love most about Roxbury Latin, and one of the things I love most about the start of the school year. Roxbury Latin is a place where we can come, where we can be with each other, where we share a common mission and a common task, and where we can focus on that task. Without the distractions and without the noise. On the one hand, yes, summer can be a time of relaxation and time to unwind and restore. That is good. On the other hand, it is a time away from each other, a time when the outside noise can creep in. Here, back together at RL, we can distill that noise.

Roxbury Latin allows us to focus on what is important. We believe in character, that what matters most is the type of person you are. We believe in honesty in all dealings, that in our brotherhood, trust and honor and integrity are the most valuable things. We believe in the life of the mind, where the intellectual pursuit is laudable and worthwhile, and we are unashamed to say so. We believe in service to others and that “from those to whom much has been given, much will be expected.” We believe in the value of a “sound mind in a sound body,” that it’s important

to play sports and compete physically. We believe in the gift of making music, and doing it together. We believe that it's important to be generalists, that it is best to learn and achieve broadly, to view the world through the multiple lenses of the classicist, the humanist, the mathematician, the scientist, the linguist, the athlete, and the musician. We believe in being democratically gathered, in the beauty of our different perspectives and backgrounds. We believe in hard work, in discipline and time management, in challenging ourselves to excel, in setting the highest standards for ourselves. We believe that there are many ways to be a boy, whether as a scholar, or a debater, or a certamen competitor, or a Glee Club singer, or a hockey player, or a tech tutor. We believe in face-to-face interactions, in personal relationships, in conversations between boys and adults. We believe in all these things, and we do our best to reach them. This is who we are, and this is what this place affords us the space to take on.

And frankly, there is a lot of noise out there that runs counter to those beliefs. Noise that tells us that to specialize is the best thing, that to focus our body or mind on a single pursuit at an early age is what leads to "success." Noise that says that education is for the purpose of a return on investment. Noise that says it's okay to cheat, as long as you win, that short cuts are a good substitute for hard work and deep learning. Noise that says human relationships should be transactional, that the rule of law is meant to be circumvented, that checks and balances are meant to be skirted. Noise that says that where you go to college is the most important thing, more than who you are. Noise that says that what you look like or how fast you can cut someone down is more valuable than building someone up. And on and on and on.

But here, we can focus on culling that noise. On finding our way through it. That's not easy. We have a lot going on here. A lot to take care of. Learning is hard. Being a generalist is hard. Meeting high expectations is hard. But it's also worth it. It's engaging and wonderful and right. And in order to do all those things, we need to focus. And in order to focus, we need to quiet that noise.

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When I say "quiet the noise," I'm not saying that we ignore the outside world. Far from it. We want to engage the world, and we do. We serve our community. We travel and immerse ourselves in foreign countries. We bring speakers to our campus, and we send scholars and competitors around the country. We make connections and we welcome a broad and diverse pool of thoughts and opinions. That's what makes us strong.

And our job as a school is to help you with this. We want to equip you, as best we can, to discern what is meaningful from what is noise. To make good judgments. To ask the right questions. To recognize hallucinations. To assemble and analyze and conclude. We want you to recognize too that not everything is black and white, that not every question has an easy answer. That there is value in embracing the gray. But in order to distinguish those signals, we sometimes need to

reduce that outside noise. Whether that involves removing a distraction from a free period so you can talk to a friend or play a game or study, or providing a space where you can argue and debate and make mistakes without the disruptions of the outside world. Our goal is for you to learn the skills to discern the signal from the noise. To inhabit the values to make the right decisions. To cultivate your spirits as well as your minds.

I'll say that sometimes what we do here can be loud. It can be messy, and joyfully so. Like when we are arguing with each other in the Student Center or the Refectory. Or discussing *The Great Gatsby* in English class. Or debating the future of AI in a Community Forum. Or are "riding the rollercoaster" in RL Nation. But that's volume and vigor and voice. Not noise. It's productive and it's us, and it's face-to-face and it's relational, and it works because we share common values.

But noise can show up here too. Even as it gets loud and messy, and even as you seek to resist the outside noise, unwanted sounds can creep into our lives at RL. And I want to encourage you this year at times, when you sense that's happening, to pause. Stop for a moment and cherish what we have here. If your own internal noise gets too loud, take a break. Pause and reflect. Take a breath. That may help you make a good decision rather than a bad one. Just like when a hitter steps out of the batter's box if he's feeling uncomfortable. Or a coach calls a time out. Or a conductor smiles and tells his singers to take a deep breath. Those are all ways of quieting the noise. Or maybe take a physical pause. Enjoy this campus around us. Take a walk with your advisor. Eat lunch outside. Pause on the slog back from practice with your friends to admire the sunset. Do this alone and do this with others. There will be a lot going on this year—and it will be great—but it's also worth catching your breath in the moment.

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And finally, I've been ruminating this summer on a description of Roxbury Latin that feels relevant here. As I read Rev. Jarvis's history of the school, and as I've perused speeches and scripts and past *Newsletters*, I've seen RL described as a "nursery." It's a description that caught my eye, because it's one we wouldn't likely use these days to describe a school with twelfth graders in it. The phrase, it turns out, comes from the famous Puritan clergyman and author Cotton Mather, who wrote a biographical sketch of John Eliot in his 1702 *Magnalia Christi Americana*. As he described the school that Eliot had founded—our school—and as he praised it, Mather wrote that he considered putting the "title of *Schola Illustris* upon that little nursery."

As I said, it may seem strange to us today to use that word to describe this place. "Nursery" makes us think of a nursery school and babies and little kids and maybe St. Theresa's. But for Mather, this was the highest compliment. He called families and schools the "nurseries of all Societies." And what he meant by a nursery was a place where young people were nursed and strengthened to be good and godly citizens. "There are many points of a Good Education, that we

should bestow upon our Children,” he sermonized. “They should Read, and Write, and Cyphar, and be put unto some Agreeable Callings.” Indeed, in his mind, a school was a place where young people could learn how to resist the outside temptations that could distract them from right living. “A Good School deserves to be call'd the very Salt of the Town,” he continued. “A woeful putrefaction threatens the Rising Generation; Barbarous Ignorance, and ... Outrageous Wickedness will make the Rising Generation Loathsome, if it have not Schools to preserve it. But Schools ... Those would be a Glory of our Land.”

The word “nursery,” naturally, comes from Latin *nutrire*, which means “to feed, to support, to nurse, or to foster.” It’s the same root as our words “nurture” and “nourish,” and there, I think, is the best reference to Roxbury Latin. This is a place where we can nourish our minds, our bodies, and our spirits. We are a “nursery” in that sense, a place as Mather envisioned where young people are nourished and educated. Not as little babies, but as young men who will be citizens of this country and this world. Perhaps the analogy of a plant nursery fits as well. This, like plant nurseries, is a place where young trees are raised and cultivated and then transplanted, that they may flourish elsewhere.

That is what this place is. It’s a nursery for young men. It’s a community of scholars and athletes and musicians gathered for a common purpose. Last year, I spoke of us as an Unum composed of a Pluribus, one school made of many people, one community composed of many small acts. I talked about the handshake as a symbol of that community, a grasping of agreement and equality. This morning, I am talking about this community as a physical place and as a mental place. As a nursery. As a sanctuary where we can collect ourselves, quiet the noise, and focus on what is important, on what is good and right and true.

And as we start this new school year, as we welcome each other back to campus, as we shake each other’s hands and embark upon the journey of the 2025-20206 school year, I want you to have a most wonderful year. I want to encourage you to quiet the noise so that you can nourish your mind and your body and your spirit. I want to encourage you to quiet the noise, so that you can amplify what is within.