Convocation Address
by
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Thursday, Sept. 6, 2018

This warms my heart. I'm so glad you all are back. While I will admit that an empty campus in June isn't the worst thing, by August it's depressing as can be.

As you know from the letter I sent to you this summer, I have big dreams for this year. And I will tell you, those dreams came from listening to you. Not to the faculty, not to the board, not to parents. But to students. You said you wanted your school to be enthusiastic, joyful, inclusive, spirited. (I love that word, spirited.) As I reflect back on those conversations, the same word keeps coming back to me – community.

In my letter to you, I talked about how I define community – and what I think needs to be in place for that to happen: common purpose, mutual respect, pride, and joy. Our collective work for this year is to make this Hilltop sing with those attributes – to make this a proud, joyful, respectful community. This is important work – not only for our community, but for the world. If we can together create a model community here, and then each of you can go out into the world and make it happen elsewhere, this little school here on this hilltop can make a real difference.

Let me tell you why this is so important...

Over the course of the past few decades, our society has seen a decline in this idea of community. It's happening everywhere. People are less likely to interact with others outside of their immediate circles. The number of people going to church and synagogue has declined. Many communities have seen a decrease in the number of people getting involved with local government. One famous study even found that people are less likely to join bowling leagues. People are still bowling, they're just bowling alone. This decline in community has been documented by many. And truthfully, your generation appears to be the most impacted. By virtually every measure, teens today are less connected to each other and to their communities than has been the case in modern memory. A few examples: your generation is less likely to date, less likely to go to parties. As a generation, you lack faith in our society to fix problems, you are much less likely to participate in political action. You are even less apt to have friends with different political beliefs. The result, argue a number of people, is that our society is more divided and disconnected than ever before. You are growing up in a world where people segregate themselves by virtually every manner possible, never reaching out to connect with people who think differently, look differently and act differently. In short, our sense of community is in decline.

There are all sorts of theories about why this has happened, but one thing keeps coming up. The rise of technology – the internet, e-mail, smart phones, texting, social media, Netflix.

For a long time, I poo-pooed this thinking, believing that technology is here to stay and us old folks just need to get with the program.

However, after watching things develop over the past few years, I have come to see that I was wrong. Our addiction to technology is hurting our communities.

To my mind there are two related dynamics at work here. The first has to do with the rise in work and school-related stress. The second has to do with we how we use downtime. I know those sound distinct, but I think they are related. Let me explain. It's a long, involved explanation – so stay with me.

When I first entered the workforce as a teacher in 1993, very few people had email. Over the course of my first couple of years as an adult, that started to change. And in the beginning, it was really just fun. It became a neat way for people to stay connected. Prior to the introduction of email, staying in touch meant calling each other on the phone, usually leaving a message on an answering machine and hoping the person would call back in a day or two. This is going to sound funny, but in my first years out of college, I used to love coming home after work to see the red light on my answering machine blinking, indicating I had messages.

The advent of email meant that we could be in touch more easily. It meant that groups of people could interact simply by replying all. We sent jokes, we teased each other, we made plans. Ironically, I would say that those first days of email were actually a time of increased social capital. Unfortunately, however, over time it became easier to stay in touch with old friends than to make new ones. As chat rooms and instant messaging became ubiquitous, it was no longer boring, or socially unacceptable, to sit home on a Friday night.

The other unfortunate thing that happened with email was its quick infiltration of work environments. In my first years of teaching, most interaction with administrators and parents was personal. On occasion, there might be a note or a memo in my mailbox, but pretty much all of my communication with the administration or my fellow teachers or with parents was done in person. In fact, if a parent wanted to get a touch with a teacher, they would call the front desk and the administrative assistant would take a message and leave it in the teacher's mailbox. The teacher would then call back, and usually schedule a face to face meeting. Even talking over the phone was considered impersonal.

Quite honestly, email changed the nature of work. And, despite the increased efficiency, not for the better. No longer were we interacting in person. Administrators and parents could suddenly reach out 24/7. As a result, over the course of the following decade, the time people set aside to deal with email grew each year.

That growth became exponential with the introduction of smart phones, and with it, the expectation of an instant response. This, to my mind, resulted in the final blow to previous notions of community. How could someone attend a PTA meeting when they were busy responding to the latest email from work? Church? Nope. Everybody needs to get to inbox zero before Monday. Virtually every profession saw an expansion in work-related demands.

In addition to the resulting decline in communities, came the increase in stress. More work, higher expectations, increased demands, evening and weekend communications – these all became the norm. When I was a child, I never saw my parents work. Yes, they might have occasionally worked a long day, coming home later than usual, but when they came home, they were done. No Blackberries to scroll through; no texts in need of response; no feedback to review. Work was work and home was home.

I know for a fact that my kids, and I would imagine many of you, experienced a very different childhood. Since becoming a school administrator, the expectation has been that I will be immediately available at all hours. Since my kids were little, I would come home, make dinner, and then immediately sit down with my laptop. I loved it when my kids got old enough to have homework because it meant we could all sit together in the evening and do our work. We were together and all was good with the world – unless the wi-fi went down.

How weird is that, though. It took my kids entering this world of work and stress for us to find commonality. When I was a child we watched TV together as a family or we read books. Sometimes we went for a walk. Now, it takes homework to bring us together.

Here's the other problem with this expansion of the work day – and this is where our use of downtime comes in. By the time we've finished our work, we claim that we're too tired to go out and engage. Instead, we think, we'll just climb in bed and watch Netflix. Here's the other weird thing about that – generally we watch Netflix on our laptops – the same machines we use to do our work. We never escape from these machines! Talk about stress.

As a result, we have this decline in community. We are tethered to our devices – working at all hours, and then sitting in front of our laptops watching Netflix when we're not working. And that's the example you have grown up with. The iPhone was introduced on Jan. 9, 2007. The oldest among you were probably in first grade. The youngest still in pre-school. This world of constant access, ever-present work, and unending demands is the only one you know. It has changed both our working and our non-working hours.

It has also led to an increase in all sorts of terrible phenomenon. On a societal level – there is far more anger and dissonance, people are less likely to vote but more likely to complain. In communities – people are less likely to reach out to people different than they, to know their neighbors. And on an individual level - the incidences of depression, anxiety and suicide have never been higher. It's not a pretty picture.

People, I want us to be better. As a boarding school, we have an unbelievable opportunity to model for the world what a joyful, inclusive, enthusiastic, spirited community might look like. Wouldn't it be amazing if the world could look to us as an example – to understand what could be.

Truthfully, however, it's going to take every single one of us in this Chapel to make that happen. The faculty has done a huge amount this summer to make the conditions right. We have introduced all sorts of changes meant to encourage community. We have expanded intervis to an hour for underformers and will continue to allow sixth-formers to intervis during quiet hours. We are allowing fifth-formers to go to the library and the academic center right off the bat. Fourth-formers are allowed to go to the academic center. We are

redesigning assembly. We are re-branding the Sachuest versus Sakonnet clubs into true teams that will compete throughout the year. We have moved members of the administration out of the Dean's Office to make them more accessible. Community lunches will now be every Thursday. And community weekends will be true community weekends. And there will be places – like King Hall – that are going to be tech free, at least at lunch and dinner. There will also be times, like this weekend's form trips, when we tell you to leave your phones in your rooms. There is purpose in all of these changes – they are intended to bring us together, to make us into a true community.

In truth, however, it won't happen without you. There will be times on Saturday nights when you hear Netflix calling. You will be occasionally tempted to have food delivered instead of going to King Hall. You might think it's a good idea to sit in your room before quiet hours and Facetime with someone at another school. Day students, you might be drawn to the thought of heading home after your last commitment.

As much as possible, I want to encourage each of you to resist those urges. How incredible would this community be if everybody went to the Saturday evening activities? If people gathered after dinner to play games or just sit in groups and talk? If people lingered in King Hall, solving the problems of the world? That, people, is why you go to boarding school. You can watch Netflix anywhere.

I want to make one last point. To some, this might sound like a decline in intellectual, academic pursuits. Encourage people to gather socially? They should be studying! As a tried and true nerd, I assure you that building a strong community is absolutely compatible with upholding high standards academically. In fact, we know from universities and businesses that they want students who are able to collaborate and interact. Someone was just telling me about a graduate school, a well-known one, that is including kindness and community engagement as a major factor in its application criteria. Many colleges and universities are telling us that they don't want people who just study, study, study, often making themselves sick and burnt out in the process. They want students who have what are often called 'soft skills' – the ability to relate to people different from them, to listen, to collaborate, to demonstrate empathy. You can't learn any of those things if you're sitting at home by yourself.

But you can learn them at boarding school.

Thank you.