

Headmaster's Opening of the Year
Comments to Faculty and Staff
August 14, 2007

Good morning and welcome.

Before I offer some thoughts on my mind this morning as we begin a new year together, I want to talk briefly about an idea that was proposed to me last year by Jim Crowley and Juli Fleming as a result of their work with FEAST, the Faculty Enrichment and Support Team. Because we are a large group—there are some 370 of us gathered here this morning—it is difficult for us to know one another as well as we might. There is no easy solution to that problem but FEAST has suggested that we try to do more to build a stronger sense of connection within this large group. And so, on three occasions this coming school year—in September, in November, and in February—Penny and I shall host an informal open house at the Loridans House for any staff member able to come. I shall get you these dates soon. These are meant to be very casual gatherings whereby folks could drop by the house after school is over and they are in no way required though all are welcome! Again, I shall get you some more specific information soon and I am grateful to Juli, Jim, and their fellow FEAST members for working to find ways to help us to get to know one another better amidst this large community of faculty and staff.

As we prepare for Lovett's 82nd academic session, I'd like to share some thoughts with you about what I think are three important topics—topics that are tightly connected with one another. The topics are these:

- 1) The mission of our school—a mission that I think to be more noble and important than ever;
- 2) The sacred nature of teaching;
- 3) The responsibilities we have to one another in a community like this committed as we are to an enormously worthy and challenging endeavor.

Let me say at the outset that I view each of you in this room as a teacher as well as critical to our community and mission. We are all teachers and mentors and each of us helps carry out our mission as a school literally every day. Indeed, in my four-plus years here, I have learned many important and inspiring lessons about commitment, tenacity, friendship, and servant leadership from virtually everyone in this room. Whether you teach third grade, or prepare meals for our community, or direct traffic, or coach softball or maintain our campus and equipment—regardless of your responsibilities in our school—you teach and serve Lovett through your work, your devotion to our school, and your character. I am very grateful for the tremendous multitude and variety of gifts represented in this room this morning and for your constant willingness to share those gifts with us.

1) Our Mission.

Last Friday morning in some short remarks to our new faculty, I told them I believe more fervently than ever that a school like Lovett—dedicated as we are to nurturing mind, body, spirit, and character and to preparing our students for college and life—is more relevant and needed than ever. And I would add that achieving the goals of our noble mission is perhaps more challenging than ever in large part because of the high aspirations we have for our school, for one another, and for our students as well as the many challenges presented us by contemporary culture. We seek to help the young people in our charge develop the skills, the understandings, the attitudes, and the values that will enable them to succeed in college and to make a meaningful difference to the world around them throughout their lives. Lovett's particular educational philosophy challenges us and our students to commit ourselves to always growing and learning and to use our learning in service to endeavors and causes that transcend a specific job or livelihood or career.

As one colleague and friend puts it, we must “free our students from petty and strategic thinking about their education and their lives . . . (and) remind them that the (ultimate) goal of . . . school and college is to find a calling.” (Tad Roach, Headmaster at St. Andrew's School, Middletown, Delaware, Fall 2006 Alumni Bulletin). In other words—as we go about the ever-important tasks of helping students learn to solve problems, to analyze increasingly complex data, to read thoughtfully and critically, to write and speak clearly and concisely, to act responsibly and compassionately—we must always keep before them the obligation we all have to be constantly mindful of those learnings and principles and actions most important to leading a life of depth, substance, meaning, integrity, contribution, and wholeness. That, in my view, is

the essence of a liberal arts education—taking what we know and learn and applying it such that we become more fully human as well as more thoughtful, more engaged, more moral citizens of our nation and world.

2. The Sacred Nature Of Teaching.

To carry out this vision of schooling called for in Lovett’s mission is more vital and more difficult than ever amidst an ever-changing and in some ways, more fragmented and divided world. To accomplish our worthy purpose, we must feed the imagination of our students and thereby enable them to imagine and then create—through their own callings—a future and world of greater opportunity and justice and peace. I am talking here about a task for those of us in this room and for others with whom we are in partnership—parents in particular—that is truly life-changing for our students and transformational for the larger world. It is the nature of our vocation that the life-changing work which you are doing—again, life-changing for you, your students, and the world—makes teaching a truly sacred and moral endeavor. Bruce McClellan, who served Lawrenceville School as a teacher and leader for over thirty years, was fond of pointing out that as teachers, we are participating actively—alongside parents and other mentors to our students—in creation and in recreation. He argued strongly that those of us in this room are—in many ways—part of the Creation Story because of the powerful and enduring implications of our work for the students we serve. What could be more humbling, more important, more sacred! (Selected Speeches of Bruce McClellan, The Lawrenceville School, November 12, 1977 Remarks to Parents).

3. The Responsibilities We Have To One Another.

Our mission and our work are noble, sacred, important, and ever-challenging. When I began to interview for the job as Headmaster at Lovett in the fall of 2002, I was enormously impressed with the quality of the Lovett faculty and staff and indeed, I remain impressed and if anything, am more impressed than ever. I want to highlight four qualities which I have seen in evidence time and time again here and which I know we shall continue to nurture in the years to come.

1) The faculty and staff here have genuine respect and love for young people. You love and respect our students at their highs and their lows, when they are soaring in their victories and when they are sinking in their disappointments. That love is the mark of an effective school.

2) While there is healthy disagreement from time to time about the best ways to carry out our mission, we believe—in a very soulful and coherent way—in the fundamental purposes of our school. All in this room care deeply about our commitment to sending forth from here young people with the skills, attitudes, and character that will in turn enable them to make a constructive difference to a world so in need of their service and commitment.

3) You look for the best in one another and in your students. There is a story that the great Athenian leader and general Alcibiades was asked how best to lead and to teach. His response? We lead and teach most effectively when we summon those around us to “nobility” (quoted by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in his May 25, 2007 Commencement Speech at the U.S. Naval Academy). You consistently summon those around you to nobility and that is a key reason our school is as strong as it is. I hope we shall always work to bring forth what is truly noble in one another and in our students and families.

4) You care about each other and you show that care in ways too numerous to count. I certainly have felt that care personally and I have seen hundreds of examples of your reaching out to each other, sharing in one another’s triumphs and pains, showing real love for colleagues when it is not always easy or convenient to do so. I hope we shall always find ways to make time to reach out, to help, to show our concern for those around us. We all need friendship and fellowship. No community can sustain its health and coherence and vitality without these qualities of care, compassion, friendship, fellowship, and love.

I look forward to serving with you in this Lovett’s 82nd year. It is a privilege and blessing to share this sacred profession with you and to do it at this particular school and at this particular time in our history.

May we have a great year together.

Billy Peebles