

# St. Anne's-Belfield School

## 2019 SENIOR GRADUATION CHAPEL: "A HISTORY LESSON IN FOUR PARTS"

David Grant Smith  
May 31, 2019

### Quotations

"When we accept slight amazement, we prepare ourselves to imagine great amazement and, in the world of the imagination, it becomes normal for an elephant, which is an enormous animal, to come out of a snail shell."

– Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* [Reader: Jordan Taylor]

"All man's love is vast and inconvenient. It is tempting, of course, to blunt its edge by caution. It is so much easier not to get involved—to thirst for nothing and no one, to deny that matter matters and, if you have the stomach for it, to make your bed with meaning which cannot break your heart. But that, it seems to me, is neither human nor Divine.... Such faintness is unworthy of true men... Love is as strong as death. Man was made to lead with his chin; he is worth knowing only with his guard down, his head up and his heart rampant on his sleeve.... Playing it safe is not divine."

– Robert Capon, *The Supper of the Lamb* [Reader: Laura Robertson]

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.  
Through the unknown, unremembered gate  
When the last of earth left to discover  
Is that which was the beginning;  
At the source of the longest river  
The voice of the hidden waterfall  
And the children in the apple-tree  
Not known, because not looked for

But heard, half-heard, in the stillness  
Between two waves of the sea.  
Quick now, here, now, always--  
A condition of complete simplicity  
(Costing not less than everything)  
And all shall be well and  
All manner of thing shall be well  
When the tongues of flames are in-folded  
Into the crowned knot of fire  
And the fire and the rose are one.

– T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," from *Four Quartets* [Reader: Jimmy Zunka]

### Appreciation

At this chapel of all chapels it feels appropriate to begin with words of appreciation. Bob Clark: you truly understand these moments. Gentle and gracious is your council. As we've already witnessed, Will Nichols has essentially orchestrated a concert; he also provided a wise word at a crucial moment in this process. Musicians and singers: you have given of your time when you did not have to. Your willingness reflects your commitment to this place.

To all of my colleagues, especially my squat buddy (pourin' one out for ya) and the Awesome Workout Friends: each day you model what it looks like to love.

# St. Anne's-Belfield School

And to my immediate team, to quote Whitman, "Faithful and friendly the arms that have helped me." Your generosity, confidence, grace, and strength have carried me here today. A special thank you to Laura Robertson and Jordan Taylor, who with strong angelic arms rallied around me and offered food and drink and kind words (they know how hard this is). And to Jimmy Zunka: I could not ask for a better office mate, teaching partner, and friend. You have shown me how to do this thing we do.

I'd like to offer a special appreciation to the parents who are here today. Thank you for giving us this time with your children. Students, you will learn over the course of your life that occasions like this one, graduations and weddings especially, are not actually about you at all. Much like the Figure, we do these things for our parents. So today is as much about them as it is about you all. Be kind to them. Let them take pictures. Indulge their affections. And thank them.

But today is indeed about you, seniors. And my aim here is in part to invite your parents and relatives inside just a bit, in to our community and your lives here. Into this particular home of ours. Mostly, my hope is to illuminate for them how we see you, how we feel about you, and what you have taught us. Your decision to put me up here today is proof that you are not fully formed just yet. And while I feel your wisdom in this particular instance is a little misguided, I am indeed humbled, if not a little afraid. Thanks for dropping this most impossible homework assignment in my lap the moment you hurried out the door. How possibly to convey what you have meant to us?

I was having dinner with a group of seniors and colleagues a couple weeks ago when I acknowledged that I felt utterly unqualified to give this sermon today since I tend to have more to say about moments of trial than occasions of joy. I mentioned that it's easier to speak about the slivers of light that crack through in those dark moments. And without skipping a beat, Hannah Trebour piped up and with typical optimism said, "well Mr. Smith, just tell us what to do when you find the light!" I don't know if I can tell you what to do when you've found the light—or even where to look for it—but I will say that I returned home that evening and took a stroll in my neighborhood, and as I walked I began to think through all of the faces in this room today and I was overcome with joy. And I realized exactly what I wanted to say to you all. Here's the short version: getting to know you through everything we do here has truly been one of the greatest privileges of my adult life. Working with your class has affirmed what I have chosen to do with my life, and I am grateful for each day that I have spent in your company. I know my colleagues feel the same. And so, I, we all, thank you.

So we come back to the question, How possibly to convey what you have meant to us? Time and again, the answer came: something about love. So here's my take. I offer you a final history lesson in four parts

## **Prospect**

"We shall not cease from exploration  
At the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time."

I cannot think of a more fitting invocation for our time together this morning than these words from T. S. Eliot that Mr. Zunka read. Together we have come full circle. Graduation days are days to take stock, to assess, to remember,

# St. Anne's-Belfield School

and to look ahead. As such today functions as a sort of circular meditation on the past, your past, your time here. We close a circuitous journey through a shared remembered past as we seek personal and collective forms of closure. And so we glance backward while looking ahead.

## Lesson I: Love

In the scope of world history, the year 1912 gets very little play, a relatively unnoticed year that hides in the shadows of 1914, the year western Europe went to war. In 1912 Alaska became a territory, the Mayor of Tokyo gave 3,000 cherry trees to the District of Columbia, a group of British explorers reached the South Pole, the Titanic struck an iceberg, an Army captain in Missouri successfully parachuted out of an airplane, the Boston Red Sox moved into Fenway Park, and a bartender in Milwaukee shot Theodore Roosevelt in the chest.

Yet it was a simple prayer for peace that appeared that eventful year in a small French magazine called *The Little Bell* that I'd like first to call our attention to this morning. Published anonymously, the prayer made its way to the French Pope Benedict XV in 1915, circulated throughout Europe between the wars, and was printed in English in 1936 while the world was mired in depression, just ahead World War II.

Erroneously attributed to Saint Francis, this simple prayer, which we recited earlier, finds its way into our chapel liturgy every few weeks. Almost too easy to recite, its lyrical cadence can seduce us into an unthinking rehearsal of its series of petitions, requests that ought to give us real pause. "Lord make me an instrument of your peace." A noble and genuine request, to be sure. Maybe this first part is easier.

But then we make the insane turn, the turn that upends every message our culture of self-affirmation tempts us to embrace. The turn that implores us to quiet our first impulses in almost every human encounter. The Prayer of Saint Francis invites us to consider what our lives might be like if, every so often, we removed ourselves as the central players in our drama and inverted the moral order of our universe. "O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love." To console...to understand...to love. It's a dangerous business to ask for such things. But it changes everything. This is how to lead with your chin, your heart rampant on your sleeve. This is how to invite the divine. To love another in this way is a simultaneously creative and redemptive act. Because love is not about mastery or growth mindsets or self-improvement, but about the dissolution of the self at the moment of another's need. The moment that you realize that it's not about you is the moment the weight of the world slinks from your shoulders and you can lay your burdens down. "And all manner of thing shall be well."

\* \* \*

The former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams once wrote that "Preaching is cheap if it fails to meet human beings in their darkest points." It's hard to talk about these things, love and all the rest, without considering the preceding heartaches that invite us to console, and understand, and love in the first place. On such a joyous occasion as this it feels unseemly to bat about in the dark corners of life. But here's the thing. That is when you all soar. Because you all know how to love. I've seen it every day.

# St. Anne's-Belfield School

## Lesson 2: Time and Memory, Part I

In 1936, the same year the “Prayer of Saint Francis” was printed in English, T. S. Eliot toured a small chapel in the heart of the English village of Little Gidding in Cambridgeshire, seventy miles north of London. Five years later, Eliot conjured his memory of Little Gidding as he grappled with the evil and human recklessness unleashed in World War II. As London burned he confronted the inevitability of loss and despair that arises out of our collective failure to love. To Eliot, human depravity, our soiled nature, fixed us within an endless cycle of warfare from which human history could never break free. Could our history ever overcome our humanity?

But it was in this small country chapel, nestled amid the hedgerows of the English countryside, that Eliot found hope. For Little Gidding had endured its own cycle of destruction and renewal, death and rebirth, a cycle that had reached back into the days of the religious wars when the devout fought over God. In 1626, having lost his fortune to the Virginia Company, a cleric in the Church of England moved with his family to the manor of Little Gidding. There they established an informal Anglican spiritual community and lived out their days in accordance with the Book of Common Prayer. Twenty years later, in the throes of the First English Civil War, King Charles I sought refuge at Little Gidding after the Parliamentarian New Model Army routed his Royalists at the Battle of Naseby. Eventually the war overcame Little Gidding and the community dispersed.

And so three hundred years later, it was another war, a bigger war, that shattered the peace of the English countryside once again, prompting Eliot to consider the meaning of a place like Little Gidding in the face of apocalyptic terror. Destroyed and rebuilt, again and again, over centuries, the chapel at Little Gidding stood for Eliot as a site where all of humanity could return through the redemptive power of sacrificial love in history. Although we may long to escape the confines of our present moments, courageously we live suspended between past and future in the hopes that true meaning is rampant in the eternal now. Love as a creative and redemptive act: *That* is the “condition of complete simplicity (costing not less than everything).”

## Lesson 3: Time and Memory, Part II

Eliot begins the stanza from which Mr. Zunka read like this:

“What we call the beginning is often the end  
And to make an end is to make a beginning.  
The end is where we start from.”

Eliot’s meditation on the circularity of time, the way ends become beginnings, and beginnings ends, how memory works to tether these together, strikes me as especially fitting for our occasion today. For though this is an occasion of great joy, no doubt many of you feel conflicted. The ambivalence that accompanies these liminal moments is a reminder that such days are both endings and beginnings, births and deaths. The unease we may feel on such days reflects the strain of having to leave something dear to us behind in order to move ahead. Elsewhere Eliot grapples with the tensile ambiguities of such passage moments. The Magi who journey to the Christ child in Bethlehem discover that the birth of a new age is for them the sad death of the old dispensation, a new order of things in which their part is diminished. And “a hard time they had of it.” And as you take your first steps into a world that is full of wonder and fear, hope and uncertainty, what you leave behind when you step out of these doors is a home. Because “home,” writes Eliot, “is where we start from.”

# St. Anne's-Belfield School

## Lesson 4: Home

As we gather together one last time here in the living room of our school, it seems fitting to talk of home. All houses are experienced most completely, most presently by children. For it is only in our childhood that a heating vent becomes a racetrack for toy cars and a balcony the launchpad for little green parachute men. Banisters become slides and living rooms encouched fortresses. Kitchen floors the settings of great battle scenes, the undersides of desks hiding places for the littlest ones. We interact more imaginatively, more intimately with these spaces as children, and through our deeply attentive play make our houses into homes. And the small spaces to which we then laid claim affirmed our safety and enabled us to indulge the pleasures of wonder. To be a child in a home is to lose oneself in a daydreamed reality without edges. For more than anything, the chief benefit of a house is it “allows one to dream in peace.” It is a shelter for daydreaming. Thus protected, we are free to explore our limits and frolic within our architecture, and we learn to become our self.

As we grow older we put aside childish ways; chairs and tables become places to sit and eat, no longer our playground on rainy days. And yet the older we get and the farther we drift from the houses that became our first homes, the more memory binds us to those nooks and corners in which we dreamed. Yet the house is more than memory. It is, writes the philosopher Gaston Bachelard, “physically inscribed in us. It is a group of organic habits.” When we imagine our first house, our first home, we can still recall how to navigate hallways in the depths of night, the height of the light switch in a darkened room, and which creaky step to avoid when sneaking to our beds after curfew; our reflexes remain. Our gestural relationship with the spaces we inhabited endures in our memories long after we move away. It is those haptic, fingertip memories that awaken within us dormant pasts and return us in a flash to the simple, innocent imaginings of a slightly smaller cosmos.

If, as Bachelard writes, “All really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home,” then certainly you have made *this* place your home as well. It is a home built by those who came before you and a home that will endure long after you depart. And yet you have made it your own; it is now and will forever be yours. Each day your presence here, the clamor of your voices, your quiet whispers, your laughter, your tears, your dreams, and your heartaches invest this place with meaning. With every passage through the hallways you have animated its architecture and recast its form with the enchanted yearnings of your collective heart. In the spaces that now lay empty will linger the spectral memories of the things you did here. Your absence will only confirm the beauty of your presence.

And this is why we can learn so much from the snail, the terrestrial gastropod mollusk. The shell and the snail are mutually constitutive; they make one another. The shell confines yet also protects. “When we accept slight amazement, we prepare ourselves to imagine great amazement and, in the world of the imagination, it becomes normal for an elephant, which is an enormous animal, to come out of a snail shell.”

## Retrospect

So why do I stand up here talk to you of love and time and memory and home? To call again on Whitman, “it is time to explain myself.” Because the lesson lies with you. You see, you likely don’t know it but these are the things you teach us every day you come into this place. The traces of your lives that will linger long after you depart will remind us of the meanings of these things and urge us to be better.

# St. Anne's-Belfield School

So how will we remember you in this home of ours? Mostly, we will remember what you've taught us. I have learned things simple and profound:

I have learned that there is never an inappropriate occasion to wear a tuxedo. I have learned that you often meet the people with the warmest hearts in detention (I love you, Trip). I have learned to be on the lookout for Katie D and Liza when entering any darkened room. I have learned that to be unable to distinguish between twins is unkind, that even the toughest among us yearn to be vulnerable, and that Joviah is what joy looks like. I have learned that backstage pre-show musical rituals are much cooler than any pre-game sports rituals and that watching Tulai bob and weave at a choir concert is worth the price of admission alone. I have learned that it's entirely reasonable to spend the better part of your free time flicking credit cards into the ceiling of the commons and The Most Interesting Man in the World is actually Connor Croll. I have also learned that it's sometimes the quietest ones, the Messiah's of the world, that actually hold us all together. My honors Euro family has taught me how to listen and that people are willing to help make the dinner you've promised them when you're running late because you haven't finished your chapel sermon. From the 13 seniors on the lacrosse team I've learned about the strong bond of friendship that is forged through mutual sacrifice. (Keep the chain strong.) And I've learned that at times, when things aren't going right, all you can do is lean back and say, "That's tooouuugh."

And if I may offer one final lesson. When you get older, you will realize that while it is a gift to be loved, it is an equally profound gift to allow another to love you back. What you may not realize is that you are the reason that we are here. You make this whole thing work. For four years—much longer for many of you—you have allowed us to love you. You have allowed us to care for you. You have trusted us with your hearts and minds, your fears and joys, your hopes and your heartaches. You have let us celebrate and mourn with you. You have invited us into your worlds and allowed us to ask questions, to sit alongside you, smuggle in outside food, jumpstart cars, and all the other things that go on in this place. You enable us to do what the universe has called us to do. You are our precious children and we would throw ourselves in front of the world for you if we could.

## **Closing**

Here's the thing about home: you can never truly leave. Because you will always be bound to us and us to you. You can never sunder the cord that binds you to this place. Together you have fashioned and re-fashioned it. Whether you depart with joy or sorrow, satisfaction or regret, you forever have a seat at our table. Because you have loved us and we have loved you. And we are now and forever more beholden to one another for the time we spent here together.

Though you were once snails you depart now as a herd of thundering elephants, mighty and wondrous, the most empathetic of all the creatures, and we are amazed. And behind you remains this resplendent shell in which each of your pasts is inscribed. And home, and time, and memory, and past, and present, and future collapse into one. And there you are. And *there* is love.

We'll miss you. We love you. And we will always be home.