

T AFT **COMMENCEMENT**

**REMARKS BY WILLIAM R. MACMULLEN '78
HEADMASTER**

**UPPER MID AWARD CEREMONY
MAY 27, 2008**

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Remarks by William R. MacMullen, Headmaster

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“The Tremors of Learning”

As you know from the presentation a week ago, on May 12, at 2:28 local time, an earthquake hit southwest China. The tremors will be felt for a long time, and perhaps even can be sensed here. There are many lessons that have risen from the rubble and the grieving, but there is one we here can learn from: that education will be the differentiator in tomorrow's world.

The quake registered 7.9, and that is massive anywhere. In this area, of small cities and rural towns scattering the hills, it was catastrophic. And for two reasons, one legislative and one architectural: first, the government's 25-year, single-child policy meant that those parents who lost a child had lost their only child; and second, most of the schools in China look nothing like ours.

China has more than 400,000 elementary, private and secondary schools, and the majority are in rural or semi-rural areas. While new seismic building codes were adopted in 1990, many schools pre-date this; and many new schools were shoddily built and did not meet code, with—this we now know—insufficient re-bar rods, structures that could not carry the loads, shortcuts on the concrete. In addition, in a nation with a staggering population and where the desire for education is so high, you have countless schools with large interior rooms, big enough for classes of 50, 60, and 70—and steel beams spanning these very large spaces. And so unlike you sitting in the Wu building or taking history in the CPT classrooms, that afternoon in China at 2:18, there were many schools filled with lots of students in large rooms in unsafe buildings.

In these rooms you saw the future: Chinese boys and girls crowded in large buildings, hungry to learn, eager to leave the countryside and move to the cities and a brighter future. And never have the possibilities been greater for those children. Many were burning with ambition, and many knew that if there was a way out of the village, this was the only way: through learning. Here, then, in these rooms, you found the fuel that is powering the massive engine that is growth in China. For any leader or economist, this scene said all you needed to know about the future: China, a nation with a nearly limitless supply of human capital and with a long history of commitment to education, is uniquely poised to take advantage of the global economic system.

When the earthquake struck that afternoon in the Szechuan province, thousands of schools collapsed, like so many houses of cards. In one primary school, 300 girls and boys died. In Juyuan Middle School, 900 students died in one collapse. In Mianyang city, over 1000 students and teachers died in a pile of concrete and steel—in this city alone, more than 20,000 are feared dead. In Deyang city, five schools toppled. And so on. In some places, schools were reduced to rubble, while sturdier apartment or government buildings remained standing. One teacher wrote sadly, “We never thought about earthquake resistance. We were thinking about the most urgent need—to let these kids have a school.”

And so a terrible scene was played out, hundreds and hundreds of times: one or both parents, weeping at the rubble pile, holding a picture of their only child. The lucky ones had a body to weep over; most did not.

One photograph has haunted me. It is of a young girl, of your age, alive but trapped under twisted steel and shattered concrete. You can see her face and shoulders in a wedge of darkness, and she reaches out to her rescuers, her eyes at once terrified and hopeful. I think she is grasping at life, of course, but something else as well: at learning.

That picture matters to us here.

More than at any time in human history, the quality of education you receive will fundamentally shape your future. Advances and increased accessibility in technology and travel mean that the boy or girl in China—or India or America—has a greater opportunity than ever to succeed, and education is where it all begins. Chinese children died because a massive quake hit buildings that were unsafe, but they also died because they wanted to learn, because they wanted to narrow the income gap between the rural areas and the cities, because their parents knew that if they had any chance to have a better life than the one they themselves knew, it would begin in that large, crowded school room.

And this sense of urgency, this hunger to learn, this acute sense that in a flattened world only those with education will prosper—this is felt not just in China, but also in countless other developing nations. If the United States is going to succeed and thrive, its young people—this means you—must have a strong education.

And so you are fortunate: you go to class in small, safe state-of-the-art classrooms, with gifted teachers and a sound curriculum. But those things will not matter at all if they are not accompanied by great curiosity, interest and discipline, by the same strength and hope you see in that young trapped girl. To succeed, you will have to have considerable drive, for the fact is, this globe has spread opportunity more equitably, if thinly, than ever; and success will be based increasingly on those who have both education and initiative. To have the former and not the latter would be tragic, for you and for this country.

The global marketplace is a highly competitive one, an ecosystem where the available niches are rapidly filled by those who can exploit them, where survival will require smart, well-trained and ambitious people, and where the formidable challenges will require smart and ethical leaders who can look at problems in new ways. What you do here, then, in forming your habits and developing central problem-solving skills, is very much a training for the future you inherit.

And those Chinese students who survived? What of them? They went back to school.

Not long ago, I listened to an NPR segment on how the schools were coping. In a scene that has been repeated everywhere, in one town, a huge tent has been erected, and desks, tables and bureaus were dragged in. School was very much in session: math, science, language. A teacher was conducting a class in English. Ninety students were translating, in heavily accented English: “To help others is to help ourselves.”

The fierce urgency that will mark these survivors is a reminder not so much of who we are competing against but more of what we might aspire to. As we honor the leading scholars of the Upper Middle Class today, and as you end the year and approach your exams, finish well, do your best and remember that great scholarship, in the end, is not only about intellectual firepower. It is also about what burns in the heart.

COMMENCEMENT

Remarks by William R. MacMullen, Headmaster

May 31, 2008

“On A Circle of Chairs”

This class has so many remarkable qualities. They are smart. They are richly artistic, dramatic and musical. They commit to their passions: consider the range of projects exhibited in the Senior Project Museum. They are deeply principled and committed to action; look at how many of them have been on service trips, have sought meaningful ways to serve and have partnered with other schools and non-profit organizations. They have behaved very well. They have a great school spirit: incredibly supportive of each other, celebratory, enthusiastic, a bit edgy. They have been open to creating new traditions and shaped this school culture in a way that has been extraordinarily mature—witness their evening of shared Reflections two nights ago in the faculty room, where they gathered as a class to offer thoughts, perhaps the most important and powerfully positive student event I have seen in my years as headmaster, an evening of thanks, sharing and love. They have earned enormous respect and affection from the faculty. It is exquisitely sad to think of this school without them.

But let me tell you what I have been thinking about: chairs--empty chairs around a pond, to be more precise.

An explanation:

A few days ago, I came down to breakfast, as I always do, with Pam and our boys, at 7 o'clock; and when we walked into the dining hall, it was completely empty. Not just of people: there was not a stick of furniture there, and on the floor, arranged out of the red trays and complete with the apostrophe, we read, “'08.” I knew we'd been had.

Of course, I immediately thought of the knuckleheads who had pulled off the prank, and a good one it was indeed; within minutes two of the aforementioned knuckleheads were in my office, looking a little bleary, and with a peace offering of a box of donuts. “Have you looked out at the pond?” they asked, and so off I went. And this is what I saw:

Arranged carefully, aligned side by side and just touching, and perfectly circling the entire pond, were all the chairs, at the water's edge, up the gentle embankment, then up on the Jig patio wall, and around again. How they did this—I mean it was perfect, not a chair missing—is beyond me: it seemed to have required sophisticated mathematical formulas and surveying equipment and laser transits, and also extraordinary precision and exquisite teamwork, neither of which one would expect in meaningful amounts after midnight.

It was accidental art, of course, born of some 2:00 a.m. vision, perpetrated by some thirty giggling, whispering and tiptoeing seniors. How did our crack security staff not discover them?! And when teachers saw the scene later in the morning, and Peter Frew came out with his camera to take pictures of scores of seniors sitting and joking, you had to admit that it was pretty darn good. And then they all helped set the dining hall up again, and we all had a good laugh.

Without meaning to, they sculpted a scene that gestured not only to what they had created here but also what they might fashion in the future: a gathering of like-minded people, elbow to elbow, caught together in the act of communal reflection and joined at the edge of some shared objectives.

OK, I am an English teacher always on the hunt for metaphor, and it's been an emotional week, but that's how I saw it. At times like this, you look out the back of campus and a midnight prank becomes this really big symbol:

pond and chairs, reflection and communion. A stretch, you might say, but not really, not when you think of what a Taft education is and what this class has done.

Here's what the faculty have sought to do here: we have tried to gather a group of smart and motivated young men and women, in a community of high expectations and caring, in the act of rigorous intellectual and personal reflection on the great question which is at the heart of a liberal arts education: "What is living for?"

That many schools and colleges have forsaken this question is clear, but we have not. We see our duty as teachers the way author and Yale Law Professor Anthony Kronman articulates it in *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life*: one in which we give "students moral and spiritual guidance by introducing them to a more-or-less fixed system of knowledge and norms that constitute their intellectual inheritance."

So the pond image is apt: it tells us that the seniors have had to look into themselves, that their education has been a rigorous process of scrutiny and inquiry, that the quest for self-understanding is a timeless one, that at its heart was preparation for living a good life.

Seniors, we hope that the lessons you have learned here will serve you well. Your life becomes the final examination, and there are but three questions: What constitutes a good life? What values will shape my existence? How will I serve others? The grading scale is, of course, a hard one, but you are well prepared, there are daily assessments, and one day you will sign your pledge.

Now what of that circle of chairs? To me it is a reminder of the need for and possibility of communion, of gathering of diverse peoples joining each other, with respect for each other's differences, and in hope that we together might create a more just and peaceful globe. Today's speaker, Ambassador Fraker has had such a seat, and seniors, so can you.

It is this interest in and respect for otherness that we have tried to instill here—on service trips, through outside speakers, in our traditions of sit-down dinner and School Meeting, in a million conversations between teacher and student in and out of class.... It is this quality that the class possesses in abundant measure, and it accounts for the affection that unites them.

On a flattened globe where opportunity has been spread by technology and travel, schools like Taft must create leaders who will sit at the table of brotherhood and work to find solutions with people who will in all likelihood view the world in a way very different from their own. Those who remain isolated—by virtue of their self-righteousness, their extremism, their fear of otherness—will live in darkness. This class is made of boys and girls of all walks of life, a pallet of skin colors and a pageant of ethnicities, of diverse perspectives and experiences, and they will carry with them the most profound and most needed lesson: that if we do not embrace difference, if we do not celebrate the wisdom of the Koran, the Bible and the Torah, if we do not engage in the very tough work of bringing discordant voices together at the same table in order to find shared interests, if we do not together articulate that fanaticism is fratricide, then we will perish.

What this class has done here, what they have become in these past few days, gives me great hope.

Last night, thinking of you seniors at dinner at our house, envisioning you opening your hearts to each other in the faculty room, reflecting on how much each of you has grown here, I saw something else in that pond scene, of those chairs, at once intimate and empty, facing inward, gazing on the mirror-flat pond, upon which was painted the clouds and sky. In memory, and in thinking of the many memorials I know that are built around empty chairs, it became beautiful and bleak, a reminder that you would soon be leaving.

But it also became the vision of tomorrow, of the seats you will fill when you leave Taft, the possibility that you might fashion a world like the one you have created here—perhaps imperfect, and flawed and fragile; but also startlingly beautiful and enduring, and noble.

Seniors, I thank you for the gift of that vision.

Congratulations to each of you. This is a proud day for every one of us, but in particular for you seniors.

Look at me: Think of the scene of your class crowded in the faculty room for final reflections. Think of that final night, that common room in Vogelstein, all you girls piled like puppies as you fell asleep, that room in CPT, where you cried together as you told stories. Think of the shadowed sunsets over the fields, the echo of your steps in Lincoln Lobby, the sun rising over the pond, the sound of Collegium's song rippling through the air. Together, we have been trying to do something very rare and very difficult here, to spin out of the threads of our dreams a more perfect and peaceful world: a more just and compassionate one, where we are not served but serve. You have left this school a better place, and now can carry that spirit with you, like a torch. Thank you, good luck and blessings upon you.