

Convocation 2018

Remarks by Headmaster Willy MacMullen '78

As some of you may recall, at Commencement three months ago, I spoke about a leather-bound book someone had sent me: an old, crumbling 1918 Student Handbook. It is small—it can easily fit in your breast pocket—and it had many of the things we still have today in the Handbook: the daily schedule, the year calendar, club listings, important rules, and so on. To hold that book, carried by some boy a century ago, is to be taken back in time and to be reminded of what we were and what we are.

Some of the book seems, for lack of better words, “endearing” or even “cute.” It’s an antique, after all. You find phrases like “new boys do not wear white flannel trousers or knickerbockers,” and all students were to “learn the school songs and cheers at once.” But there is also wisdom for all times, and a challenge for us.

Headmaster Horace Taft, who had founded the school in 1890 with the mission to educate the whole student, included in the book a section entitled “General Admonition,” meaning advice. There’s something quite wise and even fatherly in his suggestions, and a lot of them still ring true: he suggests that you “consult teachers and older students, especially monitors, whenever real troubles arise,” and “take some form of daily exercise,” and “participate in some activity outside your curriculum work,” and “keep busy and you will not be homesick.” Hard to argue with those. In all, there are twenty admonitions, but here’s the last:

“Be genuine. Don’t try to make others think you are different from what you really are.”

Let me repeat that: *“Be genuine. Don’t try to make others think you are different from what you really are.”*

It’s worth thinking about this piece of advice, really reflecting on it, because there’s a lot here, and there may even be a goal for us this year. What if everyone of us committed to the idea, one we all want, that each of us had the opportunity here, on every corner of campus and at every hour, to be our genuine self? Now, that’s a worthy goal.

At first glance, it is advice for that individual student. You can sense what he is getting at: that you don’t try too hard, that you don’t try to pretend or posture, be real. We might say “Do You” or “Live One Life.”

But I think the admonition is more than just advice for the reader. I like to think that he ends with this because it really is a message for the entire school, a claim on what he knew to be essential in creating the kind of school community he aspired towards, because in order for every student to be able to be genuine, to let other see you for what you really are—well, then something really beautiful and challenging has to happen.

Actually three things have to happen. I’ll offer them each as a hypothesis. You probably know what a hypothesis is: a claim based on limited evidence and a point of further investigation.

So, to be a place where we all can be genuine, here's three suppositions we might prove this year:

First Hypothesis: There Are No Outsiders Here:

I hope that every single person on this campus believes and works towards that reality: that there are no outsiders at Taft. None.

I believe this with every bone in my body, and while my remarks today are aimed to you students here, this must be true for my colleagues behind me and for every person on this campus.

Each of you was discovered, chosen, invited, welcomed; and each of you belongs.

Each of you belongs as *all* you are, cracked and whole, perfect and flawed, searching and finding, in all the ways you think of and identify yourself.

Each of you has identical and immeasurable value, enriches this school beyond measure, and is worthy of full-throated celebration.

Each of you is now part of the Taft family, forever and fully a member.

There are countless small and big ways the premise that we all belong is affirmed:

- In our stated policies about how we treat each other and our refusal to accept bullying or harassment or meanness.
- In our statement on diversity and inclusion that says, and I quote, we all “work to acknowledge, respect, and empathize with all people” and our Portrait of the Graduate, which tasks you to “consider a range of perspectives in order to develop a moral worldview that helps create a compassionate, inclusive, and socially just community.”
- And in the interest in your whole being which you cannot help but feel from the faculty; in eye contact and hello’s and high-fives from friends and strangers; in invitations to join the lunch table or walk down to campus after practice; in willingness to listen to the ideas of others especially when that are discomforting; in the respectful attention and recognition after the announcement at Assembly; in the rowdy and celebratory crowd at a game or the performance.
- Even in the white-haired alumnus who greets you on the summer street simply because you are wearing Taft hat.

And on and on in the thousand ways each day offers the chance to assert we all belong. Does it get any better, could you be any prouder, to be part of a community that posits, There are no outsiders here?

Second Hypothesis: It's Our High Standards That Make Us Special

So, we begin with the idea that to be a place where we can all be our genuine selves, there can be no outsiders; and that leads to the next hypothesis, which is this: We have really high standards and they are what make us feel we belong to a special place.

No organization of any kind can be great unless it has high standards, whether it is a professional team or an army platoon or a startup tech firm or a global corporation. These high standards will be very hard to meet, individually and institutionally, and that's the point. Steve Jobs was clear in saying that he wanted to make insanely great products, not pretty good ones. Google is explicit in saying they have ridiculously high standards. If the standards were easy, those companies wouldn't be where they are. It's the fact that we have to challenge and stretch ourselves to something aspirational that unites everyone, underscores that they all belong.

For us, as with Mac and Google, those high standards are evidence of the uniqueness of the community. Striving to meet them makes us all feel we are part of something special.

But they are something more as well. These standards are, if you are able to meet them, *proof* that you truly belong. It's like you got a membership card with no expiration date. And so belonging is inseparable from these standards. We would not want it any other way.

So, we have high standards for integrity, especially in your academic work and in your respect for the property of others.

We have high standards for how we live together and treat each other with the basic decency and respect we all wish for.

We have high standards for how we wrestle with ideas and perspectives that may be discomforting and even oppositional: in how we talk, listen, disagree, collaborate, share, argue.

We have high standards and expect you not only to be nice but also to be brave: that you are kind to your peers and you have the courage to stand up for what is right.

We have high standards of academic performance: that when you walk into class, you will be mentally and physically prepared, ready to learn and eager to further learning in others.

We have high standards for how we treat the campus—from dining room table to dorm room--seeing it as a place we treasure and take pride in.

To meet these standards is really hard. It would be a lot easier to have low standards, but then you would not be stretched and we would not be special and you would not feel lucky to belong and we would not be Taft.

Third Hypothesis: You Can Meet These Standards

Remember, this all starts with the idea that each of us wants to be in a community where we can be our genuine self.

We began with the idea that we all belong and that there are no outsiders and moved to the claim that it is our high standards that make this community special and allow that sense of belonging, and that leads inevitably to this: the belief that each of you is capable of meeting these standards.

On that I don't have a shred of doubt, and nothing inspires me more, brings more joy to my heart, than the realization that I know we can meet these standards.

To be clear, what I have described is very hard. It's hard for each of us individually to meet these standards. We have bad days. We get tired and sloppy. We make mistakes. We say things we wish we could take back. We do stupid things or don't do smart things. We are flawed.

So we also have to believe in the best intentions of others. We have to be able to forgive. We have to have a sense of humor.

Being a place that has no outsiders and holds itself to the highest of standards is especially difficult here. We are crowded together, with diverse ways of experiencing the world, made of motivated and ambitious people, under intense demands and pressure—how challenging that is! Crafting a functioning learning community where we all can be our genuine selves under these conditions is a really big challenge.

Our work would be a lot easier if we had low standards, lived in a large and anonymous campus, if students and faculty shared identical backgrounds and perspectives, if we didn't care about excellence.

But we will never do that. We have deliberately made the task of creating a community of genuine members really hard. But it's glorious work. My trust in every teacher, student and staff member, my belief that we all seek the same thing for ourselves and each other, my faith in the best intentions of all, my belief that challenge and discomfort can strengthen, my conviction that we can absolutely meet these standards—all this cannot be shaken.

We will never know exactly why Horace Taft closed with the admonition that we be genuine and not try to make others think you are different from what you really are. Surely it was advice to a new student, perhaps a little nervous about entering the school. He knew it took courage and that it would be hard. He was giving a bit of a pep talk, maybe. But I like to think that if he was offering that advice to this individual, he was also offering a challenge to the school that still rings today.

If the year ended, and each of you were able to say, "I felt I was my genuine self," and as importantly, you could add, "I helped others be their genuine selves"—well, that would make this a very special place indeed, a place with no outsiders, high standards, and complete faith.

That's my goal for the year, for myself and for all of us, and for that opportunity, and for your efforts as teachers and students, I am deeply grateful.