Taking Time to See the Light

Every once in a while, I step back from the hectic pace of the day and take note of what otherwise would seem part of our daily routine. I should do it more often; every time I do, I am inspired by what I notice and grateful for all the goodness that surrounds us here. As I have mentioned several times, William Bennett says that if we are not grateful for something we have, we risk losing it. I never want to lose any of the inspirational and good things that come forth from this place, so I try to be mindful of what I am experiencing.

I had one of those moments last week during Chapel. After the Pledge of Allegiance, which deserves some reflection of its own, we heard a talk by new Language Chair Ellen Meranze, followed by daily announcements (also deserving of some reflection at another time). Then we heard from Glenn Ehrean about a Colwell Speaker, from students promoting a dance at Catamount Arts, and finally the kickoff for Kayla Davis’s Capstone. I ask that you bear with me as I describe and then reflect on the good things that came from Ellen, Glenn, the Catamount kids, and Kayla.

First, Ellen, as a brand new member of our faculty, took a risk. It takes quite a bit of courage for even the most seasoned veteran to get up on Fuller stage and share personal experiences and values with 800 people. When the lights are shining brightly on you, you seriously wonder if you have anything to say that warrants that much attention. What Ellen had to say certainly did. She began by quoting the saying that adorns the entrance to Germantown Friends School, where she attended high school: “Behold, I set before you an open door.” She went on to describe what that open door symbolized—risk-taking, learning, loving relationships—and the realization through it all that what matters most is one’s inner light as it recognized and valued the inner light in others. Her message was to believe in the power of that light, the power of individual dignity and creativity, the power of community and shared vision. It was a great way to open Chapel.

Next, Glenn Ehrean spoke as Director of the Colwell Center for Global Understanding about the arrival of Ambassador Herbert Quelle, the German Ambassador to Aserbaijan
and Harvard Weatherhead Fellow, who was speaking that night and the next morning in Chapel. After a distinguished career in economics and diplomatic service, Ambassador Quelle had many topics upon which to speak, but when he spoke in Chapel, he focused on three anniversaries being celebrated this year: Martin Luther’s posting of the 95 Theses on the door of the Wittenberg church; Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech; and John F. Kennedy’s assassination. His message was simple: these men changed the world, changed it so much that we acknowledge their deeds decades—even centuries—after they died; and the key to making such world-shaping changes was their willingness to take risks for what they believed in. The echo of Ellen’s message resonated with all in Fuller Hall, and we came to take even more seriously the power of our inner lights.

Next, in a short and rather rushed announcement, a group of students invited their peers to a costume dance that night at Catamount Arts. On the surface, this part of Chapel was easy to forget, but when one considers what was being announced, it takes on greater meaning. First, the announcement was an invitation to have fun, to relax, to let down one’s guard—dressing up and dancing are two activities that the more uptight among us don’t do very often, sometimes because we don’t feel like we are very creative or graceful. However, as one of my favorite sayings from Zimbabwe reminds us, “If you can talk, you can sing; if you can walk, you can dance.” It’s all about letting your inner light shine. The second aspect of this announcement that might be overlooked is the partnership that has formed between the Academy, Catamount, and other cultural institutions—the Fairbanks Museum and St. Johnsbury Athenaeum, to name two. As a coalition, these organizations are working to keep the arts alive and celebrate creative inspiration during these economic hard times. This coalition not only provide fun and creative activities for local youth, but also give community members and artists a space in which to let their lights shine.

Finally, we ended Chapel with Kayla Davis doing something she had planned to do for almost a year—cut her hair. As a tribute to her aunt, who was diagnosed with cancer, Kayla launched a Locks of Love campaign that encouraged people in the community to
grow out their hair, cut it, and donate it to an organization that turns it into wigs for cancer patients. First, Chef Paula Bystryzycki, Kayla’s advisor, read a list of top ten reasons you should donate your hair, as Kayla’s cousin cut her hair on stage. Then Chef invited Jenni Laferriere, her advisee who had come up a couple inches short of being able to donate her hair, to come on stage to cut Chef’s hair. Dozens of others throughout the community, some of them young men who had received permission to grow their hair out, donated their hair that day. Just stop and think about the love that compelled Kayla to dream up and advocate for this Capstone, the empathy that others felt in supporting her, the closeness of the advisee-advisor relationship evident in Chef and Kayla and Jenni, and the spreading of one young woman’s light to brighten the darkness of so many cancer-ravaged lives. Do you feel the same sense of gratitude, inspiration, and hope that I feel?

This kind of thing happens here all the time. I often say we have too much good news to fit in our newsletter, and I am sure that we miss many opportunities to celebrate, be thankful for, and be inspired by the goodness of the people around us. But as Ellen reminded us, every day is set before us an open door to enter into relationships with some amazing people, each possessed by their own multi-colored and beautiful inner light. I just hope I never stop taking the time to notice.—Tom Lovett, Headmaster