August 2016

Dear Members of the Collegiate Community,

I typically begin this letter with some reflections on my team, the Boston Red Sox. While I am watching and listening to more games and rising and falling with the team, I admit to feeling somewhat uncomfortable spending time on baseball when so much is happening in our nation and the world—matters of fundamental importance. Let it suffice to say that the Red Sox play 44 games on the road in the second half of the season—that does not bode well for a successful season. I hope I am wrong!

I begin this letter with some updates on the building and our planning for the move. I will then turn to the 2016 Presidential Election and share some of the reading I have done this summer. I conclude by revisiting remarks I made at the Middle School Moving Up ceremony regarding kindness.

My colleagues and I knew that the summer of 2016 would be filled with numerous conversations about our move to 301 Freedom Place South. In this letter I wish I could share with you a firm, set in stone date for our move—I cannot do that at this time. We will know much more about our schedule in the fall. With that said, the building is coming out of the ground; as you travel on the West Side Highway, evidence of our building becomes more prominent each day as the steel is erected, floors are being poured, internal walls are going up, and elevator shafts are taking shape. In early fall the building’s façade will be installed. All of this progress is tremendously exciting.

To prepare for the move, we engaged a consultant who specializes in moving large organizations. We introduced her to the faculty in June, and at that time she explained the importance of being diligent in “purging” our respective offices and storage areas. In the final days of our meetings, faculty and staff made a tremendous first effort to do just that and, as a consequence, we filled record numbers of dumpsters as well as creating boxes for donations.
While this is, perhaps, the least glamorous part of the move, it is a critically important part of the process. As a next step, we will develop teams to insure that all spaces in our current buildings have “owners” who will be responsible for packing and unpacking their respective spaces.

The other move-related initiative includes work with our architects on furniture; we will add to the samples that we had the past year and bring more samples to the school this fall before making final orders early this winter. We are also working with C+G Partners to develop final plans for the building’s interior spaces with a specific focus on school culture through the use of artifacts and other art work to insure that the space is distinctly Collegiate, albeit in a modern building.

Beyond the logistics and details of this move, my colleagues and I are mindful of the more ineffable elements of this transition—feelings of loss, discomfort with the unknown, and questions about the school’s culture and values as a consequence of the move. The conversations leading up to the move have provided many in our community with opportunities to express their concerns and questions—and their feedback has been immensely helpful in our planning to insure that we are as attentive as possible to the full range of concerns about the move and protecting the school’s “soul.”

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The jarring news of this summer, national and international, has been troubling and often profoundly unsettling. The fact that we are also in the midst of a presidential campaign makes this moment: that much more consequential—and fascinating. My suspicion is that the boys, regardless of their age, will be curious about the candidates, matters of race relations, and foreign affairs. I recognize that I have neither the standing nor the expertise to comment on the election or candidates. With that said, I felt inexorably drawn to reading about politics and democracy this summer, perhaps as a way to gain increased perspective and insight. In what follows I will share my brief summaries of four books that captured my interest by providing me with some deeper understanding of where we are, how we got here and what we might do to change our political discourse.

**Toward Democracy: The Struggle for Self-rule in European and American Thought** by James Kloppenberg is a study of democracy “from Periclean Athens to Gilded Age America, Victorian England, and the French Third Republic.” At the heart of Kloppenberg’s thesis is the idea that “Democracy has been—and remains—an ethical ideal rather than merely a set of institutions. It requires the willingness to allow differences to persist, a commitment to toleration that has long dissatisfied idealists.” Kloppenberg emphasizes the importance of personal generosity and working through differences without personalizing such disputes. He dwells on the idea of deliberation and its centrality in democracy: “We cannot know, or impose on all persons, a fixed and unitary conception of the truth. In a democracy provisional truths
emerge from the process of free inquiry, from the verification of truth claims in experience, and from democratic deliberation understood as the means of provisionally resolving remaining disputes. The English verb “deliberate” derives from the Latin deliberare, meaning to weigh well, to consider; that activity lies at the heart of democratic culture.” He frames such negotiating with the idea of “reciprocity” wherein “treating all persons with respect and weighing well their aspirations and their ways of looking at the world.” Democracy demands conversation and, according to Kloppenberg, “it thrives when individuals must articulate the reasons for their commitments; it withers when individuals retreat to unexamined willfulness.” It is conceivable that Kloppenberg would point to our current political environment as one in need of more reciprocity and deliberation—and less unexamined willfulness.

In American Maelstrom: The 1968 Election and the Politics of Division, Richard Cohen argues that the political environment we have now is the direct result of the 1968 presidential election. Cohen contends that the 1968 election “... fundamentally changed the way Americans think and talk about politics today.” Cohen carefully unpacks Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society and his escalation of the Vietnam War and how they set the stage for the 1968 presidential campaign—and the persistence of those 1968 themes to influence politics, forty-eight years later. “By Election Day, Richard Nixon, Hubert Humphrey, and George Wallace,” Cohen claimed, “competed to lead a nation sharply divided by race, culture, age, and class.”

According to Cohen, 1968 marked the beginning of the strong anti-government language for the Republican Party and the embedding of concepts that have influenced subsequent presidential elections: “tough on crime,” “strong and resolute,” “defenders of cultural values,” and “small government.” As a consequence of this framing, “voters showed greater interest in national security, crime-fighting, cutting taxes, smaller government, and the amorphous but potent question of morality and values.”

Voters in 1968 were responding to what the National Committee for an Effective Congress described in a report to its democratic constituents: “At all levels of American life, people share similar fears, insecurities and gnawing doubts to such an intense degree that the country may in fact be suffering from a kind of national nervous breakdown, a depression of the national spirit.” Perhaps that language is exaggerated in the context of 2016, but Cohen makes a persuasive case linking our current political climate to the election of 1968: “The 1968 election marked a turning point in the nation’s politics and in the relationship between the American people and their elected leaders. It began the move away from New Deal-style liberalism to the rhetorical embrace of antigovernment conservative populism...” We heard echoes of those themes during the recent Democratic and Republican Conventions.

While Cohen links 2016 to 1968, John Burt’s book, Lincoln’s Tragic Pragmatism, uses the Lincoln-Douglas Debates and Lincoln’s leadership to provide a different but relevant perspective on American politics. Burt notes that his “... aim is to examine the means that American political culture, a political culture committed to an ethos of compromise and deal-making, brings to bear upon deep moral conflicts that can be neither evaded nor compromised away.” Burt’s analysis consistently refers to evidence of Lincoln transcending personal animus to remain
focused on principles: “Lincoln had to hold both love and rage at arm’s length. Lincoln had to resist the attraction of rage, its promise of cutting the Gordian knot of complexity and complicity, and its promise of cathartic regeneration through violence.”

In addition, Burt invokes Aristotle’s idea of “phronesis” in explaining Lincoln’s leadership: “Aristotle means by phronesis an intuitive know-how, guided by principles and not dictated by them, about how one lives out a life in light of those principles. Phronesis is intuitive but principled in exactly the way that any act of judgment, such as connoisseurship, is intuitive but principled.” In the context of Lincoln’s political and practical wisdom, Burt also notes “the politics of consent functions much less well under conditions of polarized ideological conflict, in which every issue inscribes deeper lines of division.” To overcome such conflict, Burt calls for political leaders with wisdom that is practical and capable of dealing with morally complex matters—transcendent leaders like Lincoln as evidenced by this passage from his First Inaugural:

I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our natures.

With Lincoln in mind, Burt argues that a president can transcend the messy and heated back and forth of the gritty details of policy to identify and articulate broader principles, ones that can unite people by making “… an appeal to the opponent’s best self, a way to resolve a conflict by making a commanding appeal to shared values.”

My final reading, Fractured Republic by Yuval Levin, provides yet another contextual perspective for our present political climate. The heart of his argument is that our current political narrative is enmeshed by nostalgia for what people experienced (or believed was experienced) in the post-war years in the fifties and early sixties: “Our frustration is driven in part by a failure of diagnosis—a failure of self-knowledge, which in turn is rooted in a widespread nostalgia for midcentury [20th] America. The nostalgia distorts our understanding of where we are and how we got here, thinking blinding us to some features of the present. It keeps us from seeing the good as much as the bad, and persuades too many in our politics to double down on tired formulas...” We are trapped, therefore, by a continual longing for an idealized past and, as a result, our political conversation is constricted, static, and seemingly binary.

According to Levin, we can move forward and transcend our “political dysfunction . . . by seeing modernization . . . as the means to national restoration.” Moreover, Levin suggests that “there is an alternative to this perilous mix of over-centralization and hyper-individualism. It can be found in the intricate structure of our complex social typography and in the institutions and relationships that stand between the isolated individual and the national state. These begin in loving family attachments. They spread outward to interpersonal relationships in neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, religious communities, fraternal bodies, civic associations,
economic enterprises, activist groups, and the work of local governments.” At the heart of his solution is the idea of “subsidiarity” which Levin defines as “... the entrusting of power and authority to the lowest and least centralized institutions capable of using them well. “Levin’s alternative is to provide a way to manage between “radical individualism and extreme centralization” via close and constant face to face interactions, at all levels in our communities.

In the weeks and days leading up to November 8, there will be much discussion, some intensely passionate, about the issues and candidates. While a common trope, this election is consequential and that will not be lost on the boys. It is an opportunity, as a teacher, to prompt them to think deeply about the issues, candidates, and their own emergent guiding principles— their political true North. It is a time for adults to question and probe. Perhaps one of these books will be a catalyst for such conversation in our homes or classrooms.

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At the Middle School Moving Up ceremony in June my brief remarks focused on kindness. I share them here with the hope that they will remind us all of the power of our kindness has on others.

Be kind. Be kind. Be kind.

A number of years ago I was drawn to the following definition of kindness by Margo Silk Forrest: “Kindness is the wise use of the heart. It takes wisdom and heart to notice when someone needs our help and to see what kind of help they need.”

“Wise use of the heart.” I know that there are people, beyond your family, who you regard as kind—as utterly and unambiguously kind. What is it about their “wise use of the heart” that makes such a significant and positive difference in your life?

My hypothesis about their impact on you: They pay attention to your needs. They are eager to be helpful. Their instinct is to build you up, to focus on the positive. When it comes to you, the cup seems always half full.

I think of Mr. Murphy, my elementary school custodian. I was an early arriver to school. On winter days Mr. Murphy let me in and we would sit in the lobby and talk. He always had something positive to say. He took an interest in my interests. And he was infinitely patient with my questions about his job and the school. I think, too, of my high school teacher and coach, Peter Capodilupo, whose enthusiasm and undivided attention during our numerous daily conversations demonstrated his care and regard for me. His boisterous greetings and warm smile made my day, even when the days were not so great. And even now, decades later, when I
see him—it is the same thing. Saying his name makes me smile and is a constant reminder of the extraordinary power of kindness.

I know you have people like Mr. Murphy and Cappy in your life. . . . friends, teachers, and staff at Collegiate and those beyond the school. I hope that you will be that person in many people’s lives—that your “wise use of your heart” will enrich the lives of others.

I end with the words of Henry James: “Three things in human life are important: The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. And the third is to be kind.”

Have a wonderful August. See you all soon.

Warmest regards,

Lee M. Levison

Enclosures:
2016-17 Calendar
Bios of New Faculty/Staff
Collegiate Connect Login Instructions
Welcome to Collegiate Connect
Magnus Health Forms
Parents’ Association Safety Patrol Letter
Safety Patrol Instructions
PA Bookmark
PA Important Dates List/Bargains for Boys Flyer
A Parent’s Guide, Community of Concern