



Convocation

A celebration the 93rd school year opening

Friday, August 25, 2018

Keeler Theater with grades 5-12

A few words before we begin the school year.

I would like to speak to you about spider webs. I am sure many of you have seen these creations in the trees, the bushes, and on the ground at Country Day. We certainly have a few in the Broadwell House.

To me, these structures are works of art. I would hold a dew-covered web bathed in the morning sun up to any of the pieces hanging in Cincinnati's amazing art museums. Webs have also made appearances in literature - perhaps the most famous spider of all time, Charlotte, used them to save the life of her friend, Wilbur the Pig.

But a spider web is also an incredible machine. It's a trap more effective than any human hunter could ever create. Strong enough to hold a desperate insect, but flexible enough to bend with the wind. And, a web has a sophisticated communication system-- the subtlest vibrations in the intricate network of strands can trigger an alert with amazing precision.

What does this have to do with us? Quite a lot, actually. Clifford Geertz, a famous anthropologist, described a human being as "an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself [or she herself] has spun."

We are like spiders, but *our* webs are made of human relationships, not filament. In fact, today you have already been spinning. A conversation about last night's homework? A thread was made. A shared experience standing in the amphitheater? Another thread. A snapchat message you just sent to your classmate? One more thread woven into your growing web. Our interactions are acts of constant spinning and with each passing day, you expand your own distinct web.

Now, what about us, as a community? Do we have a school-wide web? Sure! While a bit harder to imagine, it is just as real and just as unique. And it's important because this collective web is our school's shared culture.

Within our community web, will this be a year in which each student grows to her or his fullest potential? A year in which each learner, regardless of age, is known and nurtured? A year in which each student can feel respected and valued? These questions are not hollow, rhetorical devices – these questions go to the core of Country Day’s guiding principles.

The school’s culture, its web of interactions, is fundamentally important to achieving these goals. It has been said that “culture eats strategy for lunch,” which is just a fancy way of saying that a network of healthy relationships fosters success, and without it, a community can be left dangling in the wind, like a web whose silky threads have snapped. That is why we must proactively work on creating relationships that will support us in the year ahead.

So back to the spinning of your own personal web. To do so, you need to think practically about the blueprint for your web, the materials you will use and how you put those supplies together.

First, you need to design a structure that serves a purpose. Regardless of where life may take you, networks of friends and connections will be crucial for help and backing. Look to your right or left. Could this be a future business partner? I would suggest assembling a network of relationships that is both wide and rich in diversity. This year, will you spend time with known friends or will you reach out to individuals with different interests and opinions? Yes, you have heard the truism to “get outside your comfort zone,” but what about getting outside your usual connections and relationships? It does not come naturally and takes intentional planning.

Next, you will need to think about the quality of the materials you use in building your web. How will you make sure your connections are strong? Can people trust what you say? Can they count on your word? An expert carpenter can spot a weak piece of lumber with a glance and many times people can do the same with others. A moment ago, Mr. Brant had helpful guidance for us about the importance of civility. The school’s handbooks contain guidelines for developing a culture of character and serve as important guideposts for the formation of healthy relationships. Imagine making your daily connections through interactions based on integrity, respect, responsibility, courage and compassion. A tall order? Maybe. But a fail-safe way for you to build relationships that will stand the trials of the school year to come.

With a plan and good materials, you are ready to build. One of the best ways is direct communication with other individuals. Old fashioned face-to-face conversations in which you can communicate with both words and many other non-verbal ways. An expression on the face can, at times, mean far more than the words we proclaim. What about technology though? Doesn’t the world wide web make it possible for us to create webs of significance far larger than generations before us? Yes, but connections through our smartphones can also create threads that are different. Not better, not worse, just different. I would say though, that the threads you create through digital communication are sometimes easier and can even be inauthentic if cloaked in anonymity. The best relationships can be hard-going and require the work of

navigating difficult conversations. Take the more challenging route, where necessary, of speaking face-to-face to your friend, teacher or parent. Your web will be stronger and of higher quality if you do.

Country Day is an amazing place which has long respected and celebrated scholarship in a warm, inviting community. This year let us commit to spinning a collective web – a collective culture – that shows anyone who comes into our home what a family of learning looks like.

Thank you!