

Gifts
Upper School Chapel Presentation – November 13, 2009
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Good morning. It's been about seven years since I've volunteered to take the microphone during a chapel service — far too long for sure. Very early in the school year, I asked Father Scrutchins if I could give a talk during chapel at some time this year and today's chapel service has presented that opportunity. Today, I want to draw upon some of the remarks I made seven years ago and add a few new thoughts about what I hope the opportunity to attend Holland Hall might mean to each one of you.

First of all, a question. If I asked you to create a metaphor for the school year, or for your career at Holland Hall, what metaphor would you choose? While you think about your answer, let me share a metaphor that I hear applied far too often.

In the spring of 1998, a little over 11 years ago, I attended my daughter's graduation from Bryn Mawr College. Some of my memories of that ceremony remain quite vivid — the beautiful day, the huge tent that had been set up to keep us out of the sun, the fact that each one of the 400 graduates had her name read as she walked across the stage. My most vivid memory, however, is the short speech given by the class valedictorian. This young woman stood up, walked to the microphone, and I remember very well the first words she spoke. She said "I would like to compare my time here at this university for the last four years to a race."

Well, I sat up and listened. I've run in more than a few races in my life and I wanted to hear what she had to say about her education resembling a race. She talked about not being able to run very well at the beginning, stumbling and falling quite often, being picked up by her friends so she could get back into the race, and being very satisfied now to have completed the race feeling like a winner. She did the best she could, in my opinion, with a flawed metaphor.

My experience with racing doesn't fit very well with what she said. After a race has started, I don't get much help from my friends; they're all trying to outrun me. I don't even SEE some of my friends — Mr. Greg Spencer, for example — because he runs off and leaves me behind. I've only seen one runner fall down during a race and he was so angry and disappointed, he didn't want help from anyone.

The major flaw, however, with the race metaphor is this one. The object of a race, in my mind, is to get to the end of it as quickly as possible. That's what a race is — make it end as soon as you can. If any of you are sitting here today simply hoping the end of it arrives as quickly as possible, I believe you have completely missed the point.

Too many people, in my opinion, spend their lives simply waiting to get to the end of something:

If I can just reach the end of the day, then I can go home.

When will Friday get here, so I can have my weekend?

If I can just get to end of school year, then it's summertime.

If I can just make it through the Upper School, then I can go off to college and have some real freedom.

If I can just save enough money to retire.

And on and on and on.

So, it is NOT my choice to view the school year as a race. A much more appropriate metaphor, in my opinion, and the word I want to leave with you today is to view the school year as a GIFT.

So let's all think for a moment about gifts. Unlike races, gifts are something we all have in common — a shared experience — and one that we repeat over and over again. We give gifts during the holiday season, for birthdays, anniversaries, weddings, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Valentine's Day... the list goes on and on. If gift-giving were banned tomorrow, thousands of stores would simply have to go out of business. I don't know how many gifts I have given or received in my lifetime — hundreds certainly. I suppose that makes me an expert on gifts, but probably no more of an expert than many of you.

I would be willing to bet that the subject of gifts conjures up some very clear memories for each one of you — hopefully pleasant ones, but maybe, like me, some memories that are a little uncomfortable.

For me, it was the anticipation on Christmas morning as a child — wondering if Santa was going to come through with every gift on my list. Later on, as a young father, watching the faces of my own children as they received their first bicycle or that new set of Legos. Later on still, worrying about whether or not the gift I bought for my brother was either too expensive or too cheap in comparison to the gift I knew I would receive from him. Wondering whether or not the look on my face when I opened that one-of-a-kind birthday present would expose my true feelings, which were, “There is no way I can ever wear this shirt in public.” Or walking into the mall with that helpless feeling — “How will I ever find just the right gift for everyone on my list?”

We all have our own stories about gifts and I want to tell you one personal story that I remember well. During the summer a few years ago, the phone rang at my home fairly early in the morning. I answered it and the caller said, “Hello, Mr. Calkins, this is Jared Lentz.”

Jared had graduated from Holland Hall just a month earlier. He had been a student in one of my math classes — a very bright and capable student, and someone who rarely spoke.

Jared continued, “Are you going to be home for a few minutes this morning? I’ve bought a gift for you and my father said he would drop it off at your house on his way to work.” I was more than a little surprised and confused. There was absolutely no reason for Jared to give me a gift. It wasn’t my birthday. He was no longer a student in my class. I had never bought HIM a gift.

Jared went on. “Every summer,” he said, “my father and I go on a fishing trip to Canada. At the lodge where we were staying this summer, I noticed this great map on the wall. I liked the map so much that when I discovered they were selling them in the gift shop, I bought one for myself. And then I remembered that you said how much you liked maps. So I bought one for you too.” There was a moment of silence before I had the chance to say thank you when, perhaps in an effort to make me feel better about accepting his gift, Jared said, “Don’t worry, it didn’t cost very much.”

I can’t remember what I did say to Jared. I hope I thanked him. I don’t even remember telling him that I liked maps but obviously, I must have. I have the map in my office now. It’s a huge map of the northern territories of Canada — so huge that I have never found a good place to display it. I take it out and look at it all the time. Great map. Great gift.

I remember this gift for several reasons. It was unexpected. It wasn’t connected to any kind of holiday or special event. And, perhaps most important, I didn’t do anything to deserve it

So, what I want you to do is to think of your Holland Hall education as a gift. And now that I consider the gift METAPHOR, it occurs to me that it’s not a metaphor at all. For every one of you here today, your experience in the Upper School is not a metaphorical gift — it IS an actual gift in every sense of the word. It costs money, somebody has paid for it, and it has been given to you.

Perhaps the metaphor game can be played if we begin to think about what KIND of gift you have been given by being presented with an opportunity to attend Holland Hall. Is it like an article of clothing? A car? An item of jewelry?

I think I have an answer to this one as well. I believe that what you have been given is not exactly a gift. It’s more like a GIFT CARD.

Yes, the GIFT CARD. That invention that saves us when we don’t know the right size to buy, or what the best color might be or when we don’t have time to really shop, or (I’ll admit it), when we’re just too lazy. But in a more positive vein, we know that a gift card allows the recipient the freedom of choice and the ability to purchase exactly what suits him or her.

I don’t know about you, but I’ve always had mixed feelings about gift cards. I enjoy receiving them but I sometimes feel a little guilty when I give one to someone. My youngest granddaughter just had her second birthday and I tried my best to find a gift for

her. She already owns every toy a two-year-old could possibly want, so I put a gift card to Border's in the mail with instructions to my son and daughter-in-law to hit the children's section and buy a couple of books by an author I know of who writes wonderful children's stories. I'm still feeling a little guilty. My son and daughter-in-law have to do all the work, but the good part is — what they choose to buy will be exactly what is right for my granddaughter.

But what about you? What are you going to do with this gift — or gift card if you will — of a Holland Hall education?

First, you have to remember that the Holland Hall gift card is not quite the same as other gift cards. On your first day in the Upper School, perhaps when you were a freshman, the gift card had already been purchased for you and your job was spend it wisely. It's a gift card that lasts for four years. It also requires some effort to begin cashing it in. We're going to make you spend part of it on some science, some English, some arts courses — you know the requirements. But you can't walk into the science department, for example, buy a little Biology, and then, oh by way, would you wrap that up in some nice paper and top it off with an A on my transcript, please. No, you have to cash in a little more off the card to make that happen — some hard work, consistent effort, maybe a little extra help once in a while from your teacher.

Some of the choices about how to spend the gift card will be yours to make. Will you spend it on a second foreign language, maybe some extra history courses, a few challenging courses beyond what is required, a role in a school production, the opportunity to serve the school or the larger community? So many choices.

As you think about these obligations and choices, I have three requests and I hope you will take each one very seriously.

Number 1 — Say thank you. Simple enough but how many of you have said thank you to whomever has given you the opportunity to attend Holland Hall? Who bought the gift card? This shouldn't be too difficult because I know you to be a polite group of young people. I hear you saying thank you all the time. This thank you is an important one though, because this gift you have been given is huge and, we all hope, life-changing.

Number 2 — As you begin to “buy things” with your gift card, please remember that what you are buying truly is a gift. Which faculty members helped you to become a better writer? Whoever they are, they are a gift to you. Who taught you how to be a problem-solver or how to express and defend your opinion? Another gift. Who provided you the opportunity or gave you the inspiration to perform, to compete, to create, to serve your community. All of those are gifts as well. Who spent all that extra time with you helping you to understand what you found difficult or giving you advice and counsel to help you through a difficult situation? What astounding gifts those are. Who challenged you to give your best effort and then raised the bar even higher the next time? Another precious gift.

And number 3 — And this an important one. Spend everything on the card. I don't know about you, but when I receive a gift card, I spend the whole thing. I don't let it expire with even one cent left on it. And, you have to remember that the Holland Hall gift card is one of those cards that has an expiration date on it.

For the seniors here today, the expiration date is not too far in the future — Wednesday, May 26, 2010, 7 p.m. to be exact. That's the date when the gift cards expire for all the seniors in this room. What a shame it will be if that date arrives and you walk across the stage at commencement filled with regrets because there is still money left on your card — too much time wasted, opportunities missed, too little effort expended, too many expectations unfulfilled.

The good news, of course, is that I know that so many of you here today know what a precious gift you have been given, you know how to say thank you, and you are busy every day spending your Holland Hall gift card — and that when the card expires for you, every cent of it will have been spent.

In closing, one final reminder. In the same way that I was not entitled to a gift from Jared Lentz simply because I was his teacher in a math course a few years ago, none of you should feel you are entitled to the gift of a Holland Hall education. You are quite simply among the fortunate few who have been given a precious and maybe even undeserved gift, or gift card — if you will — with the expectation that you will say thank you, and that you will express that gratitude over and over again by spending every cent on the card — that no portion of the gift will have been wasted, thrown away, misused, or taken for granted.

Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for your kind attention and I wish for every one of you in the remaining months of the school year, a long list of high accomplishments, and the pride in knowing that you have taken advantage of your own gifts and the gifts that have been given to you.