

DEERFIELD

JUNE 1971

THE HEADMASTER SPEAKS



David M. Pynchon

One of the most impressive moments of Commencement was the Headmaster's Report to the Parents at the Deerfield luncheon. Many of those present thought that it should be shared with others so we are sending it to the entire Deerfield family.

ROBERT CROW
Secretary of the Alumni

Later this month, Janet and I will pile our four daughters into the station wagon and head for Colgate and then Denver, Colorado, to attend a pair of Headmasters' conferences before we take a vacation camping trip into Colorado and Wyoming. At such conferences,

headmasters start all conversations with the cliché question: "What kind of a year did you have?" *Normal* people ask, "How are You?", but headmasters ask "How was your year?" *Normal* people answer "Fine," and go on to other topics, but headmasters launch into monologues.

What kind of a year was it? I can tell you what I had hoped it would be: I had hoped it would be one of consolidation of gains—tying up the loose ends of so many new programs, of the expanded curriculum, of proliferated social programs, off-campus projects, the thousand-odd plans and activities which needed pulling together. That would have been bliss, to catch up on the details of endeavors which had left us all—students and faculty—exhausted a year ago. Some of that, of course, did take place—but that alone would have been too kind a world for these days, I am afraid. Instead it was a year of pretty intense introspection and self-evaluation—not the quiet kind of personal and even institutional introspection that I can indulge in later in the peace of a camping site, but rather the energetic, vital, challenging kind that involved a large number of people, and in a very healthy way.

It took many forms and explored the validity of boarding schools in general and Deerfield in particular. It started last summer with stray articles in *Time Magazine* and the *Wall Street Journal*. They were concerned with the declining applications and consequent financial plight of many boarding schools. We hadn't experienced the application decline that particular year, but our remarks were taken out of context anyway.

Then, early in the fall a rather vitriolic book called *A World of Our Own* came out of the Choate experience—an important book, but badly written—repetitive, inconsistent in tone and style, inconsistent rhetoric—and yet it had a few important and many insignificant things to say. The prime review said little about the book but

used it as a launching pad for the writer's own bitter views of the American socio-economic-educational scene. But it questioned sorely the validity of the American preparatory school, especially the boarding school.

Throughout the year, however, we have undergone our own consciously sought self-evaluation: we have had a series of events or projects of our own which involved this self-questioning, these attempts at self-understanding. First, since we began our actual planning of the proposed new science building, a committee of faculty and students have met weekly with the architects and a science-planning consultant to examine present and future science teaching and its building needs, all in the context of the educational goals and philosophy of Deerfield itself.

Second, several times this spring and once in the fall, we asked our senior class officers to speak at alumni and parent gatherings to describe and appraise the full spectrum of their education or experience at Deerfield—academics, student life, athletics, social activities—an overview. They were tactful and kind, probably even restrained, but also very bright, perceptive, and helpful.

Third, as the school launched into its own study of coeducation, it was perfectly clear that we wished to explore the question singularly in terms of Deerfield, not merely boarding schools in general, and that, of course, demanded its own self-examination of Deerfield today in the context of societal changes. For that, we gathered a task-force of alumni, parents, students, faculty, and administration, plus two wives of alumni.

The next project of self-scrutiny to come upon the scene was probably the best effort of the lot—most perceptive study of all: publication of the book *A Sigh of Change* by two of our seniors, Rory Cowan and Lee Phillips. Indeed, I could best answer headmaster-colleague summer questions if I simply gave out copies left and right. I am personally profoundly moved by the book for all its strengths. Indeed, the only fault I could find was Rory's use of a picture of me that has bruised my ego badly—that one of me playing goal in hockey—making a save, to be sure, but in horrible form. Rory and I talked about that: I told him I thought it was a dirty trick to use a picture exposing such poor form, but he assured me that *all* the pictures they took of me that night came out the same way!

These formal exercises of self-examination, however, say nothing of the many rap sessions in the dormitories, apparently at the dining tables, in the classes, certainly in faculty meetings—ideological warfare it was called in

The Sigh of Change; guerrilla warfare I'd call it if I believed all I read today in the *Scroll*. But some real insight has come forth from the year's exercises. In an interesting way the statement of goals and purposes which we will shortly present to the Trustees is not nearly so important as the very process, the thought-processes, which have gone into it. My recall of all of this hangs on a series of memorable phrases and thoughts expressed in all this search.

Lee Phillips, for instance, got at the heart of Deerfield when he talked about Deerfield's sense of community: "the kind of community—based on a real respect for the values of others, a fine awareness of the individual, and an unequaled sense of friendship—that can be secure amidst uncertainty."

Jon Rosen, in that session exploring goals, stated that to him Deerfield was "the River, the Rock, and People." The River—joy? exhilaration? freedom? I can only guess—we don't go to the River very often. The Rock?—that's the one up on the top west side of Pocumtuck Mountain. What does it mean? heights? a spectacular view? silence? where better can one listen to silence? and People—very much so—Deerfield is People.

And as I look back on the year, I do indeed think of people, and I think of the many ways I have seen them living and learning and growing this year. I think of the rare, unbridled, creative energy of those in Hitchcock, and those in McAlister III who so discouraged us at the buffet supper at our house and who so totally renewed us with the Christmas party Lee told about in the book—though I hadn't connected the two events until I read it. I think of a dozen other dormitories, each with its own special dynamic of human interaction—Wells III, Ashley, Barton, Pocumtuck, and difficult, difficult Plunkett. I think of that special dynamic which can develop between senior proctors and the boys with whom they work and live in underclass dormitories; an example—though it may embarrass a pretty modest guy involved, Andy Campbell.

It was a serious incident in which a boy in Andy's dormitory suffered a critical, indeed a crippling, attack of asthma in the very early hours one morning this spring. Andy acted swiftly and correctly—calling the infirmary to alert them that he was bringing the boy over, and then literally carrying the boy to the infirmary. From there, they rushed him to the hospital in Greenfield where he went into intensive care, and where he recovered fully in several days. We might not have been so fortunate if it had not been for Andy.

The following is from a letter the boy's father wrote to Mr. Kolster and me shortly thereafter.

"Enclosed is a check made out to Andrew Campbell, who so gallantly helped my son during his time of distress and carried him single-handed from the dormitory to the infirmary.

"During these times we hear so much about the wrongdoings of the younger generation and there is much criticism about it. On the other hand, I strongly believe many good deeds are performed such as Andrew did. Unfortunately, they are never acknowledged. Please in some way announce his good deed to the students, and also please hand him this small award in their presence. The purpose of this is not only to express my gratitude but also to express appreciation of his spirit in helping his fellow student. I think this should be encouraged. With best wishes."

And I know of the dynamic which takes place among many of our students and some of the exciting teachers of our faculty. I think of that crescendo of pride and excitement which developed during the Glee Club concert and full-school singing at Spring Day several weeks ago. And I think of the band under Ward Pennebaker's leadership—they weren't a marching band this year partly because they were short of drummers. Approaching Memorial Day, we had some very delicate town-gown relationships, strained a year ago in a flag incident. We learned that the South Deerfield band was refusing to come to Old Deerfield unless ours would come down there and march with them. And our band responded, practiced, and were ready to swallow their own pride to help the school heal that earlier breach.

It was a year of intensified cultural interest, highlighted, I think by the very personal dimensions of the Arts Festival and by the series of visiting poets brought to the campus by Mr. McGlynn. It was the reality of the presence of these people which helped get us involved — in the Arts Festival, it was the series of craftsmen who got in there with us, up to our elbows in clay, leather, or paints, and that led to the seniors' class gift to the school of the ceramic kilns as well as the new trees to replace our dying elms here in Deerfield.

And the poetry reading: I think many of us that evening with Richard Wilbur caught and played with his phrase from one of his poems: ". . . a moment's perfect carelessness." But our Deerfield students, too,

during the Arts Festival had a reading of their own poetry, and offered glimpses of their own insights.

And we had our own version of Outward Bound develop here this year — we called it "Encounter" — a microcosm of experience, the meeting of a human with another human, a human with an adversary, or a human with himself. And the pilot group in the fall asked the rest of us to come see and take part in the experience. A few of us did, and so learned something fine about them and something humbling about ourselves.

And I think of one Sunday Sing after which a group stayed at great length to probe and argue in their search for the wholeness of man, not through the speaker's fundamentalist look backward for biblical data or proof, but rather looking forward and inward to their own humanism.

I think too, of that phrase tossed almost carelessly to us by the wife of an alumnus at our meeting on "Goals and Purposes," as she suggested tentatively that part of what Deerfield instilled through its experience was the male characteristics of "aggression and compassion," and I guess that's true. I think of course first of hockey or football, soccer or lacrosse — clearly aggressor sports — but I also think of the qualities of compassion in some of those who play them. Andy Campbell was a darn good football player. And interestingly, I think also of that undefeated golf team who almost lost their undefeated record in their final match but who charged back to win in the last several holes. Did you ever try to play golf without that balance of strength and gentleness?

What, then, has been the year? What kind of year did we have? It was a year in which *the River*, *the Rock* and *People* took on full significance. It was a year of "aggression and compassion." It was a year filled with moments of intense self-evaluation, and yet a year of "moments of perfect carelessness" — "The experience of an unequaled sense of friendship."

It was a year in which Deerfield exercised, as Lee Phillips said, "Its privilege of self-evaluation, which is so necessary if there is to be the kind of thought that will produce the kind of action that will produce the kind of society we desire." It was a year in which we of the faculty have had a rare privilege of working, living, and growing with some remarkable young people, your sons.