

Statement on Spirituality at Deerfield Academy by Jan Flaska, Dean of Spiritual and Ethical Life (2022)

A few weeks ago, on a Second Visit Day, one student was walking with a speaker in his backpack, with music playing.

I asked the student to please turn it off, so that visiting families would feel welcome to engage with us in conversation. The student politely said, “no problem.”

This interaction brought me to consider the impact of technology on our students, and, for me, reaffirmed our good work to regulate the frequency with which it intrudes into their (and our) lives.

It occurred to me: Some time long ago, the song that the student might have substituted the speaker for was whistling. Yes, whistling.

Many admire someone who can whistle a tune well. Whistling, as a sort of breathing exercise, is available to all of us. The act just needs some practice in the proper setting in order to bring it to existence – whistling asks for the discipline of attentiveness, and silence.... Silence, not the absence of sound, but being present with sound. This is Snow White’s wisdom: You can whistle while you work.

Technology does not restrict one’s ability to learn to whistle, or master it, but the noise from the speaker, the phone, and the laptop needs to be filtered in order for one to discover that a) one can whistle and, in time, b) one can whistle well – maybe even well enough to be celebrated in the presence of other whistlers and non-whistlers.

Whistling is a craft. Whistling is Spirituality at Deerfield Academy.

In this community, whistling is not in the curriculum, though some may note that, in the early incarnation of Deerfield Academy and its Protestant Christian informal affiliation, it used to be.

Whistling is not in our Mission.

Not every student whistles and, importantly, not everyone in this room whistles – we recognize that there are many other worthy pursuits.

Nevertheless, and as an example, we should admire the fact that the Evensong, on Sunday nights, sung as a full community, brings us to a settled moment where we come together in shared harmony, literally honoring past tradition and future aspirations. This is not the fullest presentation of whistling, but it’s close.

We, as mentors attentive to the moral, spiritual and whole formation of our students, know that we can provide space and support for our students to whistle, even if we cannot whistle, or choose not to do so, or even when choosing to instead sing, dance, or speak.

We have hundreds of students here at Deerfield Academy that have learned to whistle, and seek to improve this craft... and they value opportunities we provide to hone that simple gift.

We have dozens of students here that do whistle well, even in the presence of others.

In supporting the effort to “encourage each student to develop an inquisitive and creative mind, sound body, and strong moral character,” a setting to practice whistling, with adults and friends who celebrate that gift, is a collective pursuit of worth.