



DEERFIELD ACADEMY

## **Seek To Learn That Which Cannot Be Taught**

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**Baccalaureate Address**  
**May 19, 2024**

Good afternoon, Deerfield. As we conclude our Deerfield Days and approach Commencement, I hope to offer a perspective that encourages reflection over the next week. Instead of starting at the beginning, I'll start at the end: I suggest that you seek to learn that which cannot be taught. That's it. Now you can ignore me, because my lesson is that most of the interesting stuff is probably not learned in schools. Thanks! We're done.

In truth, I have more to say. I didn't have time to write short remarks; thus, you get to sit through the long version. Throughout my life, I've explored teaching and learning—sometimes as a learner, sometimes as a teacher, ideally inhabiting both roles simultaneously—meandering back and forth, like the Deerfield River on a lazy summer day. I would say that at Deerfield we have a pretty good educational program; however, when I think back over the most important things I have personally learned, I suspect they are nowhere to be found in any course catalog. It's quite interesting, because I know that good and deep learning *does* occur in our classrooms, but some of the best and most important learning isn't explicitly in a teacher's lesson plan.

I intentionally use the 'paired imagery' of the interplay between two different inter-related ideas, like *teaching* and *learning*, because this allows us to explore some topics by setting the conceptual boundaries. Neither *yin* nor *yang*, by themselves, is the truth; but perhaps the truth can be somehow interpolated between, or extrapolated beyond, these poles. Thanks in advance for wandering with me.

Also, why not have some fun at Baccalaureate? I've learned over the years that, at Deerfield, you can get murmurs of affirmation from the audience, if you share profound-sounding statements. The best method is to use the rhetorical device of anti-parallel restatement. For example, 'true wisdom is knowing that you know nothing.' [pause] Thanks for playing along.

I'll also get a two-for-one by invoking the wisdom of a famous and learned person to bolster my own position. Murakami said, "The most important thing we ever learn at school is the fact that the most important things can't be learned at school." [pause] Good job—keep it up.

From a thematic perspective, much of what I have to say will seem incoherent; however, the persistent form will be that of the Janus-like pairing of two ideas. Janus seemed fitting for today; just in case you don't know, Janus is an ancient mythological figure, presiding over beginnings and endings; the past and the future; the idea of duality. Incidentally, as the god of comings and goings, Janus is also the god of doors.

I should point out that the binary approach has limitations. Very rarely is the binary sufficient to map out all possible space and it may constrain your thinking. I encourage you to think beyond the binary. *After all, there are at least three kinds of people in the world, those who can count, and those who can't.*

### **Questions & Answers**

I hope all of you can count by now. After all, we seem to inhabit a world that rewards getting the right answer. Ironically, some of the best learning I've observed occurs when students aren't giving answers, but when they are asking questions. While answers are important, many of the problems we encounter have perfunctory solutions, easily solved by algorithmic AI. The real value-add is *not* in finding the right answer but in *asking the right question*. The best Deerfield classes are environments that foster the asking of questions—the more the better.

Questions can be uncomfortable. Questions imply that you don't know. Questions mean that you have more work ahead of you. Answers feel better, both when you give and receive them. However, if you think about the best learning that can be done—the learning that is productive, meaningful, and engaging—you will find there is a question, problem, or challenge that you simply can't leave alone. I like to call these 'splinters in the brain.' Trust me, splinters in the brain are good things. An answer tends to be a terminus, leaving no room for additional discovery and discussion, while a question invites partnership and portends a learning journey. A journey that might take you there and back again like Frodo and his friends: "All that is gold does not glitter; Not all those who wander are lost." (Tolkien)

When we give answers, we highlight our cleverness and conclude conversations. I posit we can be more effective together by asking more questions. We should ask tough ones. We should craft them jointly. We should refine and clarify them. We should make sure

they are meaningful. In doing so, we open conversations, invite dialogue, and we learn together—the work of a school.

### **Knowing & Not-knowing**

What is it that we're even learning? To be honest, I don't quite know. *There is no map of the future.* This is likely uncomfortable for you—Voltaire reminds us that “Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is absurd.” What I can say is that I really enjoy spending time with people who are seeking the truth. I am allergic to people who claim they have found the truth.

Empirical falsification, of the kind described by Karl Popper, and used by real scientists, does nothing to tell us what the truth is. Empirical falsification can only tell us what the truth is *not*. In my youth, I was amused to hear non-scientists claim, ‘science has proven, such and such’. Science cannot do that.

Science can only construct falsifiable hypotheses that can be disproven by clever experiment. If one cannot accumulate evidence to disprove a hypothesis, *then* the hypothesis is still in the running as a model for describing reality. Think about this very carefully; the best scientists spend all of their time thinking about how to convince people they are wrong, not that they are right. By failing, they succeed. If you have a belief that you are actively trying to tear apart and it is still standing, you may have something worth sharing.

Now that I'm an old man, it does not amuse me to have non-scientists invoke science to justify their positions. This is dangerous. This is taking advantage of a known shortcoming of our meat-computer. You and I are human. We like certainty. Each of you will need to figure out, on your own, how to deal with this; however, I offer the tools of ‘not yet’ and ‘for now.’

Reality is unstable and in flux. Kierkegaard is famous for saying ‘Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.’ When you are uncertain and make a self-limiting declaration, use the ‘not yet’ affix. For example, ‘I don't understand any of the math we went over today.’ Well, ‘not yet.’

When you are too certain and filled with high self-confidence, thinking you know how the world works, employ the ‘for now’ affix. ‘This is what I know to be true.’ Well, ‘for now.’

I strongly advocate updating as you go along. One of my favorite poems is by Delmore Schwartz, ending with a couplet I find most profound: “Time is the school in which we

learn, Time is the fire in which we burn.’ For you chemists out there, I invite you to consider the similarities between combustion and cellular respiration. Burning, always burning . . .

Understand that the ability to change your mind when you get new information is a ‘superpower.’ This power can manifest in a variety of ways—perhaps quantitative methods such as Bayesian statistics or qualitative methods such as journaling. Dickinson highlights the path: ‘dwell in Possibility.’ These are simple tools to keep an open mind and preserve the possibility for additional nuanced learning. This will enable you to be more effective and make fewer mistakes, regardless of what priorities you choose to follow.

### **Playing to Win or Playing to Play**

The immortal bard told us that ‘All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.’ I don’t want to demean or trivialize all of your hard work and achievements, but it’s kind of a game, isn’t it? Or at least one can use the idea of games to frame the act of living.

James Carse has a fabulous book, entitled *Finite and Infinite Games*. Like a punch to the brain, he starts with, “There are at least two kinds of games. One could be called finite, the other infinite. A finite game is played for the purpose of winning, an infinite game for the purpose of continuing the play.”

We live in a competitive world that is frequently framed as zero-sum, despite the evidence to the contrary. All the finite games that you play, and might play, are built on the arbitrary rules of the contest. “All the limitations of finite play are self-limitations.” Make sure you are playing the right games and make sure you are keeping score with the right scoring system. Also, never forget that every finite game requires an opponent—another entity to play with. It saddens me to think that we live in the age of the so-called ‘mic-drop’. To say your piece and then to walk away leaves too much of value on the table. To do it with bravado is simply wrong. Murakami said “Always remember that to argue, and win, is to break down the reality of the person you are arguing against. It is painful to lose your reality, so be kind, even if you are right.” Even if you are right, for now.

Anyhow, an infinite game is one in which the purpose of the game is to keep the game going. We can do this via collaborative meaning-making, through productive and perpetual conversation. There is no need to win an argument or debate. Keep the game going, and going, and going. To declare a winner, the game must come to a conclusion, to an end. For my part, I’d rather keep playing than win the game of life.

## **Addition & Subtraction**

Sometimes less is more. Lao Tzu shared, “To attain knowledge, add things every day. To attain wisdom, remove things every day.”

## **You & You**

Interestingly, I offer my remarks in English. It is a language with limitations, and I was a horrible French student; thus, I essentially have no choice but to use English. Yes, the French would characterize my ability as *horrible, horrible*. An oddity of the English language is that the second person singular pronoun is ‘you’ and the second person plural pronoun is ‘you,’ unless you’re from the south, then the plural is y’all.

You are an individual and you are a collective. That collective, if you allow room for it, could expand to all of humanity. When playing games, it is more fun to have someone to play with. Invoking modern mythology, I’ll simply share that the great triumvirate of Superman, Wonder Woman, and Batman are unrivaled in their respective domains; however, they choose to be on a team together. Trust me, if these three feel like they need to be on a team with friends, so do you. Furthermore, if you think the world is zero-sum game and you need to win by conquering your enemies, then I remind you that Abraham Lincoln offered the master-strategy by providing a question, not an answer: “Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?”

However, I do guide you to make sure you choose your friends judiciously. Over time you will become the average of your five closest friends. Make sure they are more capable than you are, so that you can learn from them—never let them know you’re bringing the average down. Related to this is my belief that an effective relationship is one, in which, through no malice or ill-intent, both parties think they are getting the better end of the bargain. For my part, I have been, and continue to be, the beneficiary of many relationships. I can only strive, strive, strive to give as much as I receive.

I should be clear on two items. Number one: The point of a relationship is NOT to gain advantage—it has its own value in simply being. Number two: I was an OK French student. Saint- Exupéry gave us the answer in *The Little Prince*. “Here is my secret. It is very simple: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.” *Vraiment!*

Well, our time together grows short—*it is the fire in which we burn*. In a very unscientific way, the mind seeks meaning where there is none, I will do the same by fabricating meaning through the lens of time. When I first came to Deerfield during the summer of 2011, most of the Class of 2024 was beginning their journey of formal education by starting kindergarten. What a journey! Additionally, you (or y'all) started your high school adventures in the fall of 2020. Those were tumultuous times, but you came to understand that the only way forward was through. Tolkien shared this sentiment.

*“I wish it need not have happened in my time,” said Frodo. “So do I,” said Gandalf, “and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.”*

Some of you have hung on for the duration of these remarks. I'm grateful for both your time and attention. Next week we'll celebrate your hard work and growth. We will do so not as an ending, but as a beginning; as a *commencement*. For my part, I hope that these remarks have put you into a reflective mood for the next week. I actually don't hope that I've 'taught' you anything today, for if that were the case it would mean you haven't truly wrestled with any of these ideas. Instead, I simply hope that I've kindled in you a burning desire to seek to learn that which cannot be taught.

Thank you.