

As we start this year I want to take a moment to speak of community. I know there are many reasons you, as students, are here: to grow as curious learners, to prepare well for college and life beyond, to explore your interests.

But the first thing we do together each year is build a community. The strength of this community is what undergirds everything else we do. It is what allows all the magic to happen here. And we believe that our community is at its best when everyone belongs, and everyone makes a difference.

This community is, for many of you, the most diverse community you have ever lived in. We differ from each other in many ways: race, gender, culture, sexual orientation, political views, religion, athletic and artistic interests – I could go on. This diversity is actually essential to building a vibrant community. We are actively curious about one another, we do not make assumptions about each other, and we get to know and understand different perspectives.

The diversity of our community is a strength because we work hard to be sure that everyone belongs here. This belonging takes place in many informal ways – lending a helping hand, laughing together with friends, being inclusive in our interactions, seeking the best for all. It also happens in more formal ways. Ours is a community where we gather together in the morning – in this room – for morning meeting, and we gather together in the evening to share a meal at family style dinner. We are intentional about how we get to know and understand each other, how we build community.

This is also a community where everyone matters. This plays out in a number of ways.

For example, returning students may remember that we are revamping student council this year to be a more proactive voice shaping the student experience at White Mountain. In brief, we will have steering committees focused on the academic program, the co-curricular program, the residential life program, technology, faculty hiring, among others – and these committees will be made of teachers, students, and administrators. We believe that students should be at the table when we are discussing improvements to our program. Student council will function as a gathering of the student leaders who serve on these steering committees.

Another way everyone matters here at White Mountain ties back to our Episcopal Heritage. The Book of Common Prayer asks us, “Will you strive for peace and justice among all people and respect the dignity of every human being?” “Respect the dignity of every human being.” When we are at our best, this is what we do. I want to take a moment to explore this phrase a bit.

First, let me note that while we draw on our Episcopal heritage to highlight the importance of this phrase, it is not limited to religion.

For example, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights begins:

*“Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world, ... “*

“Respect the dignity of every human being.”

The word “respect” means to re-see, to see again – the prefix “re“ meaning “again” and “spect” deriving from the same root as spectacles (glasses).

Dignity refers to our intrinsic worth. We are each born with dignity – as the universal declaration of human rights puts it: inherent dignity. This is not something that has to be earned, it is inherent.

When we are asked to “respect the dignity of every human being” , we are asked to re-see, to look again at everyone’s inherent worth

We will explore this in our own community this year, and I believe it will make us stronger as individuals and as a school. I also hope that exploring this will help us all engage in the world with more curiosity, courage and compassion.

Looking at some events that made national news over the summer, I sense a breakdown in respect for each other’s dignity. There was a contentious, divisive confrontation about inclusion at Evergreen State College in May. How might that have turned out differently if everyone involved worked hard to respect the dignity of all – those they agreed with and those they did not. What about in Charlottesville? What about Google’s lurching steps toward toward a more inclusive, supportive workplace?

And I also look to the flooding in Houston and the towns nearby. This gives me hope, as I read about so many reaching out and helping –clear acts that honor the inherent dignity of all. And it leads me to ask, what is it that I should do when there is a distant tragic event? – and how do my actions flow from a commitment to respect the dignity of every human being?

So let’s begin the year in this spirit. – Yes, let’s work on being curious learners, and yes let’s work on preparing for college. But let’s not forget that the community we build should be a model for all, a community where everyone belongs and everyone makes a difference, a community undergirded by our commitment to “respect the dignity of every human being.”

Thank you for being here.