

Chapel Talk by Elisabeth Anderson

Last fall, on a day that was a bit balmy for November, I stood on our soccer field, under the watchful eye of Cummings House, scowling. I was mad.

The girls on my team were moving through a simple drill: the goalie punts the ball, two players battle for position and possession and then go to goal. After a handful of girls had shied, screaming, away from the meteor-like soccer ball, I stopped them, used choice words in addition to calling them chickens, and I put myself into the drill, declaring that I would show them what I meant. As expected, our goalie punted the ball into orbit, and I took off. When the ball was about twenty feet from impact, I realized, with horror, that I had gone too far forward for the ball to land at my feet, as intended. When the ball was about ten feet from impact, I changed my course and prepared to trap the ball with my chest, instead. I opened myself up, **SHOW THEM**, and as I did so, the ball hit me so hard, square in the face, that it broke my glasses and drove me backwards into the ground. When I sat up, I saw that my team and co-coach had joined me on the ground. And together we cried with laughter.

Now come back with me, to my 4th form fall at Groton. Prior to this time, I had always been a straight-A student— had always been complimented on my writing.

When I turned my first essay in as a Groton student, I was extremely confident in my work. So, a week or so later, when Mr. Harmon, a kind, spectacled sage, placed my essay on my desk, my heart dropped and a cold sweat broke over me. 64 was written neatly in pencil at the top of the page. And at the end of class, sensing that my airways were on the verge of collapse and that my body had already gone numb, he stopped me before I left the room. He looked at me sympathetically, and, putting his hand on my shoulder, said “my dear, I’m afraid you don’t know how to write.” Insulted, I nodded, mustered a fake smile, and ran to my dorm. I cared little about my grade but was stricken by the fact that a truth I had held with certainty had suddenly become untrue. “My dear, you don’t know how to write.”

Shortly after we had gotten our essays back, Mr. Harmon emailed me, suggesting that I spend my free blocks working with him on grammar worksheets- an appealing offer which my ego ignored. The same grading fiasco happened for our second essay. And it wasn’t until I had once again flirted with failure that I accepted his offer and began the slow, tedious work of self-improvement (which, it turns out, happens in one’s free time).

In the fall of my sixth form year. I was a dorm prefect, and a club head, and a varsity athlete and a captain, and I was wholly uncertain as to who I was and where I fit on this wobbly orb. In my English Expo class, I wrote honestly, for the first time, about my uncertainties, and my teacher, Mr. Goodrich, responded thus: “Elisabeth, your paper has four addendums: the cover sheet, the note to me, the second cover sheet, and a second handwritten note. Such things point toward one profound truth: you wrestled with a very tough issue here, and this paper stands for your having ventured far out onto a limb or far into your thoughts— same thing either way. For that courage, I will gladly clap until my hands are thoroughly numb.”

By the winter of my sixth form year, my writing had finally found that subtle balance between craft and analysis, and I was certain about where I was going, not only in the following September but in life in general. In one of my last English electives, there were seven of us. As far as class chemistry went, we were a quick and thoughtful group, and we had grown lazy. One day, Ms. Rennard walked into our classroom and cried “CAN YOU BELIEVE IT? What did you FEEL??” Unfortunately, none of us had done the reading. We tried for about a minute to pretend, but she knew. Her glee turned frigid. “who did the reading?” she probed. We all looked down at our notebooks, unable to answer or make eye contact with her, hoping that someone else had. On a good day, Ellen Rennard was warm, sharp, cunning, and intimidating. Angry, she was silent and terrifying. She let us sit in our own panic for a few minutes, before she took her place at the head of the table and said the most chilling three words I remember from high school: “How. Dare. You.” At this point, we were wetting ourselves and thinking up our wills. She quietly boomed again, this time incredulously: “How dare you?” We thought she was mad at us because we hadn’t done the reading. “How dare you sabotage yourselves like this. Nobody gets this chance— this is bigger than you are. Think about everyone who has ever sacrificed something for you to have a seat, here. You are the best and the brightest young scholars in the country and perhaps the world, and you have the nerve to show up unprepared. I’ve already read the book; I know what it’s about. You, on the other hand, have merely sabotaged yourselves. How could you not do the reading? It was fourteen pages!” Our eyes were glued to our notebooks and to each other’s shoes. “How dare you have such little respect for yourselves and each other. Read.” And with that she left the classroom. We sat in silence and we read.

What I couldn’t possibly have known, until I was a bit older, was that when Ms. Rennard had said to us “how dare you,” what she had meant was “I love you.” When Mr. Harmon had said “my dear, you don’t know how to write,” what he had meant was “you have unlimited potential, and I want to help you tap into it.” And when Mr. Goodrich had written that “he would clap until his hands were thoroughly numb, for my courage” he meant exactly that.

And so, nearly a decade later, when I found myself on the ground, on our soccer field, on a day that was a bit balmy for November, with my eyes running, either from pain or embarrassment, I laughed at my incredible failure and knew well enough to take the hand outstretched to me and rise to my feet.