

Chapel Talk by Kate Kelderman

Dean of the Chapel

How will you fill your backpack?

When I was a kid the beginning of a new school year was always greeted with eager anticipation. As children growing up in Virginia, we always spent our summer well, in search of greatness; the kind of greatness that lives in childhood memories: like establishing the longest winning streak for Kick-the-can, creating a network of secret pathways in the neighboring empty lot, building strong durable summer feet (perfect for walking on hot sand and gravel driveways), catching fireflies, seeing a shooting star, learning to whistle with a blade of grass, and much to our mother's dismay procrastinating our summer reading until the last possible moment... Not that a Kent student would do that,... right? As kids there is no doubt, that we used our summers up, but by the end of August all four of us were ready for the rhythm of school. Even my brothers felt the same way, although no one could get them to say it out loud. We yearned for structure.

And nothing says structure to an eight-year old like a backpack filled with school supplies! Right? I can still remember the trip to the store before the first day of school. We'd pile into the station wagon each of us armed with our list, and my mom in her infinite patience would usher us through the A&P to pick out our supplies. Our lists were similar; we all needed a box of 12 color Crayola crayons, wide-ruled spiral bound notebooks, #2 lead pencils. But Ethan was older so he always got to buy the more interesting items before the rest of us, like pens and college ruled paper.

Once home with our supplies for the year, we had to arrange them in the backpack, and that always took some doing, 'cause not everything fit. We had to make choices. Crayons, pencils, and the art supplies were always included. They were absolutely necessary from the beginning of the school year. So you see from an early age, we learn that choosing what to put in our backpack is important.

But you know what, what we leave out is equally important.

Several years ago author Bill Bryson he wrote a book entitled "A Walk in the Woods" in which he described his attempt to hike the Appalachian Trail. Bryson chooses to tackle this adventure with his curious friend "Katz." Now what is really interesting is that even though these two men travel together, they didn't pack together. So when they arrive at their campsite after the worst 7-mile journey either had ever taken, they discovered some gapping holes in their supplies. Much to Katz dismay, Bryson had left the Little Debbie cakes on the shelf in New Hampshire. And Bryson was equally disturbed that they didn't have cheese, summer sausage, or coffee filters, on hand, since Katz had flung them off the mountaintop several miles back in a desperate fit to lighten his load.

What we carry with us makes a difference on our journey.

So... what's in your backpack? Here we are at the beginning of another school year, with a world of possibilities stretched out before us. What are you going to take on your trip?

Certainly here at Kent there are some obvious things that we think are valuable to include. Self-motivation and initiative are on that list. They are critical in forming you to be self-reliant and purposeful. It is also important that you possess a genuine willingness to engage this community and be in relationship both with your peers and the faculty and staff. It is these relationships that will shape and form you. We also want you to carry with you a great deal of respect: for the wide variety of humanity that shares this campus with you,.. and for the ground upon which you walk, the environment in which we live.

But you know what there are other less obvious traits that are that are equally necessary.

If you are going to be self-motivated and possess great initiative, then you also need to include courage and a sense of adventure. But that also means you will have to leave behind your fear of failure, ...because fear is too heavy an item to include in your backpack. It is the surest way to stop you dead in your tracks.

If you are going to possess a genuine willingness to be in relationship, then you also need to include a willingness to be vulnerable. There will be times when you share a part of your heart with the people in this community. But carrying vulnerability and means you will have to leave behind your control issues, and trust that others will hold you gently and with compassion.

If you are going to carry with you a great deal of respect, then humility needs to be included as well. Humility gives us the ability to respect the divine that exists in each and every human being, and the holiness of God's creation. And we will have to leave behind arrogance that causes us to claim privilege over people we do not understand and the abundant resources of creation.

These are the foundational qualities that you need to include, but there is space for other things as well, others to include. For me ... faith in God and a sense of humor are vital. I could not imagine traveling this road of life alone, and furthermore I couldn't do it without the ability to laugh at my mistakes. And my hunch is, that all the adults in this community have a list of essential qualities they dare not leave behind. And perhaps you do too, or at least you are beginning to have an idea.

Choosing what to bring and what to leave behind is important. It will affect your journey. So be intentional in what you choose to include. Pick those qualities that are life giving and community building. Leave behind anything destructive.

Take some time during your day to think about those qualities that are important for you to bring along, and furthermore think about those traits that are better left behind. Because how you pack your bag makes a difference on the path you take, both here at Kent and beyond.

What's in your backpack?