

Endurance as Heroism

The Cum Laude Address of Professor George D. Gopen '63

The Headmaster introduced Professor Gopen at the Cum Laude Exercises on April 24, 1990 as follows:

Our speaker this morning is a six-year veteran of the Class of 1963 at the One True School. At R.L. he lettered in basketball and tennis, was president of the Chess Club, sang in the Glee Club, played hymns on the piano for hall, and won the mathematics prize and the Greek declamation prize on Exelauno Day. He then went on to Brandeis, where he was an English major, and where he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. In 1972 he received his Doctorate in Jurisprudence from the Harvard Law School and three years later his Ph.D. from Harvard in English. After teaching in Utah and then Chicago he went to Duke where he teaches Chaucer, Shakespeare, and the History of Rhetoric, and where he invented and directs that University's world-renowned writing program. He also finds time to travel all over the U.S. (in fact, all over the world) as a consultant on legal writing to law firms and governmental agencies. He has written literally hundreds of learned articles and several books. His latest book is an annotated edition and translation of the Moral Fables of Aesop by the fifteenth century Scots poet Robert Henryson.

His achievements in the academy make us proud to claim him as our own. Will you join me in welcoming back: Professor George David Gopen?

Cum Laude; with praise. I am pleased to offer my congratulations to those of you in the graduating class who have achieved this Latin distinction; but I hasten to add that I have come here to praise not only the *cum laude* honorees, but all those whom I consider the true heroes of the Class of 1990. I use the word "hero," however, not in its ancient conception. Now that the twentieth century is turning towards its close, I hope we have learned from its terrible wars to abandon that older concept of the hero — the individual who rises to some great occasion to act in a way greater yet than the occasion itself. Today, dragon-slaying, in all its many manifestations, should be restricted for the most part to the athletic field. There we can enact it in a metaphor of last-minute heroics that can fulfill our fancy without destroying anyone else or setting ourselves up for future disillusionment.

I think the essence of heroism is to be found not in acute action, but rather in chronic endurance. The real hero in our day is not the person who can conquer the momentary evil, but rather the person — or the school — that can hold up over the long haul. The entire Class of 1990 has accomplished significantly heroic feats that mirror the accomplishments of Roxbury Latin itself: You are here; you have been here; you have done all that you have been asked to do; you have grown; you have, slowly, come to understand; you have endured. Having done so, you are all heroes, and I salute you as such.

Enjoy the moment. Take a deep breath and pat yourself on the back. Come September, the next long haul begins.

I graduated from this venerable School in 1963. I can't claim that I walked long miles in the snow to get to school (although that actually did happen once); nor can I tell you stories of suffering through the Great Depression of the

1930's. (Those were the significant "when-I-was-young" stories people of my generation had to listen to from our predecessors.) But the R.L.S. I attended was in many ways a different one from yours. In a recent *Newsletter* that is sent to alumni, Mr. Jorgensen fielded a number of questions about those similarities and differences. This morning I want to share with you some of my experiences here so that you may compare them to your own. I have chosen them to illustrate some of the most significant things I learned here.

My six years at Roxbury Latin were the longest twelve years of my life. (My classmates and I were also true heroes.) I won't call those years the "good old days." They weren't. Nor were they the "bad old days." They were just *our* old days. We had five required years of Latin; we had only one significant elective choice in the entire six-year curriculum (in the Third Class we got to choose between Greek and Biology); we wore the mandatory coats and ties; we had eighteen minutes for lunch; we had three minutes for recess. I remember it well. What did I learn?

I learned important things from Mr. Bridgess in Sixth Class arithmetic. I remember an assignment to find circular objects at home, to measure their radii and circumferences, and then to perform some enigmatic mathematical function upon those pieces of data. I didn't come very close to discovering the value of pi, as he had intended. The wastebasket I used was badly dented; the ash tray just ever so slightly oval; my twelve-inch ruler not nearly as accurate as a tape measure would have been. I learned something that day about precision. I learned something about perceiving the patterns in intellectual carpets. I also learned that re-inventing the wheel is one of the best ways to learn something about wheels.

Mr. Bridgess taught us to interpolate. What fun. We were actually ordered to *guess* the answers, not to figure them out. All those who turned in "correct" answers like 56.42 failed the homework; those of us who guessed roughly 55 did well. I've used the latter approach a number of times every week since then.

But most importantly, Mr. Bridgess taught me something astonishingly profound, about all kinds of situation-assessing and problem-solving. He growled this one growl at us over and over again while returning our homework and exams — "When you arrive at an answer, you must ask yourself, 'Is it *reasonable*?'." There are whole professional disciplines that would disappear if everyone understood the value of Mr. Bridgess' favorite growl.

I had Mr. Rehder for history. We were all impressed with his astonishing consistency. Although we tended to grumble about it to each other, I suspect we were also a bit comforted by it. He always wore a bow tie; in winter he always wore a vest, often plaid, as I recall; he often bought a new automobile, but you could never tell when, since it was always the same automobile — same make, same model, same color. The "old" one was always in such mint condition that the "new" one would be quite indistinguishable to the eye. I thought of him with real concern on the day it was announced that Volkswagen had discontinued making its Beetle model.

Mr. Rehder was also consistent in his work habits, in *our* work habits, in his pedagogical approach, and especially in



The new inductees of the Cum Laude Society pose with Professor Gopen and with the president (John Davey) and secretary (Joseph Kerner) of the society: Left to right: John A. Davey, Patrick E. Benzie, Thomas A. Leveroni, David L. C. McMahon, Liam D. Craig, George D. Gopen '63, Benjamin A. Hochberg, David J. Rosenfeld, Peter Arias, Sean K. Murphy, Stephen P. Dudek, Joseph R. Kerner, Jr.

his discourse. He would often begin important sentences with the word “presumably,” investing it with heavy, swooping emphasis on the “-sum-”; I think that word taught me a great deal about history itself. I got to wondering *why* he relied on that particular word — especially at the beginning of sentences, where it contextualized everything that was to follow. Why, I wondered, did he so often *presume*? Surely he should have *known*. After all, he was the teacher. That was the whole point of history, was it not? — to get to *know* everything of importance that had happened in a previous era? Why should he so qualify these important statements? I think my intellectual journey away from givens and towards hypotheses, away from pre-judgments and towards investigations, away from received truths and towards interpretations — that long and significant journey may well have started from wrestling with Mr. Rehder’s “presumably”’s.

Mr. Whitney taught us the sciences. Mr. Whitney scared the living daylights out of us. Sometimes that was good, and sometimes it wasn’t. On the one hand, it invested the subject matter with an appropriate air of mystery; on the other hand, it made some of us feel that science was quite beyond mortal mastery. I imagine that those of us who considered dented wastepaper baskets and oval ashtrays circular had more difficulty with the sciences than others. (By the way, I chose Greek.)

But I do remember two things in particular that eventually shone clearly through the mists. The first was part of his opening lecture in General Science (Fourth Class). I don’t remember the exact words, but it ran something like this: “The material is difficult. If you’re confused, I’ll try to do something about it. If you’re bored, I can’t help you.” At the time, I took it to be a ready-made indictment for all those of us who might happen not to be enthralled by his particular subject. Eventually I realized there was much more to it than that. He was challenging us, I think, to take

responsibility for our own intellectual curiosity. At first I had thought he was telling us not to be bored with General Science; later I realized that he was telling us not to be bored with the complexity of existence and the challenge of thought.

The other Whitneyism that has stayed with me made yet a deeper impression. It came at the beginning of his Chemistry course (First Class). He held up a wooden representation of a molecule — with its dowels branching off in all directions to impale and support atomic spheres. As we began to work into our receptive minds that this was how all molecules actually *looked* (give or take a few dowels or spheres or constructive angles), he warned us that this was not reality; it was just a model. It was not *the* way molecules looked or were structured; it was just *a* way in which we might contemplate molecular structure. He told us not to forget that. I haven’t. My primary professional interest at the moment has me developing a new way to help people better control written language. I think I’m onto something exciting, a real breakthrough. When people press me for scientific proof that my theories are based on linguistic *truth*, I tell them I have no such proof and that I will seek out no such proof; I am presenting them with a model. Where models are concerned, the primary question ought to be, “Does it *work*?”

From my Greek teacher, Dr. Van Courtlandt Elliott, who unfortunately for you died before your time here, I learned the all-penetrating significance of metaphor. To study Greek with the good doctor, you had the delicious pleasure of transporting yourself to his natural habitat — the Classical Study. (We didn’t move around a great deal in those days. The masters came to us — but only in a logistic sense.) In the Classical Study you sat in Harvard chairs and looked down at an aging oriental carpet and sensed in the air (on a warm day) that slight sulphuric hint that you were in the presence of venerable but disintegrating books.

As a teacher of Greek, Dr. Elliott was wonderful and awe-inspiring (which none of those barbarian biologists would ever get to discover). I remember him as being about 5'4", with greying hair parted in the middle and combed down on either side like rams' horns. He commuted every day by public transportation (with several transfers) from his home in Cambridge on that most appropriate of streets, Appian Way. We did not know at the time that he was (or was to be) the president of the American Medieval Academy and was nationally known and respected as a scholar. We just knew he was special.

He managed to teach me about metaphor by using his favorite prop — a ping-pong paddle. Yes, in those ancient days, corporal punishment was still a part of the education here — metaphorically, of course. One day when it was my turn to recite and translate — Xenophon, probably, or maybe Herodotus — I came to a horrifyingly inexplicable passage, impossible to construe, but disconcertingly like one encountered in class just a day or so before. As I stumbled around in the text with increasing anxiety and decreasing comprehension, I could sense Dr. Elliott stiffening. He reached for his ping-pong paddle — the dotted rubber padding previously ripped from its surface, leaving a scarred open wound on its wooden face. He emerged from behind his protective rostrum. (It protected us, not him.) He took slow steps towards me, brandishing the paddle and menacingly growling "Gooooo - pen." This did not help my concentration or increase my mnemonic powers. Had I not already been sitting down, I would have sat down. He arrived in front of me. One last chance. No effective translation made itself available to me. Dr. Elliott ordered me to put out my hand. He raised his paddle high — I remember it trembling in mock rage — and brought it down with a dramatic swoop to a position one-quarter of an inch above my hand. There it stopped, for an endless moment. Then with almost inconceivable gentleness, it lightly tapped the back of my hand. He returned to his rostrum.

I had seen that show before. I knew what was coming. I knew what was and what was not at risk. I knew physical violence was absolutely not a possibility. Still, the metaphor worked.

I believe that on most of the occasions in life when we are faced with articulating things of fundamental human and interrelational importance, we do it in the form of metaphor. "The thing itself," if deep enough, usually defies explicit utterance; if it were that immediately available, it would somehow not really be profound. To understand metaphor and all its workings is a lifetime's struggle; to explain it to others is a full-time profession. That was my original justification for becoming an English professor.

Frederick R. Weed was the headmaster during my years here. He seemed a stuffy sort, but not essentially objectionable. I rather liked him, but never said so to my classmates. (After all I was a rather stuffy sort — but not essentially objectionable.) In the entire six years, I can remember him indulging in only one public moment of levity. One morning in Hall, he chose to reprimand the entire student body on the subject of our production of paper planes. He had found one lying about in the hallway; but its quality as litter did not bother him nearly as much, he told us, as its lack of quality as a paper plane. He held it up. "Look," he sermonized, "at the sloppy construction. The nose is unsymmetrically produced, making flight erratic if not impossible. And look at the paper from which it has been made: heavy Block Number One. Now anyone should

know that to make a really fine plane you must use extremely thin paper — like the pages from a phone book." Now if *that* side-splitting anecdote has stuck with me all these years, you can imagine what his general level of public levity must have been. From my delight in the paper plane sermon, I probably learned something significant about contextualization and relativity.

I had many moments of personal interaction with Mr. Weed because I was one of the school pianists who accompanied morning hymns in this very Hall; but the most dramatic (and I think profound) moment happened in my interview with him during my process of applying to the School. There I was, eleven years old, sitting in the most formal office I had then yet encountered in life, being asked all sorts of probing intellectual and aesthetic questions. At one point Mr. Weed produced a photograph of the statue that still graces the front lawn of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts — a Native American warrior, sitting on his horse, holding his arms out and lifting his face to the heavens directly above him. Mr. Weed asked me if I recognized the statue. I did. (We all had cultural literacy back then. Television was only a few years old.) He asked me: Given the posture of the rider, what time of day do you think it is? I had never considered the point till then. I decided with confidence that it must be noon: The man was opening his face fully to the sun above him in a glad acceptance of the warmth of the day and of the fulness of life in general. Mr. Weed was visibly surprised and, I think, disconcerted. You see, I had gotten the "answer" "wrong": It was supposed to be twilight or evening, with the warrior's gesture signifying an acceptance of the approach of death. It was Mr. Weed's disconcerted surprise that meant so much to me. I somehow understood that even though for him there was a "right" answer, and that mine wasn't it, that I still had a *right* to my answer — or at least that my answer had enough substance of its own to pull the rug out (momentarily) from under the authority figure that was supposed to be interrogating me. I not only *had* thoughts; I had a *right* to thoughts. They made me a differentiated individual. I am convinced that Mr. Weed did not intend to teach me that; but I am equally convinced that his response was genuine. He actually listened to what an eleven-year-old had to say.

But from all my experiences at Roxbury Latin, I think there was one recurrent one that taught me the most.

Was it the discipline of the place? the 8:15-to-1:45-or-2:30-classes-and-then-to-compulsory-athletics-and-then-home-to-an-hour-in-each-of-four-or-five-subjects-for-the-next-day-with-papers-and-exams-extra? No. I don't believe in discipline as an abstract, nor as a mental muscle to be developed and kept in shape.

Was it the small classes, with all that personal attention? No. Personal attention, in those days (and, I understand, *not* in these days) was more a police action than a manifestation of interest in who we were. There was great interest in who we were supposed to become, but not enough in who we were. More than half of us couldn't adapt to that atmosphere; we began with 47 students and graduated 22. That also has changed, and I think for the better.

Was it the constant emphasis on the sanctity of education, the reverence for the past, and the deep respect for knowledge? No. Those were good things; but together they only come in second.

The recurrent experience that taught me the most was recess. You will recall that I mentioned we had three minutes

for recess — from 10:12 to 10:15 each day. Our masters were pretty good about letting us out on time. They were also pretty good about getting us back in on time. Some of them were downright militaristic about this matter. That extraordinary recess, five days a week, thirty-six weeks a year, for six years, taught me how to expand time by increasing my consciousness and my concentration. I learned that if I could recognize every bit of life from 10:12 to 10:15 as it went by, every little bit, fully, then those three minutes offered a freedom unbounded by anyone but myself. With 1,080 recesses to practice in, I got quite good at it. It changed my life more profoundly than any other single thing I experienced at this school.

When I read Thornton Wilder's wonderful play, *Our Town*, in our First Class English course, my recess experience made me appreciate and cherish one moment of it in particular. In the small New Hampshire town of Grover's Corners, Emily has died, has gone to heaven, and has received permission to revisit earth for a day, to see what life there had been all about. She chooses her sixteenth birthday. But even before that day's breakfast is concluded, she is too pained by what she sees to remain on earth any longer.

She perceives that no one really sees each other or talks to each other or recognizes the person-ality of each other. They all look so blind, deaf, and dumb. In conceding the visit had been a bad idea, she decides to cut it short and return to her grave on the hill. But before she leaves, she indulges in a farewell that is symbolic of the way she wishes she could have lived her life. She says,

Good-by, Good-by, world. Good-by Grover's Corners . . . Mama and Papa. Good-by to clocks ticking . . . and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths . . . and sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you.

She looks to her guide and asks, "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? — every, every minute?". He answers, "No. [pause.] The saints and poets, maybe — they do, some." Recess can temporarily make you a saint, or a poet, and, in the long run, a hero. From one hero to a whole graduating class of heroes, I greet you with praise (*cum laude*), send you congratulations and good luck, and bid you not farewell, but fare forward.

“Rejoice, We Conquer”

An Address by Dr. Carl Scovel

The Rev. Carl Scovel, Minister of King's Chapel in Boston, delivered the following address to the School on April 12, 1990, the Thursday before Easter and the Boston Marathon (which fell on the same long weekend this year):

In exactly four days, three hours, and 45 minutes begins an annual spring event which unites the people of our metropolis in a single spirit of fascination and enthusiasm. And I don't mean Easter. Marathon weekend is coming up, and on Monday at noon begins the running of the 94th Boston Marathon. May I remind you of the origins of this event?

In 490 B.C. the citizens of Athens learned that the armies of Darius had landed to the north and were marching south to destroy their city and take them captive. Athens sent a meager force of ten thousand soldiers led by Miltiades to occupy the hills around a two-mile plain called Marathon. From that vantage point, to theirs and everyone's amazement, they routed the Persian armies and afterward sent a runner named Pheidippides, a former champion of the Olympiads, to bring the news to Athens. Pheidippides ran 22 miles to the city limits and before he fell down dead from exhaustion cried out to the waiting Athenians, "Rejoice, we conquer."

In 1896 the Greek government celebrated that event with an international foot race run over the same course which Pheidippides ran 2,386 years before, and to the delight of his countrymen a Greek peasant named Loues won that race with a time of two hours, 45 minutes, and 20 seconds. In the very next year, 1897, Boston inaugurated its own race of 24 miles, stretching the distance to the present 26 miles, 385 yards in 1927. And what a race it has become, *the* race, the big one, "the Boston."

I saw my first Marathon in 1954. There were 314 runners in that event. A Finn named Karvonen won with a time of two hours, 20 minutes, and 54 seconds. (Twenty years later over 90 runners came in under that time.) I doubt that there were more spectators than the 10,000 official and unofficial runners who will take part this year. I remember standing on Lenox Street in the rain with a bunch of old men smoking cigars and waving soggy newspapers at the solitary runners as they came by. It was not the media event of 1990, but there was the same excitement, the same thrill of the race, the same charge of adrenalin when two runners were flying neck-and-neck to the finish line.

They made a movie about runners a while ago. Titled "Chariots of Fire," it described a Scot named Eric Liddell who was supposed to run the 100 meter race for England in the 1924 Olympic Games. He was a devout Christian and when he discovered that the race was scheduled for a Sunday, he refused to run. He believed that God meant Sunday to be a day of rest and he was not going to violate that commandment, despite intense pressure from the racing officials, the newspapers, and his teammates. (Strange, most of us wouldn't think twice about that.) And so on the Sunday when he was supposed to run, Eric Liddell was preaching at the Scottish church in Paris. But he did run the 400 meter race on the next Saturday and won it in a record time of 47.6 seconds. The film ended with this achievement, but I am going to tell you a little more about Eric Liddell.

He became a missionary and went to China where he taught physics, math, and chemistry to high school students. He was ordained and began to preach, baptize, and organize churches in the countryside. It was a crazy life. A war was going on involving the invading Japanese forces, Communist guerrillas, and the Kuomintang troops. Once while Liddell