A LETTER FROM VINCE

Boats Against the Current
Summer 2015

Fifty years ago, preparations were underway to enroll the first group of sixty or so students at St. Ann’s Episcopal School. Nothing was certain, other than the determination of Canon Harcourt, the Vestry of St. Ann’s Church, and the newly hired headmaster, Stanley Bosworth, to embark on an educational venture in Brooklyn Heights that had many precedents but no direct forebear, and no detailed blueprint for what the school would become. And so it began.

When many of the students, parents and teachers who participated in the first five years of the school gathered in our theater last October to reflect on those early days, we were all reminded of the leap of faith that was required to be a part of this uncertain enterprise. But it was also clear how desperately those first parents were to find for their children a school that would liberate children from stale routines and stultifying dogmas and complacent mediocrity. All of this Saint Ann’s promised to do.

This young school was not, as Stanley wrote to teachers in 1970, a “prim paradigm of educational innovation.” Rather, it was “at its best a hectic organic cell from which life achievement may be converted to creation.” More and more families flocked to join, enrollment grew by leaps and bounds, new teachers—just out of college or refugees from other schools—signed on to direct plays or chamber groups, teach English and math, run field trips and man study halls. Every action and decision was based on the premise that given the freedom to pursue knowledge, acquire skills, to seek transcendence in the arts and academics, children would blossom, driven not by competitive urges but by their innate curiosity.

And what of the Saint Ann’s of today? We have changed, certainly, as the times have changed, our neighborhood and city have changed. A school with nearly 1,100 students and more than three hundred teachers and staff is inevitably different than a school of sixty, or five hundred. Stanley wrote in these pages in 1982 that Saint Ann’s was indeed “more conservative than once we were,” but that the school “remains and intends to remain a thorn in the side of traditionalists. We are here to respond to children. We are here to poke fun at the fusty anachronisms of convention.”

That is as true now as it was then, for certain fundamental practices and beliefs remain at our core:

• We continue to believe that children are creators rather than empty vessels.
• We continue to assemble within our walls a community of teachers that is stunning in artistic vision, in scholarly accomplishment, in commitment to our mission, and in their deep and profound love of children.
• We continue to admit students of many creeds and colors who are joyful, unpredictable, curious, and iconoclastic; who are breathtakingly gifted as poets, actors, painters, writers, and mathematicians; who without grades, rewards, or prizes achieve fluency in languages, subtleties of literary criticism, and nuances of musical interpretation well beyond their years.
• We continue to believe that meaningful education involves risks both intellectual and emotional, and that our curriculum—more audacious and eclectic than any other I know—is at its best a playground for the mind and the soul.
• We continue to occupy every square inch of our buildings, with music spilling out of locker rooms, audiences packing the red stairs for concerts, children tumbling over one another—all of us, children and teachers, living out John Dewey’s creed that “education is not preparation for life. Education is life.”

And what of the future? Yes there are still barbarians at the gate, as Stanley’s letters home to parents each August almost always warned. But the vibrancy of our school, our constancy in pursuit of our mission, the strength of support we receive from parents and graduates, all suggest to me the possibility of a future that is as interesting and compelling as our past. We, perhaps more than other schools, are haunted by the idea that there was a particular moment in the past when Saint Ann’s became Eden, when it achieved an almost mystical equipoise between order and chaos, freedom and community, old and new, stasis and change. This trope appears every few years in graduation speeches, as lament or Jeremiad, in which it is declared that this is the last “true” Saint Ann’s class. As we reflect in the coming year on fifty years of history I suspect that we will find that moment to be as elusive and alluring as the green light on Daisy’s dock.

Vince Tompkins
Head of School
One of the rituals of autumn at Saint Ann’s is the parade of almost daily admissions tours. Tours for the Lower School typically begin in a room above the Kindergarten on Henry Street. There, backed by several portraits of dour Presbyterian divines on the wall behind me (predecessors of our current landlords), I endeavor or so to give the parents of prospective students some sense of what we are about, what sets us apart, what to expect and what not to expect if they choose us and we choose their child. A similar ritual unfolds for parents and applicants for admission to ninth grade, only the tours meet in whatever space we can find in the Bosworth Building before proceeding to take in a handful of high school classes.

On one high school tour this fall a parent’s hand went up in the middle of my opening remarks. For five or ten minutes I had been describing a school in which the arts occupy a central place, in which students are expected to exercise agency, take risks, make mistakes, discover themselves through literature, music, languages, to unlock passions in mathematics or science or poetry, to experience achievement and play as mutually reinforcing activities. I talked about learning for its own sake, and about our deep-seated commitment to teaching without the use of formal grades. My eager interlocutor seemed desperate to know how children whose formative years were spent in such a place were supposed to “fit in” to the world after graduation.

“I hope they don’t,” I said. Plenty of schools seem to fill that function, turning out graduates without the will, inclination or knowledge to question, to meet the world skeptically, to live in perpetual tension with it. The world does not need more of that, I said, it needs people who will seek to change it, to make it better or subvert the status quo whether by making art, or seeking social change, or simply by going about whatever profession they choose with the belief that they should not only think outside the box but refuse to accept that the box has any real legitimacy to begin with.

This question struck me with such force because it came in the context of another dismal season of political and social insanity: mass killings in Paris and Mali, the continuing epidemic of gun violence in this country (in Oregon, Colorado, California, and too many other places), the vicious demonization of refugees and immigrants among presidential aspirants, racial violence at the hands of the police. It seems to me perverse to ask that we or any school help students to “fit in” to the world as it exists now, rather than to equip them to challenge its assumptions and its orthogonies in the most profound ways possible. Even as we seek to give to each generation of students the gift of knowing what we regard as great, beautiful, transcendent, and worthy, we also strive (as Grace Dunham ’10 so eloquently described at our 50th anniversary celebration last October) to help students find their voice, that they may use it here and in the world.

Vince Tompkins
Head of School

Third grade students study the work of Muybridge and Edgerton.
The Open Road
Summer 2016

What We Live For
(Lyrics from the closing song of the Preschool Opera 2016)

This is what I live for
Baby, you’re my open road
You can take me anywhere the wind blows
Right into the great unknown
We can throw our hands up out the window
This is what we live for
–by American Authors

In June, with graduation behind us and the prospect of summer ahead, a teacher stopped by my office, and we reflected on the 50th anniversary year we’d just finished. He commented to me that one measure of the vitality and success of what we are doing was the extraordinary eloquence and thoughtfulness of each of the six senior speakers from the Class of 2016 at graduation the week before. In my estimation he wasn’t wrong when he suggested that if one had replaced the six students chosen by their peers with some other half-dozen from the grade, the perspectives and themes would have changed but the courage, candor, and intelligence of their remarks would in all likelihood have met the same mark.

This simple assertion tells us something important about a school that has no valedictorian, no grades, no lessons in elocution, no role for adults in the choice of graduation speakers. What is so powerfully evident at each year’s graduation is our students’ self-confidence, their ability to articulate complex ideas, to give voice to aspirations and frustrations, to converse easily with one another and with adults, to speak not only for themselves but for a broader collective experience.

How is it that Saint Ann’s nurtures these particular qualities? First, through our enthusiastic embrace of curiosity and exploration. You will not find a classroom at Saint Ann’s—from preschool to high school—where these traits are not nurtured and encouraged. Our teachers create structures to the day and to their curricula that guide without constricting, that embrace playfulness without sacrificing a sense of purpose or accomplishment, whether in the form of a proof, a play, or a text that students and teachers master together.

Second, we hold to a particular vision of children that prohibits the kind of condescension that can too often creep into teacher-student relationships elsewhere. An atmosphere of mutual respect, of open-mindedness towards new ideas whether they come from students or the teacher is pervasive in our school. When children know constantly and unfailingly that they are valued for their insights and their potential, that they are loved unconditionally even when they are challenged to do better, their confidence and sense of agency grows.

Third, and perhaps most important, we sustain an atmosphere of independence that is, at the least, unusual. We seek never to underestimate what children are capable of, and encourage them to challenge themselves constantly, to push through momentary bouts of fear or anxiety—whether they are anxieties born of the creative process or related to the more everyday challenges of making one’s way in the world. I do worry that the culture around us seems more and more to embrace a vision of childhood (and thus parenting) that emphasizes comfort, safety, and constant reassurance at the cost of helping children to develop the capacity to think for themselves, to confront the unknown and the unfamiliar, to navigate intellectual and social challenges on their own, to take risks and make mistakes. Bubble-wrap is a fine thing for shipping delicate objects, but it has no place in the raising of adventurous and confident children.

The metaphorical scraping of the knee ought always to have its place somewhere close to the center of childhood. We have embraced this impulse in numerous ways, most of all by sustaining a powerful dynamic in which the unleashing of each teacher’s creative impulses and intellectual and artistic passions reinforces the potential for students to discover in themselves capacities that they did not know existed. Our classrooms are many things, but they are certainly, as Linda Kaufman wrote in our Unofficial History, “a protected place, a place to learn about the past and discover the present, a place that provides our children and grandchildren with the vision to confront the unknown…the future we cannot imagine.” As we embark on our second half-century at Saint Ann’s, on a future we can imagine even if we cannot know its contours, this aspiration on behalf of our children remains at our core.

Vince Tompkins
Head of School

Artwork by Ayla, 7th Grade
The Intentional Community

Winter 2017

I grew up in a large, peripatetic family whose roots were on the southwestern fringes of Philadelphia. When I was about to start kindergarten my father quit his job, my parents sold everything they owned, borrowed money from relatives and friends, and bought a tiny marina on marshland outside of Cape May, New Jersey. Four years later we moved back to Pennsylvania, two years after that, back to Cape May. I moved in with relatives so that I could attend a high school in Delaware, and after that my wanderings were all my own.

From first to twelfth grade my education was in Catholic schools where most of the families came from a narrow demographic of tradespeople, civil servants, teachers, small-business owners, the occasional doctor or lawyer or nurse. In elementary school I thought that hanging out at my friend Carl’s—whose family had built and operated a three-story beachfront motel with a pool and a restaurant—was the absolute apex of luxury. Ethnically, my schools reflected the composition of suburban and small-town Catholic communities in the second half of the twentieth century—mostly Irish, German, Polish, Italian, English. Non-white students were barely a presence, so the racial tensions and bigotry of the 1960s and ’70s more often played out on stages outside of school, in patterns of residential segregation and employment that I only clearly discerned later. I will never forget those teachers who within this context gave me a sense of how Caravaggio, Dylan Thomas, or Richard Wright could alter how I saw the world around me.

College was a revelation. The circumscribed boundaries of my adolescent world shattered. Intellectual horizons that I’d barely glimpsed were now open to me. Long-cherished beliefs were suddenly called into question. Some of my classmates were, like me, first-generation college students, there with the help of scholarships, student loans, and work-study jobs. Others were members of a cosmopolitan American establishment—from New York, Washington, Boston, California. What happened in the classroom was formative and life-altering, but just as important was the experience of being part of a community that was ideologically, racially, geographically, and socio-economically diverse beyond anything I’d experienced before. College was my first experience of committing myself to the life of the mind and finding that I had ample company. It made all that my parents sacrificed to send me there seem worthwhile. It changed who I am and set me on a path to making education my life’s work, and it helped me to see that access to an educational environment like this could be a means to understand and overcome the structural inequities of American society.

I’ve come to realize more fully in the past year or two that the personal importance I attach to diversity and inclusion at Saint Ann’s has something to do with dreams too long deferred in my own education. When I look at Saint Ann’s through this lens I see an intentional community of teachers and students, united by a passion for ideas and art, drawn from and reflecting a city of many peoples, ready to learn with and from one another in our “fierce pursuit of knowledge, skill and artistry.” In the polarized and fearful era on which our nation appears to have embarked, this vision of Saint Ann’s seems all the more imperative.

This is not a new aspiration for our school. In its early years Saint Ann’s explicitly embraced the idea that its multitudes of gifted students should be racially and ethnically diverse. In one of the school’s earliest fundraising campaigns Stanley Bosworth placed diversity at the center of our mission: “St. Ann’s Episcopal School opened seven years ago with two overriding commitments: to develop an outstanding education for children with outstanding potential and to maintain a diversified student body reflecting the heterogeneity of the New York City community.”

In the past five years our teachers, students, and administrators have taken up the task of joining our abiding commitment to the limitless potential of each individual student with a more open recognition that race, gender, gender identity, class, and other aspects of identity play a role in how we move through the world. In weaving the tapestry of a gifted student body—composed of those we recognize not simply as students but as budding cellists and poets, historians and scientists, Classicists and coders—we have sought more deliberately to embrace the variety of experiences and perspectives that the children of the city around us can bring to our symposium. And we have sought to confront the impediments that prevented full and equal participation in that symposium from being a reality for every one of our students. In seeking new faculty we have seen how the freedom that we afford teachers to shape their curricula—Adiche in one classroom, Twain in the next—can be magnified by a wider range of backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives among the artists and scholars we recruit.

Intentionally embracing difference is sometimes hard. It is—in this historical moment at least—a countercultural move, a deliberate effort to show that the sinews of commitment that bind us one to another can hold against the tensions and misunderstandings that difference can sometimes bring. But the struggle is unquestionably necessary if we truly wish to celebrate our shared humanity. If we succeed in making ourselves fully visible to one another, vulnerable to one another, open to one another, then this school will have acted on its deepest principles to enrich the education of every child in its care and to make education a celebration of life itself.

Vince Tompkins
Head of School
Unfinished Business
Summer 2017

At our final faculty meeting of the year, members of the Music Department performed a movement from Mozart's first symphony, which he composed when he was just eight years old. Symphony No. 1 is at once stunning in what it reveals about the precocious talent of its young composer, and a mere glimpse of the more complex compositions his career would bring.

This meeting came the day after graduation for the Class of 2017. As in prior years, the speakers chosen by their classmates were poised, sophisticated, insightful in their appreciation for, and criticism of, a school that they love. And yet I doubt that anyone in the audience that night regarded them or their fellow graduates as in any sense complete or finished. One phase of their lives and of their education had drawn to a close but their journey as young adults about to make their way in the world is just beginning.

This may seem obvious, but the current educational environment seems intent on imposing on young people at this precise juncture arbitrary measurements or assessments of their worth and accomplishments. They've now achieved certain results on standardized tests. They have been admitted to some colleges and not to others. We are surrounded by and susceptible to value judgments based on these benchmarks and tempted to judge the impact of their Saint Ann's education and predict their future success based on who and what we see the night they walk off the stage.

That temptation is pernicious. We are better served—and better serve our students—if we instead accept, indeed celebrate, their state of being fundamentally unfinished. Extravagantly talented, yes! But a tidy package of attributes and accomplishments upon which anything approaching a definitive judgment should be rendered? Decidedly not. Too much living, loving, success and failure lie ahead; too many encounters with languages, science, literature, art, and the world await them. All that we should seek to claim at that moment is that we have, in the words of our long-time playwriting teacher Nancy Fales Garrett, “set them on the path.”

This attitude requires a certain kind of humility. Yes we can describe the level of knowledge acquired in history, mastery of poetic form or the critical essay in English, level of fluency in a second or third language. But we should wait a decade or two or three to take the measure of what impact a student's time at Saint Ann's will have had. We strive for teaching that touches the souls of our students, and sometimes we see it happening in the moment, but more often than not only patient waiting will reveal how their lives will be different as a result of what they have encountered here. We do not know which verse of Li Bai, which bit of scripture, which line of James Baldwin, which paragraph in a report, which conversation in a stairwell or poem in a hallway will be the thing that our students remember and recall later as a pivot point in their lives. Indeed I am continually astonished at how our teachers approach each day as though every class, every text, every proof might be for their students a moment of profound revelation.

Like our students, Saint Ann's is unfinished. That phrase took on a literal meaning this year as construction in the Bosworth Building and across the street disrupted everyone’s patterns and routines. But we are also, more fundamentally, unfinished in knowing who we are and what we will become. Each year our classes come to an end with projects, performances, exams, or a final conversation. We write our reports. We send graduates into the world. We return in the fall to begin again what can appear to be simply a virtuous circle. But this cycle masks the fact that we are constantly evolving. We are deeply rooted in and guided by our history and our shared ideals, but we face anew each year the task of deciding what it is we want to be, how we want to meet the world and how we want to equip our students to understand it. We do not seek, in either our past or our future, some perfect version of ourselves. Such a thing does not exist. Instead, within the structure of our commitment to the individual child, to banishing the useless impediments of formal grades, to celebrating art and its transcendent possibilities, we improvise each day, each moment. The French-Algerian novelist Marie Cardinal, describing her sense of anticipation (and anxiety) at a Louis Armstrong concert, wrote: “Armstrong was going to improvise with his trumpet, to build a whole composition in which each note would be important and would contain within itself the essence of the whole.”

We, like Armstrong, improvise. Each teacher, each student, encapsulates the entire ethos and spirit of Saint Ann's. We do not seek to recapitulate, but to invigorate each new performance with the same vitality and originality that informed our original composition. We, like our students, were set on a path by those who came before us. Our future direction only we can determine.

Vince Tompkins
Head of School

Lucinda, 12th grade
A LETTER FROM VINCE

Synecdoche

Winter 2018

A few days before our holiday break we gathered one evening in the sanctuary of St. Ann and the Holy Trinity for the Choral and Instrumental Concert. Just one event in a typically crowded calendar of school performances, but those two hours stand out for me as representing the best of what we aspire to be, not as an exceptional moment, but as one illustrative of the principles that inform so much of what we do at Saint Ann's.

The performers that evening spanned our Lower, Middle, and High School. I am particularly fond of those moments when we come together as an entire school, for they create an opportunity for our youngest performers to impress their older peers with their enthusiasm and artistry, and for older students, in turn, to display the increasing mastery that comes with practice, maturity, and musicality. These are the moments when bonds are strengthened across our multitude of grades and buildings, for performers and audience alike.

One could not have been in the audience that evening and have failed to be impressed by the breadth of our choral and instrumental programs. Thirty-two of our eighty third-graders performed in the Third Grade Chorus; more than sixty students are members of the Fourth and Fifth Grade Chorus, and over fifty singers are members of the High School Chorus. Each of our instrumental groups that played that evening—Consort, Brass Techniques, Cello Ensemble, Wind Ensemble, Chamber Orchestra, Brass Choir were similarly robust. Our Music Department, beginning with the classes they teach in preschool and kindergarten, make participation for even the most hesitant singers, violinists and recorder beginners a joyful experience rather than a competitive one, and students, thus enticed, then blossom as they discover their potential.

At the same time, as middle schoolers find an instrument—whether its the French horn, the clarinet, or their own voice—that they are committed to, they are encouraged by our extraordinary music teachers to pursue that passion wholeheartedly, and many of the evening’s performances offered glimpses of the emerging brilliance of those students for whom music is a focus of their lives at Saint Ann’s. Enabling students to discover their highest potential, while integrating their individual talent into the ensemble, is both a source of musical beauty and a life lesson. When I encounter some of the more recent buzzwords in education—project-based learning, maker spaces, and so forth—I cannot help but think that we have for decades already incorporated their insights by giving art a central place alongside academics. Through music, theater, photography, dance and painting we constantly remind ourselves and our students that they are first and foremost creators, rather than passive consumers of knowledge. And through their work in these subjects, they learn the rewards of close collaboration, of listening to one another, of commitment to the task at hand.

If the sheer number of participants was one strong impression from this evening, then breadth of repertoire was another. Each of our music teachers seeks pieces that will draw the best from their students, and chooses works that incorporate voices from many cultures and eras: Romani folk dances, American fiddle tunes, Brahms and Shoshtakovich, Navajo prayer songs, Florence Price and Leonard Bernstein. Each of these pieces was worthy in its own right, each found a place in the mosaic of the evening, each was chosen not because of a dictate from above, but from the knowledge and creativity of a faculty committed to the idea that the education of their students is enriched by a seamless eclecticism and a profound respect for the musical sources and traditions from which each piece is drawn. This reminder that beauty and artistry are not the sole province of any one people or culture could not have been more timely, or more welcome.

Vince Tompkins
Head of School

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Vince Tompkins
Head of School
Our Project
Summer 2018

On the next to last day of May, accompanied by a high school jazz quartet, we assembled fourth through twelfth grade in the lobby of the Bosworth Building, on, around, in front of, and over the Red Stairs. Because of the renovation of the lower floors of the building the last time students had been able to sit on the Red Stairs had been at the final high school assembly on graduation day 2017. So this moment was a long time coming, and a welcome way to end the year.

To reclaim our spaces—first the townhouses for classrooms and art studios last September, then the Undercroft for Music, dance, and Recreational Arts in January—has felt like a process of reclaiming ourselves. While disruption and displacement did nothing to diminish the intensity of engagement and the joy of creation, construction simply made it more difficult to be together, find one another, and connect outside the classroom in the normal course of things. The irony is that so much of the work we undertook was meant to meet exactly those needs, along with making the spaces where we teach, gather, travel and perform safer and more appropriate for the size of school Saint Ann’s has become.

With all of this work concluding by the time you are reading this edition of the Saint Ann’s Times, it cannot help but feel like a moment for turning the page. Construction was a project for Saint Ann’s, but it was not the project that is Saint Ann’s. It is to that project that my attention has turned in these quiet summer weeks, with a sense of urgency and purpose fed by our own students and teachers and by the historical moment in which we find ourselves.

The project of Saint Ann’s is at its heart a humanistic undertaking, a bold reimagining of what education is and ought to be, of what a school is, of what kind of community we bring together in pursuit of our shared ideals and purposes. Yes we believe that we have created and sustained a pedagogy suited to particularly gifted and motivated children. Yes we reject through the absence of formal grading schemes the notion that the relationship between teacher and student is one based in power and authority rather than mutual respect. Yes we take pride each year in the validation that selective colleges and universities provide for our ongoing experiment. But that is far from the sum of what animates us.

While our educational mission is about the sharing of dreams, it is also “a rich, subtle exploration and questioning of the world.” And the world of 2018 seems to be badly in need of questioning. As I write, the current administration in Washington has finally reversed a policy that had for weeks separated immigrant children from their parents when they attempted to cross our southern border. More than two thousand children have been put into detention facilities—tents in the hot southwestern sun, a former Walmart store, shelters in New York and other cities. And the rhetoric used to justify this action was nothing less than a project in de-humanization, an effort to make of refugees and immigrants an other, undeserving of the protection of the law. The New York Times reports that support for the president enacting this measure has climbed to 90% among members of his own party. Something is wrong. Something is broken.

Saint Ann’s cannot heal the crisis of this moment. But we cannot retreat from it either. Our celebration of difference as strength acquires ever deeper significance when tribalism and tribal resentments run amok. Our embrace of the humanities, languages and the arts as fundamental to human existence and to human connection is a basis for resistance to dehumanization. Our deep and creative pedagogy in science and mathematics signals their vitality at a moment when those in power would devalue their importance and reject the experimentalism and open-mindedness of a scientific world view. Our commitment to respect for one another, to open dialogue and fierce debate, to an ideal of inclusion that embraces the full humanity of each member of our community, give the lie to those who see homogeneity of thought, expression, or identity as necessary, inevitable, or desirable in this or any other community. Our task is to bring this project to life every day within our walls, knowing that each element is essential to the success of the whole, making space for vulnerability, for bold experimentation, for the simple act of trying.

Our physical home stands ready now to sustain this project, and is of a piece with it. Writing of the Jefferson Market Library on Sixth Avenue in Manhattan, the critic Ada Louise Huxtable once noted that “the atmosphere in which literature and knowledge are dispensed is part of a cultural package…. At Old Jeff there is also the literature of architecture: cut stone faces and flowers, spiral stairs, soaring stained glass windows, the feeling, form and sensibility of another age. This, too, is the record of civilization.”

In a few short weeks we will be return to the task of making within our walls a school that engages with the world on its own terms, embracing the sacredness of childhood and the capacious record of civilizations near and far. Our light will shine bright in the darkness.

Vince Tompkins
Head of School

Saint Ann's Times
Portraits by Kindergartners
Two occurrences of recent months have had me pondering something that intellectual historians call “declension.” The first instance was a chance encounter with an editorial in these pages from thirty-seven years ago titled “Coming of Age.” In it Stanley Bosworth recounted being interviewed by a journalist (and Saint Ann’s graduate) “about the heinous rumor that our school has become more conservative.” “I declared,” Stanley wrote, “that we are, indeed, more conservative than once we were.”

In his own inimitable style Stanley framed this right turn as a necessary corrective to the inherent failings of the sixties counterculture: “a purely bourgeois decadent—a narcissistic orgy in which the surfeited and soft-headed pushed the limits of their self-indulgence….Drugs, affectless promiscuity, messianic separatism were all destructive forces which left the more gullible victims living in little fringe groups doting on memories of former glories…which were only fantasies.” And so what had Saint Ann’s Reagan-era “retrenchment” brought? “We expel druggies. Children have to (and do) attend classes…Sixties parents (products of entropy) are implored to impose the limits upon their children from which they once escaped.” And yet, he declared, “St. Ann’s remains and intends to remain a thorn in the side of the traditionalists….We are here to poke fun at the fusty anachronisms of convention. Less subjectivistic and less impulsive than once, perhaps…but—take courage, our young alumni, we shall never be respectable!”

Not long after I came across this manifesto, our high school students assembled to hear one of their number interview a well-known graduate of the 1990’s who has made a name for himself as a fashion designer and entrepreneur. The gist of one of the early questions was essentially, “tell us what it was like back in the day, before Saint Ann’s got all conservative and started making kids go to class.” There it was: the recurring, haunting fear among our twenty-first century students (and some adults as well) that at some point in the undefined past of our school was a moment of purity, ecstasy, bliss—a time of perfect freedom and intellectual and artistic intensity unfettered by adult-imposed rules, boundaries, or expectations. Stanley’s 1982 jeremiad seemed to confirm that this is not the first generation of students to be haunted by this almost tragic sense of having missed out on a magical moment.

So what? What harm, real or psychic, is done if this mood of longing and regret, this presumption of a lost historical apogee—of a dream not deferred but missed as a first-hand experience—persists in our zeitgeist? Perhaps the myth of a golden moment should simply be accepted as part of our historical baggage. But I think not, and the reason why brings me back to the idea of declension. I’ve had a peculiar fascination with this idea ever since graduate school, when I encountered the writings of Perry Miller, a great scholar of the New England Puritans. In a classic essay on the psychological burdens of the second and third generation of English settlers in New England—those who did not witness the founding first-hand—Miller offers this metaphor: “Many a man has done a brave deed, been hailed as a public hero, had honors and ticker tape heaped upon him—and then had to live, day after day, in the ordinary routine, eating breakfast and brushing his teeth, in what seems protracted anticlimax. A couple may win their way to each other across insuperable obstacles, elope in a blaze of passion and glory—and then have to learn that life is a matter of buying groceries and getting the laundry done.”

They have to, “put up with the daily routine without ever having known at first hand the thrill of danger or the ecstasy of passion.”

In most circumstances there is nothing wrong with a little mythologizing, of sharing tales of bourgeois dragons slayed, of classes cut, of great deeds of mischief under the bridge. These shared stories knit us together and create a bond that like any mystic chords of memory shape a shared culture. But living with the burden of a distorted, oversimplified past can cloud our ability to celebrate what we have in the present or to face the future with experimental boldness. Visit any Saint Ann’s classroom today and you will not see much laundry or grocery buying in evidence. Instead you will encounter ancient Egypt, Indian creation myths, Baldwin, algebraic functions, audacious theater productions, Coltrane, special relativity, Vogel, Adichie. You will see Saint Ann’s building on but unconstrained by the legacy handed to us, and I celebrate. I am ecstatic.

We would not exist were it not for the visionaries and risk-takers in our past. But they were human as we are, flawed and contradictory and perhaps unable fully at any moment to grasp just what it was they were bringing into existence. I doubt that any of them would wish to be encased in amber. Institutional age, scale, and yes perhaps even a bit too much respectability threaten our vitality if not guarded against. But these should not stop us from thinking of each day and each new year as ours to shape as we choose. We are at once radical and conservative, suspicious of convention and jealous guards of our own traditions and folkways. Whether we are more conservative, or more radical, than we once were is a less interesting question to me than whether we are as radical, or as conservative as we want to be in our pursuit of our joyful, celebratory, cerebral, transformative, and irreverent ideals.

Our task today is to use the freedom we have to invent ourselves anew and to free today’s students from the burdens of a mythic past. This is, after all, a school meant to keep today’s children at its center, close to its heart. We can only achieve this, can only greet our students and their limitless potential, if we can see our collective past in a clearer light, unafraid of the flaws and foibles and failings that it reveals as surely as it reveals our own. Declension be damned!

Vincent Tompkins
Head of School