



SAINT ANN'S SCHOOL

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Head of School

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Dear Faculty, Staff and Parents,

Richard Powers's magisterial *The Overstory*, a novel that occupies itself with trees, opens with a tale of immigrants who meet and fall in love in Prospect Park, then migrate to Iowa to begin a family farm that lasts for generations. One day Jørgen Hoel discovers in a coat pocket six chestnuts that had made the journey with him from Brooklyn to Iowa, and he plants them in soil far removed from the chestnut's natural range. Of these, one survives to maturity, one last survivor withstanding for decades the blight that swept four million majestic trees from the American landscape before the middle of the twentieth century.

This summer has brought blight of a different kind, spread on political winds that blow through the airwaves and cyberspace and presidential tweets, raising fundamental questions of whether our polity has developed effective resistance to virulent and violent forms of xenophobia, nationalism, and racism that are striking at communities across the country. This virus threatens our school and others like it by challenging the pluralistic vision we embrace, cheapening the value of civil discourse and diminishing the currency of empathy.

So how do we carry on? How do we meet the challenge of the moment when our mission of educating children does not bring us directly into the political arena and requires of us that we focus on teaching students *how* to think rather than *what* to think? How do we face the future with optimism and open-mindedness and honesty, for the sake of the children in our care? Not, I think, in the manner of Powers's chestnut, majestic but solitary on the open prairie, unable to propagate itself or save its species. Rather, I am drawn to another part of the novel, in which a botanist discovers the web of interconnectedness of the forest, through which trees signal danger to one another when one is attacked by pests. They entwine their roots together beneath the forest floor, sustaining an exquisite symbiosis in which the health of any one member or species is dependent on the health of the many.

That is what the year ahead holds for us at Saint Ann's. We will send our roots out broad and deep, nourish one another, welcome newcomers, protect our saplings as they grow, transmit to them the enduring values that define us and commit ourselves to them as fiercely as we do to life itself. We will teach them that in our world, as in nature, the individual thrives best in a dense and diverse ecosystem, as one member of an interdependent community. *Sempervirens!*

Love,