CONVOCATION
at The Lawrenceville School
The opening of the 206th year

Sunday, September 6, 2015
5:30 p.m.
The Circle

“A WALK IN THE WOODS WITH MR. BRINCKERHOFF”
Address by Stephen S. Murray H’55 ’65 P’16
Thirteenth Head Master of The Lawrenceville School

Faculty Colleagues, Students, Alums, and Friends of Lawrenceville, welcome to Convocation – the opening of this fine School’s 206th year!

At our Friday night Assembly just two days ago, I asked all of you students to hold tight to two aspects of the Lawrenceville culture that are part of what makes this school great.

I asked you, first of all, to uphold the tradition of open-mindedness, of tolerance, and of respect. Our community is strong because we care, we empathize, we seek to understand others, and because we reject bigotry in all its forms.

Secondly, I asked you to hold on to optimism, to the belief that people can make the world a better place. In human society where cynics seem to hold sway, where poets and dreamers are often dismissed as naïve and out of touch, hold fast to your idealism.

As Chaplin chides us in his final soliloquy that I played for you Friday evening, “We think too much and feel too little.”

Imagine a world where artists and poets don’t dream of a better way, where thoughtful leaders don’t take on the big problems.

This has always been a school where we see possibilities, not obstacles. After all,
…if not at Lawrenceville…then where?
If not Lawrentians, then who?
To those two notions of respect and optimism, I will add a third core belief that should endure in the woodwork of Lawrenceville, and that is

- the intellectual curiosity
- and the inquisitive spirit that lead us to ask questions.

and with that curiosity comes the patient willingness to listen to all opinions on the topic – as they say, you can’t learn a whole lot while you are speaking.

This willingness to ask questions, to explore ideas deeply, and to listen carefully to others is of course what we have practiced at Lawrenceville for over 75 years around a Harkness table.

For the next few minutes, if you will bear with me, I would like to share a reflection on my own first real exposure to teaching and learning in a Harkness setting.

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The first time I met Mr. Brinckerhoff was on a walk in the woods. My English teacher at Exeter, Morse Hamilton, wanted us to learn to listen more attentively, to notice more thoughtfully, so he sent us on a walk in the woods with his science colleague, Richard F. Brinckerhoff.

Mr. Brinckerhoff seemed ancient to me at the time, all the more so because he was slightly crippled from polio in his youth. He walked with an uneven gait, and one of his hands stayed tightly clutched at this side – apparently of little use to him.

His energy and enthusiasm, however, hooked us immediately, and as we headed off beneath the New Hampshire white pines, he already had the eight of us in the palm of his hand.

We were walking on an unpaved road through a tract of dense, mature forest. “Tell me what you see,” said Mr. Brinckerhoff. When one of us responded with the obvious, that we were on a dirt road, he said, “Ah good, that’s a great place to start. Tell me about it!” I suppressed my initial reaction that there was not a whole lot to say about a dirt road; he just had a way of asking the question that drew us in.

We began to compile our observations. It ran east-west. It was unbelievably, even unnaturally, straight. Not a single crimp or meander left or right until it disappeared from sight on the horizon, in both directions.

“Now,” he continued, facing east, “if we imagine it continues in that direction, where will this road end up?” “At the beach,” one of us
answered. “Precisely!” he responded. “Now why so straight?” he continued, “What purpose would that serve?”

“Well, you don’t have to steer,” we tossed back, sensing something interesting emerging. “Ah good,” he said with a slight flourish, “you now have the clues – tell me about this road.”

With a bit of gentle prodding, and admittedly Mr. Brinckerhoff had to fill in some gaps, we slowly pieced together the rather remarkable historical significance of this humble dirt track in the woods.

The story emerged of the enormous strategic importance to the 18th century British navy of New England white pines. The ships of the line, the dreadnoughts of the day, had gotten almost unmanageably large. And they depended on these extraordinarily tall, straight, American white pines that had just the right height and flexible whip to serve as masts of these massive vessels.

“So the British military is desperate for these masts and is willing to go to great lengths to engineer near-perfect roads. You drop an 80-foot pine in a forest that is 75 miles from the coast, how do you get the trunk to the coast?” he asked us.

“You can’t turn any corners,” we shot back, “so you need a straight road.”

It was many years later, reflecting as a teacher, that I understood that Mr. Brinckerhoff didn’t need to be in a classroom to conduct his lesson around a Harkness table. He was sharpening our observation skills, teaching us to listen to each other, and he was a master practitioner of the Harkness method:

• His casual, offhand questions,
• the way he let silence hang in the air while he waited with arched, inquisitive eyebrows,
• the way he patiently allowed suspense to build as our answers formed a bigger picture – all served to draw us in close around a virtual table as we walked through the woods.

“So,” he said, “with this in mind, look again at these trees all around you. What do you see?” We craned out necks, looked hard, but were at a loss, all the more frustrated because at this point we were sure he was asking us to comment on the obvious. Finally, one of us said, “Wait, they are not all straight! Lots of them are forked! That won’t work as a mast.” “Excellent!” he responded. “Let me tell you how a small weevil,
an insect pest, managed to stymie the British navy and change the course of history.’’

We were enthralled. Later in the walk, he changed the topic. “Now, enough about roads, what else do you see?” We began to list all the elements around us until one of us said, “Stonewalls.”

“Stonewalls…hmmm,” he said, “Tell me about those.” Again, we began with the obvious: We described granite boulders piled up, arranged in a line. There appeared to be miles of walls, and they crisscrossed the forest.

We went around in circles for a while, and Mr. Brinckerhoff just walked along quietly with a smirk on his face and a twinkle in his eye. “Wait,” one of us finally erupted. “We’re out in the woods, that stone wall is out in the middle of the woods!” “Ah…,” said Mr. Brinckerhoff, “tell me more about that.” And on went our session around the Harkness table.

It was many years later, by way of a postscript to this story, that I learned something even more interesting about Mr. Brinckerhoff. I had recently run into an Exeter classmate at a reunion, and he modestly mentioned his work doing stem-cell research at Stanford. Another friend cut in, “If he won’t tell you, I will. He runs the lab, he has 20 PhD’s reporting up to him, and they are trying to synthesize pancreatic tissue; if they are successful, it will change the prognosis on pancreatic cancer – this is Nobel Prize stuff!” Seung smiled and waved off our friend. “Would you come speak to my students in Cleveland?” I asked, “They’d love to hear about cutting edge research!”

Three months later, Dr. Seung Kim was at the podium in front of the entire student body, and I had just prepped the audience with his impressive bio and a preview of his research. “I won’t be talking about stem-cell research today,” he began, “In fact, I won’t be talking about myself at all. I want to talk to you about my high school science teacher and the reason I became a scientist. His name was Mr. Brinckerhoff.”

“He taught us the importance of asking questions, questions that don’t yet have answers.” And Dr. Kim went on to illustrate this with an anecdote from Mr. Brinckerhoff’s younger days. In 1976, he had published an article in Nature magazine on his research on Stonehenge. “You see, he had spent a great deal of time wondering about the 20-ton lintels atop the uprights, especially the enormous effort expended to get them up there.” And he went on to describe how Mr. Brinckerhoff finally asked if anyone had checked the upper surface of those lintels. One thing led to another, and the magazine article featured a picture of him on his hands and knees crawling about on top of Stonehenge, his nose a few inches from the
stone surface. It turns out, he discovered a series of pits arranged at regular intervals that coincide with an 18-year lunar cycle.

“It was all about asking the right question,” said Dr. Kim, “and this was Mr. Brinckerhoff’s gift as a teacher as well.” As he worked his way through his talk, he went on to make his essential point. Scientific inquiry is about careful observation, it is about listening, it is about asking questions: “High School science curriculum will remain utterly boring if we continue to make them plow through labs that already have answers. We all need a Mr. Brinckerhoff reminding us of the excitement of asking the right question!”

My friend’s talk brought me back to my walk in the woods with Mr. Brinckerhoff so many years ago, and it caused me to reflect on what it means to teach and learn around a Harkness table.

The physical presence of the table, the carefully crafted, venerable piece of furniture, burnished by countless hands and elbows, of course, is important. The smooth, unbroken plane of the wooden surface connects those around the perimeter and helps create that democracy of voices that is so critically important.

This approach, built upon the design of a table, is part of the Lawrenceville legacy, a set of core beliefs about teaching and learning that should endure in the woodwork of the School, and it is a legacy that you uphold and strengthen every time you sit around that perimeter and listen thoughtfully to your classmates.

But as Mr. Brinckerhoff shows us, what matters even more than the table is having the discipline to observe before speaking; to listen and reflect first so that an answer builds on the previous comment; and in that process, the questions that occur to us will be our own questions.

And this deep, careful reflection can happen almost anywhere, in a classroom, on top of Stonehenge, or on a walk in the woods.

Thank you very much for your kind attention. Let us all have a wonderful year together.

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It is now time for the House awards to be announced, and it is my honor to call up the winners.

The Chivers Cup is awarded to the House with the highest GPA. The 2015 winner of The Chivers Cup is CARTER HOUSE. Would this year’s House president please come forward to receive the Cup on behalf of your House.

The Adams Cup recognizes the House with the greatest commitment to community service. The 2015 winner of the Adams Cup is CARTER HOUSE. Would this year’s House president please come forward to receive the Cup on behalf of your House.

The House Cup is awarded to the House with the greatest House spirit. The 2015 winner of the House Cup is STEPHENS HOUSE. Would this year’s House president please come forward to receive the Cup on behalf of your House.

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