

Parents Day 2014: Remarks from Head of School Dominic AA Randolph

Sept. 20, 2014

Good Morning. I am Dominic AA Randolph, Head of School at Riverdale. For those of you new to the school, this is my 8th year here. I hope that you all had a good summer and have had a good start to the school year.

Welcome. I hope you have a good day and really get to experience the school in a number of different ways. I am going to talk for about 10 minutes then Upper School parents will stay here to hear Kelley Nicholson-Flynn and the Middle School parents will go upstairs to the Student Center to hear Milton Sipp speak.

I would like to talk about **change** today. We live in times where accelerating change and volatility is the norm. Your children are in the midst of quite significant change and minor changes: One day elated, the next day, grumpy.

I would like to have us think about how we all cope with change. What things do you do when the situation changes for you? Many people are finding out that they do not possess the skills and capacities they need to thrive in work and life, in the ever-changing world we live in. That is because they developed capacities, skills and knowledge that were not adaptive. We need to educate for change. We need to equip students with the abilities to think for themselves, reinvent themselves and to thrive in a world of change.

I have thought about it a lot this summer and think there are three principal acts that we need to engage in when change happens:

- We need to learn how to **observe and understand** change.
- We need to **accept and actually embrace** the process of change.
- We need to think how we ourselves can **create** change.

I started wondering about what we can give to our children that will help them prepare for, understand and make change happen.

This got me thinking about **toolkits**. I love toolboxes. I think I like them so much because they give me a sense of preparedness and security. I was a carpenter's helper for a gap year when younger and my toolkit, my tool belt, made me feel more secure, more professional. It was a necessary element of my work as a carpenter and using the tools well was a foundational skill. It helped me feel prepared and ready to be challenged.

I also recently encountered another version of a toolkit. We have been thinking about design and how design can affect schools and learning for the last few years. I visited the d.school at Stanford last year as they were beginning a new fellows program — bringing people from all sorts of different fields and teaching them the methods that designers use to solve complex problems. They gave each of the fellows a toolbox with Sharpies and Post-its and duct tape and scissors: a toolkit to brainstorm ideas and build prototypes. I

gave a small toolkit to new teachers at the start of this year because I thought it was such a good idea.

So what would be the toolkit that we would give our children to prepare them for an ever-changing, mutable world? What metaphorical tools would it have in it?

Here is a version of my "**change toolkit**" with some comments and questions:

- **TOOLBOX** [MOBILE SERENDIPITY] The toolbox itself stands for the serendipitous opportunities for learning. We are all learning more and more on the go ... walking down a corridor, riding on the subway, a conversation with a friend. We must take every opportunity we can to learn.

- **TAPE MEASURE** [GROWTH OVER TIME] Do you mark the heights of your children on the wall? My mother marked my brother's and my heights on the wall of the dining room. We could see very tangibly our growth over time — what is the intellectual, social and developmental version of those marks on the wall? How do we measure our growth in learning, in our fitness, in our capacities? We need to think about how to do this better.

- **MAP** [EXPOSURE + DEPTH] Maps give you a sense of the broad landscape in addition to specific local information ... we need to expose ourselves to a broad set of ideas and activities inherent in a liberal arts education while, at the same time, plunging deeply into specific interests so that we can have feel both experience and mastery, landscape and local.

- **WHISTLE** [PREPAREDNESS] My daughter is currently doing about an 800-kilometer hike in northern Spain. Dogs and cows are an issue. So she has a whistle around her neck to scare off the dogs and cows. Thinking proactively and preparing oneself in anticipation of problems is a key capacity in coping with change. How can we prepare ourselves for the future?

- **KEYS** [PERMISSION] We keep our keys in our pockets and we often think of keys linked to security, but they also open doors for us and that permission to seek new doors and new places is an important part of growing and changing.

- **DUCT TAPE** [BUILD THINKING] Finally, some duct tape. Duct tape mends things, it is an all-purpose tool and it allows us to build things quickly. It is important to learn how to think well, but it is also important for us to build out our thoughts and try them out in the world of action.

This is my metaphoric toolkit for change.

My toolkit at school in the UK was basically a satchel, a pen, books and paper. The toolkit I am proposing is a very different toolbox with different tools. I think we need to understand and accept that reality — that our toolboxes are not and will not be the same as our children's — and think what that means for us as educators, as parents and as the stewards of our future leaders. We need to help our daughters and sons compose their own toolkits that will make them confidently face their futures.

So, are you helping your sons and daughters collect their **own tools for change**? Do you have your own tools? Have you upgraded your toolkits for a more relevant version? Are

you modeling the capacities such as optimism, self-control, imagination, grit, serenity under pressure and patience that allow us all to thrive under changing conditions? We need to ask ourselves these questions that force us to think about what we need to be doing. So I would like us to translate these ideas to talk about parenting for a few minutes. What can we do to help our sons and daughters through the process of change? Basically, I think it is the same as coping with change ourselves, and what I started with. **We need to observe change, embrace change and help create change.**

I think:

- We need to **observe and note the change in our children and learn to appreciate those changes**...more for the process of change rather than the actual change itself. This entails being less judgmental of our children and seeing all experiences as potential learning experiences. We need to be more empathetic about what they are facing. We need to distance ourselves from the experience itself and become “diagnosticians” of the change process they are going through.
- **We need to move beyond appreciating and being happy with change and we also need to embrace the change that our kids are going through.** We need to support them in those changes by coaching them through difficulty and understanding that setbacks and disappointment as much as successes and joy are part of the change process. We also need to be patient and not overly reactive to what happens to them. We need help them to do the work that they need to do — not do the work for them.
- Finally **we need to give them opportunities to make changes in their lives, both small and large**, changes in their homes, their relationships and support them as they try and make a change.

So, I hope we can all think and work together in sensible and concrete ways to make our children face the changes in them and in the world around them with the focus, confidence, surety that have marked individuals whom we all admire who have managed and created change. People like the very people we honor with the Jolli Humanitarian Prize each year at the school in naming the 9/10 building in their honor: Leymah Gbowee, Geoffrey Canada, Rachel Lloyd, Pernille Ironside, and this year’s winner, Frank Mugisha. It is great that we have so many models here, in our country and globally for our young people to emulate.

This is not easy but it is the best work in the world. I wish you all the best this year and hope that you all thrive as you go through this wonderful and exciting period of change with your sons and daughters.

Thank you for listening. Have a great day and a great year.