

RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

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I am wondering how many times this weekend you have heard these words: “Oh my goodness, you look just the same?” (Or similar words to that effect)? As far as I can tell, in truth, the only ones who really have never changed are Mr. Locke, Mr. Dietel, and the Emma Willard gargoyles! Because the fact is, we all change; no one stays the same.

Many of us were here between the tender ages of 14-18; those are years of phenomenal development – of intellect, of morals, of character, and of us physically and spiritually. It is a fertile time – and our young minds were nurtured and values were affirmed, and this was a time that became the foundation of our strengths, interests, passions and grace.

We owe much to this school of ours, for the fine teachers, many of whom were spoken of earlier, teachers like Ms. Prescott, Solange Dispas, Jack Betterly, Arthur Homan, and our vibrant Mr. Locke, and retiring Jack Easterling, among others, who had (and have) expansive minds themselves, and who challenged our minds to go to places and explore territories women might not have gone without their encouragement and belief in us. They, collectively, were agents of change...more specifically, of our change.

I do not know how I, as a woman in the 1960s, could have believed that I could become an ordained minister in what was at that time, a man's profession, without the strong encouragement of Ms. Taylor, Ms. Wellington and Ms. Lay (the old headmistresses) and Mr. Dietel, and other faculty members who believed there was no glass ceiling we couldn't break through – even then.

As a Protestant Christian minister I spend time with rituals – the sacrament of communion, for example, which is a time of remembrance, a ritual to remind us of someone or something significant. For those who were raised as Catholic Christians, Holy Communion is celebrated weekly, even daily, so one would not forget. A rosary is similar – it is a ritual by which to

remember. For Muslims, the ritual of daily prayer is paramount. Other faiths have their own rituals.

I would like to suggest that likewise, reunions also are a kind of ritual through which we keep in relationship with our classmates. Biblically, we have many examples of close relationships. One relationship, in particular, from the Old Testament, is the story of Ruth and Naomi, which was a relationship of extraordinary commitment that had a substantial love and a future; a commitment between friends who were like sisters. We live in a world of constant change, with things changing at a very rapid rate. There is competitiveness and distance everywhere; few know their neighbors, and commitment to relationships is difficult. Nevertheless, making and keeping strong relationships is critical. The Book of Ruth provides a lesson from which we all can learn.

Reunions are a time when we come back to remember who we were and to celebrate who we have become. Quite a few reunions ago after I had spoken in chapel, a dear classmate of mine said, “Bonnie, I don’t think I ever knew you like this.” I think that was a compliment, but it does go to show that one of the benefits of coming back to our school is to see the changes each of us has gone through even though, fundamentally, we may be the same. Gone are the cliques, the groupings, our old misconceptions; we meet our classmates as new people yet we have that common bond that is so distinguishable – we were and are sisters of our class in our Alma Mater. Another classmate said to me, when talking to her about coming to reunion, that the reunion was ‘so eye opening’ – she got to see such new facets of people she thought she knew so well, or meet those she never really got to know. She was able to see the school whole whereas before she was too much IN it to see it in its entirety.

This reunion weekend we celebrated, to quote Trudy Hall, “the enduring strength of friendships, renewal and connection.” We sensed the collective accomplishments and individual wisdom of our classmates and of our school. We can feel the commitment to each other in a new way, and we have had the opportunity, continuing to quote Trudy Hall, “to listen to the sounds of women who care deeply about life.” This was, indeed, as Trudy describes the weekend, “a time of intellectual stimulation, warm memories and endless possibilities, and an opportunity to secure the bonds that tie us one to another and to this place.”

As we experience these connections we see ourselves, graduates of Emma Willard, in a broader sense and with a responsibility to the world we live in. Many of us are concerned about the environment, about the poorest of poor in the world in a global sense, are concerned about AIDS, about the wasteful effects of our lives on our natural resources, and show deep compassion for these in need. Our receptivity to these issues was fostered by our formative years at Emma Willard, and were well represented this weekend with the amazing collection of women who spoke provocatively on “Women, Power and Possibility,” on how to make positive changes in today’s world. Our school is involved in every one of these issues today, encouraging students to become more involved in their early years than ever before. And as graduates our interests and passions have evolved as well, with many of us becoming determined to give back to those places and schools and organizations we recognize as vital to the future and to which our giving makes a difference. We see what happens “when women translate their beliefs into action with commitment and conviction.”

So much of this happens because of relationships. My husband, our sons, and I have been very involved in Opportunity International, a micro-finance NGO for many years, and it offers what they call “Insight Trips” where they take you into the field, and you see the faces of hunger and need. You will see microfinance at work in a variety of communities. As Jessica Jackley Flannery of Kiva.org said in the symposium yesterday, she can still SEE the face of that goat herd, one of her first and inspiring microfinance clients. Change happens through relationships.

Those in the more recent reunion classes have seen births and growths of families and businesses, and of new possibilities. For some of us in the older classes, we see the fragility and preciousness of life, and have experienced what it means to be on the eve of mortality.

What strikes me as paramount after a weekend here at reunion is, again, how relationships matter. In fact, studies show that relationships are crucial – in our work places, in our homes, in our schools, in our volunteer work, in our personal lives. What a tragedy it would be to let these relationships go. As Emma Willard graduates, we have much in common and we can do so much with these relationships from net- working to idle conversations to important and often critical

support connections. Even though we are diverse in nature we can be unified here. Relationships are critical.

When we look back on our lives, one question is at the forefront: What is the most important dimension of life? For most of us I would predict it has most to do with relationships. But the question is, have we made or are we making time for what is meaningful in life, for that which gives life its richness?

I would like to leave you with a challenge: and that is to encourage you to establish and reestablish relationships with those with whom you have lost contact or with whom you have a broken or painful relationship. Develop a relationship with an organization or a school where you can personally make a difference. Life is too short. Relationships matter.

Our school, the students and the faculty, are gifted, and the pride we should all feel is enormous. With Trudy Hall's vision and the Board of Trustees backing, we are witness to what the school will become in the future. Let us each make a commitment to return to Emma Willard again soon.

I'd like to close with the words from our class song written by Betsy Caney in 1963. Although it was written for our class, it is easily applicable to all of us:

Although our days have been so few
We've found our friendships strong and true.
And looking back in days to come,
rememb'ring all our trials and fun,
we'll see the class of '63
diverse within our u-ni-ty!"

"We came to join in this great stream
and find a channel for our dream.

Since then the new and changing tide
Has made our way more clear and wide.

A kindled fire grew more each day
in classes and in every way.
We hope this precious flame passed on
will last long after we are gone.
At least we hope the glowing coals
might 'luminare our future goals

And now the stream must find new ways
to guide us in the coming days.
But lofty tower and ivied walls
and echoing voices in the halls
will bring us drifting back again.
Semper Fidelis until then.

Thank you.