

Facebook

*Address by Jay Connolly to the Shawnigan Lake School class of 2010
Chateau Whistler, May 21, 2010*

Graduates, Ladies and Gentlemen, Guests,

I'm glad Mr Robertson mentioned the Olympics. My first impulse was to include Vancouver 2010 in these remarks -- but for a reason more personal than the venue. Many of you won't know that the first medal of the modern games was awarded to James Connolly. I go by Jay, but I was christened James, and that simple connection to the premier medalist of 1896 drew me to the metaphor. Sadly, my identification with James Connolly, the Olympian, ended when I discovered that he had earned his medal for the hop, skip, and jump. I can imaginatively project myself into a thousand different triumphs, but not the hop, skip, and jump.

Before I go any further, I should thank Mr Robertson for the warmth of his introduction. It was kind of him, given recent tensions between us.

You see, last week I discovered that the Headmaster has a Facebook account. So naturally I asked him to "friend" me.

He's very busy, so . . .

It's possible, of course, that Mr Robertson doesn't fully understand Facebook friendship. When I first signed up, I certainly did not appreciate the culture. When former students "friended me," I'd feel so pleased and so legitimized that I'd hammer out a message to them: "Great to hear from ya!" I'd write. "How ya doing?" I'd ask.

My enthusiasm was answered, almost 100% of the time, with silence.

It took me a while to see that it's not necessary or even desirable to actually communicate with your Facebook friends. It's like being a little kid again, when having a friendship was as easy as asking for one.

I was in one of the computer labs a few weeks ago. A girl I teach had Facebook open, so I asked her how many friends she had. "I don't know," she said. "A thousand?"

Then she looked up. “You?”

“Oh,” I said, “yeah . . . about a thousand . . . ish.”

In fact, I have 202 Facebook friends. That will seem pathetic to some of you, but it makes me feel giddy and self-satisfied. In my walking, talking life, I have . . . I don’t know . . . maybe six true friends.

I read that to my wife, and she said, “You should say ‘three friends.’”

I said, “Yeah, that’s funnier.”

She said, “No, it’s more accurate.”

It doesn’t matter. On Facebook, I can pretend that an additional 199 people hover over their computer screens waiting for me to say, “Jay is . . . arguing with Valentine.” And I have power over my friends, too: if one of them upsets me -- I “unfriend” them. If someone makes a request I don’t like . . . I “ignore” them. If someone says something I disapprove of, I “hide” their comments.

But I use Facebook because, like many people here, I thrive on messages.

When I was a student at Shawnigan, we did not have cell phones, email, or IM. The only way our parents could contact us was to dial the school switchboard and have the call relayed to the boarding house. And they couldn’t call during prep, either, so it was hard for them to track us down.

It was *great!*

It's not that we didn't want to speak with our folks. We just didn't want to talk to them while leaning against a radiator at the end of the dorm hallway, where prefects and teachers and roommates could listen . . . because it was always when someone was walking past you that your mom would say, “Love you, Baby Bear!”

And you would have to answer, “Love you, Mama Bear.”

In those days, messages came to us by mail. We would practically beg people to write us -- parents, friends, aunts and uncles and cousins . . . even our stupid brothers and sisters. The means of messaging was different, but the significance was the same: a letter singled us out, made us smile or laugh or feel a little homesick, and confirmed that people cared about us.

We all need those affirmations. We subscribe to Facebook because we thrive on belonging.

Facebook isn't life, of course. No one here has a thousand friends -- at least not by any meaningful definition of friendship.

So I'd like you to consider, for a few minutes, a different book of faces and a different set of messages.

For context, I should explain twenty-three years ago, in my second year as a teacher at the school, a new Anglican minister arrived at Shawnigan and introduced "the peace" to chapel. Near the end of the service each Saturday, we stood, turned to the people in the pews around us, looked them in the eye, shook hands, and said to each in turn, "Peace be with you."

It was horrible.

The tumble from public persona to private benediction was too sudden for a school full of boys. To everyone's relief, the practice was short-lived.

This evening, though, I'd like to employ a gentler form of that practice. Grads, look around you. I mean it. Scan the room.

Many of these faces are like pages you have encountered in your life at Shawnigan. Your parents, for a start, launched the process by possessing the courage to let you go -- to entrust part of your development to the teachers and coaches and artists who have challenged you and demanded of you and believed in you.

Your roommates are here, too, and some of your best friends, as well as people you've played on teams with, walked to Mason's with, fought for causes with, laughed with, eaten with, argued with -- maybe hated for a while -- or even loved.

This book of faces can be intimidating and messy and frustrating and emotional, and by its nature it is more difficult to manage than an online account. But it's a book in which you have begun to discover the foundations of your adult life.

With these people watching, you have updated your status in realms of action and achievement and daily conduct -- by what you've done and who you are, not what you can type.

With these friends, you've amped yourselves on coffee and sat in the Ritz or sprawled together in your rooms to learn the languages of science and art. You've acquired a vocabulary with which to describe the world that has shaped you and the world taking shape inside you.

You've become singers and dancers and actors and painters and designers. You have folded your hands around the raw materials of the world to create something new under the sun.

You have overpowered lesser teams and have reveled in your victories, only to be left with the question of what do to with your glory -- how to carry it with humility and grace rather than arrogance or self-satisfaction.

Simply put, you've *learned* together. And that's the real difference between this experience and Facebook. You can be Facebook friends with someone for years and never learn anything substantial about them – never allow them to see anything authentic in you.

I have occasionally heard a student insist to people at the school, "I'm not really like this. At home, I'm completely different." Your friends know otherwise, because you can't hide from the living, moving eyes in a boarding school. And that's why the experience, as challenging as it sometimes is, means so much to people.

When you have failed, we have not laughed at you. We have not mocked you by writing derisive graffiti on the door to your room.

Your friends have sat with you or stood beside you. They've listened to you or they've left you alone until you felt like talking. They've done what friends and family do best: they've walked you through the world because walking with you makes the burdens lighter and the scenery more interesting.

You don't make friends like that with one click. You can't ignore these people or hide from what they have to say. They are friends you will never want to "unfriend."

When you get right down to it, Facebook is trivial. It's statistical opportunity for companies and entertainment for the rest of us. We post trivia on our Facebook walls because that's what a Facebook wall is for.

The best part of living, and the best part of *Shawnigan*, has nothing to do with scrawling things on walls real or virtual. It has to do with breaking walls down -- with the way the barriers between us crumble when we laugh together or cry together or strive together or hope together.

In your friends, you've seen enough bad hair days and enough practiced indifference and enough hunger for love and belonging to realize we're all human and we're all trying to move toward a light more powerful and more enduring than the glow of a computer screen or a cell phone display.

This room is the *real* Facebook, kids -- and it's full of family and friends and promises and dreams that will be with you for the rest of your lives.

Peace be with you.