

Choose Life – by Gregg Perry

Welcome to the first chapel of the year! In honour of the Rev. Eric Detchon, I have to start with some one-liners:

- Did you hear that Mr. Fraser bought a metronome for 20 bucks? You can't beat that price.
- I understand that Mr. Cox's calculator started returning only a negative answer. Boy is he nonplussed!
- Would the person who borrowed the globe from Mrs. Grass' room without asking, please return it? It means the world to her.
- Mr. Lane told me that the brightest star in the sky is called the Dog Star. I said "You can't be Sirius!"
- I hear Mr. Kingstone is putting a real emphasis on proof reading this year. His lectures keep his classes spell bound.

Why are we gathered here today? Because this is the first chapel service of the year, I thought that it would be appropriate to address this question.

Mr. Robertson, in his introduction about chapel to new students, referred to this place and what we do here as "the heart of our school". Why is it the heart?

- Here in the chapel, we gather together as a whole community to celebrate our successes and share our concerns.
- We also share musical gifts.
- We hear from many speakers about issues that are important or of special interest or inspiration to the community.

It is here in the chapel that we present and underline what it is that we, as the community of Shawnigan Lake School value. All this is done in the tradition and manner that we have inherited from our founder, C. W. Lonsdale, which historically happens to be the pattern of the Church of England, also known as the Anglican Church. While our tradition and our ceremonies are Christian, we respect the traditions and beliefs of other faith communities.

Now many of you may have had some experience already in attending church services. However, for some of you, this may be foreign territory. In order to clarify what we're about here in our chapel, I'd like to take a couple of minutes today to reflect on two words that aren't often discussed in polite company. Two words that are often misinterpreted or misunderstood. In fact, people sometimes get a very negative reaction whenever they use these words.

These two words are "religion" and "worship".

As a former English teacher, I have a fascination with the meaning of words, and I hate it when words lose their meaning or get twisted by popular culture. As such, I'm a bit of a non-conformist when it comes to the popular understanding of some things. I tend to buck the trend, and look for the authentic or root meaning.

Take “religion”. I’ve noticed that many Shawnigan students are very religious. I’m not referring to the prayers you say on your way into final exams, I’m referring to a specific religious practice that I witness almost every day in the main building.

- How many of you have ever touched the nose on the bust of Sir Percy Lake, the first chairman of the Board of Governors?
- How many of you do it at least once a week? Ah, regular parishioners.
- How many just about every time you pass? Ah, you would be the devout followers.
- How many think that you MUST touch the nose? Ah, good, no fundamentalists.

By now some of must be thinking, “Mr. Perry has lost it. What’s Sir Percy’s nose got to do with religion?”

Humour me for a moment, while I take apart the word for you in the style of Mr. Anderson, our Latin scholar. “Religion” is derived from the Latin “ligare” which means “to bind”. Another word with this root is “ligament” which binds bone to bone. Religion is something that we do to bind us to our beliefs, to our values. It is how we express them, remember them as a community, and pass them on to other generations. Remember, religion has been a part of every culture since the beginning of recorded history. It’s a very human thing to do.

I don’t know when people started touching the nose, but it’s said that it brings you luck in your studies. That just might be true. Perhaps their passing caress of Percy’s nose reminds students that their aim today is to give their best attention and effort in each class they attend. Perhaps students just feel a boost of confidence when they do it. If you were to attach that meaning to that action, then every time you swipe the schnoz, you remind yourself that you are choosing to give your best today, even if you’re tired or feeling down. Your religious observance may have a beneficial effect on you. (I’m betting that is doesn’t affect Sir Percy much.) Maybe it would help change your state of mind, give you a boost on your way to your next class. It might help to bind you to the highest goals and attitudes of Shawnigan Lake School students.

Of course, you might just do it casually

- because everyone else does it, or
- because you think you’ll look cool, or
- because it’s just a tradition and who knows what it means.

But then, that wouldn’t be very religious at all. That would be like paying lip service, or, in this case, nose service, to all that Sir Percy stood for as the chairman of the board.

The second word is “worship”. Commonly, many people think that this is something that God needs us to do. Think for a second. If any god really needed us to get together and say how swell we thought he or she was, he or she would have to be pretty insecure. You and I can use the occasional pat on the back from parents or teachers or friends, but a god who needs his ego fed? You wouldn’t really want someone like that in charge, now would you?

Again, this comes from a misconception of what this word means. And again, I put on my “Mr. Anderson hat”. Worship means “to shape worth”, or to affirm and declare what we hold as worthy, or what we deem to have value. When we gather in chapel, we declare that the values in our tradition, that is our school tradition as well as our Christian tradition, when properly understood, are at the heart of who we are and what we do at this school.

Values give us guidance in making decisions. If you value health and friendship, you choose to toss a rugby ball around on the quad, rather than some other less active or sociable activity. If you value excellence in character, you choose to respect others and be of helpful service to others in the school

community. At Shawnigan, we try to encourage the adoption of values that are life enhancing, that lead ultimately to greater fulfillment and joy in each person's experience of life. That's what chapel is about.

We don't come to chapel to remind God that he is a good guy or to suck up to him. God doesn't need to be told that he is good. We, however, need to become more aware of and to remember what is good and true and beautiful and to focus on those things, even though CNN floods us with bad news. By expressing "worship" together as a community, we affirm all that we value. A central Hebrew text, one of the core passages of Judaism known as the Shema, expresses it this way:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.

And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.

In the words of Moses that you heard in today's reading, let's choose on the side of life as often as we can. It is not too difficult for us or beyond our reach. Let's choose to do the best we can in everything that we undertake. Let's not cut corners or give half measures. Let's not settle for our personal fourth best, or third best, or even second best. As some of you know, I lost my mother this summer, and in celebrating and remembering her life, I was reminded that life is too short to do anything else.