

Ms. Aranya Maritime, *Head of Upper School*
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On Language and Harassment

It is not easy to know what the person next to you is thinking or feeling. Some might suggest that you cannot ever really know, even if someone tells you how he or she feels. Words fall short of being able to express what we want and feel. Often language serves more to hinder communication than to facilitate it.

In Frost's poem "Home Burial" the husband who has just buried his child himself comes inside and says, "Three foggy mornings and one rainy day/Will rot the best birch fence a man can build." His wife reproaches him because she cannot believe that he can think of rotting wood at a time when their child has just been placed in the grave. Now if we think about the husband's words, he is talking about death and decay and the futility of trying to create things when death comes to take them away. But the wife does not hear it in this way because her mind is elsewhere. She is hurt by his remarks and the poem ends as she attempts to flee from the house.

Miscommunication is everywhere in literature. Often we see it illustrated as a missed letter – a missed communication -- in *Romeo and Juliet* the tragedy results on one level because a letter does not make it on time. Surely we all see that this missed letter can be read metaphorically to represent all the missed communication in the play. (If you need another example we see it again in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.)

I bring this up because I think it is important to remember that your words may not be heard in the way you intend them to be received. Because you cannot know what the person next to you has in his head, you cannot assume that the joke you have just told at his expense will be heard as a joke by him. Does this make the world a difficult place to live in? Does it mean you have to think about what you say? Does it mean that you cannot bulldoze thoughtlessly through your day running down everyone in your path?

The answer to each of these questions is yes. When you were little children, doubtless the world seemed a much simpler place. This was because you had undeveloped minds and they couldn't think on abstract, complex levels. I think this is the root of what I like to call the nostalgia fallacy – we look back and like to think that times were better because they were simpler when we were little. But in reality it wasn't the times that were simpler, **we** were simpler. As you age and your minds become more capable of complex reasoning, we expect that you will use your minds.

Part of growing up is beginning to understand that you need to act differently in different spheres – in other words, you can say and do things in your living room with your family, that are not acceptable to say and do in public. And this school is a public place. If I wanted to speculate about why some of you have trouble seeing this space as public, I might say it could have something to do with the internet, and the way you are willing to say things there because you are typing them in the privacy of your home – so the public realm gets confused with the private realm. But then again, I have a feeling that even before the internet, a key part of growing up was learning to act a certain way in public. Now some of

you may object that this is hypocritical – and I would answer that I would hope that you would be kind both in private and public. Then there would be no need to “act” a certain way when you are out of your house. Comedian Dave Chappelle does a great skit about this idea when he explores the concept of “keeping it real” – he shows that there are times when it is not acceptable to “keep it real” – if “being real” to you involves saying or doing things that are hurtful to others.

If you feel bad because of what others in this community say or do to you, I urge you to talk to an adult.

If you talk to someone here, we will listen and a process will begin. Many of you know that I coach Mock Trial and that I, along with all the other adults here, value the rule of law and due process. What are the rule of law and due process? Well, in some ways these things refer to the systems we put into place to ensure that students get a fair hearing based on a rational process rather than an emotional response.

If you bring a complaint to an adult on this campus, we will begin to have conversations with the people involved, and based on those conversations, Mr. McCarthy and I will decide upon a next step. This next step might involve a conversation, a counseling recommendation, a discipline response from us, or a recommendation that the case be heard by a committee. We have two committees – the minor discipline committee and the student conduct committee. The MDC hears cases involving skipped detentions, repeated lateness to school or class, etc. The SCC hears major cases often involving honor code violations – plagiarism, theft, harassment, substance use, etc.

The SCC is made up of both students and faculty, and currently has more student voting members than faculty. The student members are nominated by you, and they represent your voice on the committee. When a case appears before the SCC, the SCC has several options. One of these options is to rule that there is no case. Other responses range from warning status to expulsion. The results of a hearing vary from individual case to case. There is no magic formula that predicts what the recommendation from the committee will be. They listen carefully and base their responses in part on what they have heard, in part on previous cases and responses, and in part on your grade level – we expect more from seniors than we do from freshmen because seniors have been a part of this community for more time than freshmen and they know better what is expected and they should serve as models of this expected behavior.

Finally, please know that if you come to talk to an adult about feeling harassed, you will not have to testify before the SCC.

It is my hope that no one here is malicious. I would rather believe that sometimes people do not understand how their comments or actions may be heard and felt by another member of this community. I stress again that there is no way to truly know how another person will respond to something you may perceive as a joke or as harmless teasing. As you strive to establish meaningful relationships with one another, take the time to consider how you may be heard, and if you say or do something that offends, don't hesitate to apologize. We have all said things that we wish to retract. Part of becoming an adult is being able to understand and to say that you were wrong.

