

Dr. Maritime Opening Remarks 9-2008

In a few weeks, on September 29th we will show alumnae Nanette Burstein's documentary film American Teen in an all-school assembly. As many of you probably know, Ms. Burstein followed several students at a high school in Indiana for the duration of a year, and then edited her footage to compose a compelling story about the high school experience. One of the main reasons that Ms. Burstein could make a film such as this is that every school year has a clear narrative arc. In an article I read over the summer from The English Journal, Tim Gillespie believes that the "gripping narrative arc" of the academic year is one of his main reasons for teaching.

So what do we mean by narrative arc?

We begin in September and anything might happen. This is not to say that the choices you have made in the past don't influence the present, but right now we have a great deal of potential in this room. By the time we reach June in nine months, we can look back and tell the story of our academic year. There is a definite beginning and a definite ending to every year in high school – a form given to us that we can fill in our own ways – sort of like a sonnet.

If you are going to write a sonnet, you know that you are given 14 lines in which to express yourself. You can write about love or death or war or politics or your devotion to the Bills – but you only get 14 lines. Many of your English teachers, including me, have asked you to write sonnets for this very reason: we hope that you will learn something about both the limiting and the liberating aspects of structure. (Wordsworth expresses this well in his own sonnet, "Nuns Fret Not at their Convent's Narrow Rooms" when he speaks of the "weight of too much liberty.") Structure can be freeing because it gives you some place to begin.

So we have before us stretched out nine months, and in this room we have about 401 different stories waiting to be written. Many of the people who surround you have strong opinions about how your story should play out. Your parents, your friends, your teachers, your coaches all have ideas for your plot. The people who care about you **should** play a role, but you **must** be both the author and the principle player. One of the main goals we hope to accomplish at Nichols is to enable you to write your own story – to choose your own adventure – if you will.

I imagine this freedom to create your own narrative sounds pretty appealing, but part of learning to craft your own plotline is appreciating that you must take responsibility for it. When you get to June, and the seniors are up on this stage, and you look back over the narrative arc of your year in silent reflection, you should be able to say "I chose that path. I encountered challenges and I met them as well as I could." The narrative arc that lies before you is yours to make your own.