

Miss Hall's School Commencement June 5, 2022

Remarks by Head of School Julia Heaton P'24

Class of 2022, I am overjoyed to see you ALL HERE today. Since the beginning of the year, you said what you wanted most of all was to be in person for graduation. We never doubted that you would complete your credits or fulfill the responsibilities for graduation, but, after 2 and ½ years of school during a pandemic, we have learned to take nothing for granted, and even something as simple as “in person” was not a given. “Forty-Eight will graduate” became your mantra. This playful phrase spoke to a fervent hope shared by all of us. Every time we had to adjust our protocols, take another rapid test, do another day in quarantine, call the embassy, change a plane reservation, put masks on, go mask optional, take masks off, put masks on again...the reason above all reasons was so that we all could be in person on June 5th.

And, here you are. You are all here. And, you are extraordinary.

This class is very special to MHS. They have always been a bit different, a little unpredictable. I think the term “independent project” sums up this class quite well — you set a vision and make it happen, in your own authentic way, never satisfied to do what others have done before you. This class has also been through a lot. The universe has dealt you many wild cards — disruptions, challenges, and conflicts — around the world and here at Miss Hall's.

You arrived on Holmes Road in the fall of 2018. The theme of the year was “failure and resilience,” auspicious words for that school year. In December, MHS students of color staged a silent protest that turned into a bold call for change. Students shared experiences of prejudice, bias, and inequity at Miss Hall's, and called out the ways that the School we love was out of alignment with its core values. Some of you spoke up with bravery that year. All of you learned the power of people speaking up and speaking out, even if their voices shake (to quote a former colleague who is here today).

In the months that followed, we took a hard look at ourselves and our community. We had honest conversations about racism and oppression and privilege and hurt and impact. Some of these conversations went badly, so we tried again, practicing failure and resilience in real-time. By the end of the year, we had made shifts to curriculum and policies, created an inaugural Dean of Equity and Inclusion position, and adopted a new DEI Statement that insists that “all community members demonstrate respect through their words and actions.” We learned that being an inclusive community requires ongoing work and commitment from all of us.

I thought 2018-19 would be the most disruptive year of your time — and mine — at MHS. I had no idea what was coming next. In the words of Joan Didion, an author we lost this year, “Life changes in the instant. The ordinary instant.” I remember the day in March 2020 when I announced that we would close MHS early for spring break. We told

you to pack your books, just in case; we said we'd see each other in a few weeks. But as you dispersed from Holmes Road, the world went into lockdown. That instant changed the course of your education and your lives.

We resumed school the next fall, in person and remote, on campus and on Zoom, and perhaps the worst of both worlds, hybrid. The theme of the year was "same storm, different boats, heading to shore together." There were rough waters, disappointments, fears, and traumas, both individual and collective. We struggled to connect, we stumbled many times, and we learned to ask for help and rely on each other.

This year, you returned to campus as seniors, determined to make the most of your final year. You welcomed new classmates. You inspired us with your scholarship and service. You dedicated yourselves to your passions, in the arts, sports, tech, activism. You reinvigorated old traditions and created new ones: Prom, Senior Show, Snake Dance, Senior sunrise, and, in honor of Truc, an ice cream truck on campus!! You led us with humor and grace, embraced the imperfection, and showed kindness to others and, most importantly, to yourselves.

The disruption in the world has not ceased. COVID has claimed millions of lives and further amplified inequalities. Globally, we have witnessed the outbreak of war, the continued effects of climate change. In the U.S., we see backlash against social justice movements, anti-LGBTQIA legislation, increasing limits on reproductive rights, and the crisis of gun violence, now the leading cause of death for children in this country, and so deeply intertwined with racism, misogyny, and hatred. There is so much to mourn, so much that needs to change. This is where you come in. You are here, poised at the end of one chapter and the commencement of the next. You are prepared and ready to make a difference, to make change. This is not easy; it is not a given. How did this happen? The answer, I believe, can be found in asparagus. Yes, I said asparagus. Let me try to explain.

Anyone who knows me well knows that I am not great with flowers. If you give me a houseplant, it will almost surely end up a withered brown mess. Yet some of my favorite childhood memories are of my family's vegetable garden in New Hampshire, barefoot in the dirt, popping sweet peas from pods into my mouth, digging up potatoes with a delighted squeal, contests to see whose pole beans would grow tallest, armfuls of fragrant basil and sun-warmed tomatoes brought into the kitchen for dinner.

The most plentiful crop in our family garden is asparagus. Two things you need to know about asparagus — it grows well in cooler climates with long winters like New England. Also, it is a perennial, meaning that it grows every year, without replanting. Perennials take more time to get started, and in the case of asparagus, they should not be harvested in the first few seasons. "The patience is well worth it, though, as asparagus beds can be productive for 15, 20, sometimes up to 30 years."¹

My parents planted our asparagus bed in 1973 — three years before I was born. It is the first crop that we harvest each spring, starting in mid-May. When the stalks stretch

out of the soil, some slender and some stout, we cut them on an angle, a few inches above the ground. My father described the process this way: “Asparagus needs to be cut, and when it is, it sends up new shoots in different directions from the underlying root. Life asserts itself. But if you cut it for too long into the season, you destroy the vigor of the root, and it dies. That’s why we stop cutting at the 4th of July, letting the plant go to seed. There is a balance between the short-term and long-term, the essence of ‘sustainability.’”

My parents taught me and my sister how to tend asparagus, and now my daughters are learning, too. I hope that someday their children will take care of a crop older than they are and savor the green stalks each spring.

What does this have to do with Miss Hall’s? We have many gardens on the Miss Hall’s campus — from the Greenhouse, where all 9th graders learn to care for plants, to the Class of 2021 Meditation Garden, a place to find peace. This year, the Wildlife Ecology class created a pollinator garden, and the Class of 2025 planted an apple orchard. Thank you to the students and adults who brought these projects to life and will carry them forward, enriching and sustaining the campus we all love.

For 124 years, MHS has also been cultivating our graduates — self-aware global citizens with vision and purpose, bold and creative contributors to the common good. The graduates do not appear right away; the process takes a few years, and as with asparagus, the results are well worth the wait. YOU are worth the wait.

The MHS faculty and staff — phenomenal gardeners, all — nourish our students with diverse texts, relevant projects, and provocative questions. They provide enough support and encouragement for new shoots to grow, and they also know the right moment to stop pruning, to let you do your thing. With each school year, the cycle begins again, this delicate balance of care and patience, guiding and stepping aside, allowing students to grow heartier and stronger, to become the independent and compassionate leaders that the world needs so desperately.

Class of 2022, you have spent four years in the fertile and sustaining soil of this community. I hope that when you look back, you will take pride in what you have accomplished. Appreciate those who have encouraged you, challenged you, and let you be. Remember the laughter and joy that you have shared together.

In the words of Marcel Proust, “Be grateful to people who make us happy, they are the charming gardeners who make our souls blossom.” Class of 2022, you have made our souls blossom, and the seeds you have planted at MHS will continue to grow long after you leave us today.

Graduates, we send you forth with gratitude and love.

¹ <https://www.almanac.com/plant/asparagus>