

Commencement, June 4, 2023

Remarks by Julia Heaton P'24, Head of School

Earlier this week, a senior asked if I have a favorite class. “Of course not,” I said. That would be like asking me if I have a favorite child or a favorite book — I love them all so much, it is impossible to choose one favorite.

But, I will say, the Class of 2023 is pretty great. They are talented, intelligent, hardworking, and curious. They have contributed to the School and the local community through their service and leadership, and they demonstrate respect through words and actions. They have made an impact. I know that I speak for my colleagues when I say that we have enjoyed the Class of 2023 very much. So, while I am not allowed to have a favorite class, I do want to share a few favorite things about this class, things that I will miss when they go.

You are funny. You make us laugh... a lot. Always with you, sometimes at you. Your humor is smart and silly and contagious, the kind of funny that sneaks up on you, and, then you are laughing so hard you are crying. You know how to have fun, but never at another’s expense. At Convocation in September, I invited the community to bring back the fun, and you did just that. Thank you for making MHS so fun this year.

You are humble. While you were having fun, you were also excelling at basically everything. You have won national awards in science and languages and the arts. You have done research projects on topics I can barely pronounce, let alone decipher. You totally killed it at the college process, all cool and breezy and getting into amazing schools, where you will triple major in art history, biochemistry, digital media, justice and law, and more. These schools are so lucky to have you. You do not ever brag, or even humble brag; you are just fine knowing your own awesomeness.

You care, deeply. You care deeply about your learning and your personal passions — social justice, gender equality, the environment, and reproductive rights. This is matched by your care for relationships. Your connections with peers, teachers and advisors are deep and authentic. You care about each other; you show up for each other... you show up on time!

I do not take any of this for granted. Your time at Miss Hall’s coincided with the seismic disruption brought on by a global pandemic. Your freshman year was cut short by COVID, and much of the next two years was spent far from friends and family, distanced and masked, and restricted and cautious — far from “normal.” You missed out on milestones and rites of passage, as well as on all the daily interactions that contribute to a sense of place and home.

Given this, the Class of 2023 had every reason to enter their last year of high school thinking “Who cares? Why bother?” But, you didn’t. You returned as seniors with gusto, eager to revive MHS traditions and rekindle the MHS magic. You showed us that school spirit may be measured in Blue & Gold points, but it is created by people — by you.

You cared about Miss Hall’s, and, in return, we care for you. Look out at the audience today and find a staff member who believed in you. Smile at an underclass student who has cheered you on. Look around at your class, who has been with you through the ups and downs. Wave to your family, because without them, you wouldn’t be here at all. Be grateful for the community that has helped you to soar. We are grateful for you, too.

So, class of 2023, you are pretty great. Because you are talented, intelligent, hardworking, and curious, you will be asked to do many great things.

Because you are humble, you may doubt your ability. **Know that you are ready.** MHS has equipped you with the skills and competencies of empathetic global citizens. You know how to listen to different perspectives, use your voices to amplify the voices of others, and create a vision for change. You are ready to contribute boldly and creatively to the common good out there, just as you have done here on Holmes Road. The world needs more bold women leaders, more diverse leaders, more empathetic and passionate leaders. **YOU** are the leaders the world needs.

This is the part of the speech where I now will bestow some advice. I know you will almost certainly ignore me. As a mom of teenagers, I am used to this. But here it goes:

After you leave MHS, while you are out there accomplishing great things, changing the world, you will at some point feel overwhelmed, anxious, sad, a failure. You will be exhausted. My advice to you is to rest. Lie down, and close your eyes. Let your body be still. Allow your mind to stop spinning and to go quiet. Give yourself permission to rest.

This advice falls in the category of things I tell other people to do that I am lousy at. Rest does not come easy to me.

This winter, I had major surgery — I am fine. My doctor’s orders were to stay at home for several weeks to allow my body to recover. Do nothing, she said. Rest. In 25 years of working in schools, and 17 years of parenting, I had never done nothing for 2 weeks. A friend gave me a book, *Wintering*, by Katherine May. May defines wintering as a time when we shut away from the outside world and focus inward, similar to animals in hibernation: “It’s a time for reflection and recuperation, for slow replenishment, for doing those deeply unfashionable things — slowing down, letting your spare time expand, getting enough sleep...It’s a crossroads moment when you need to shed a skin... It’s one of the most important choices you’ll ever make.”ⁱ

I didn't have a choice of whether to have surgery, but it was a crossroads moment. Unable to do the things I usually do — work, exercise, travel, take care of everyone else — I chose to do things that I rarely have time for — sitting by the fireplace, listening to music, writing in a journal, talking for hours on the phone, devouring books of all kinds. I let my people take care of me for a while — and my people showed up again and again.

Sometimes, the wintering will come at you unexpectedly, unwanted. In the words of Katherine May, “There will be moments when we're riding high, and moments where we can't bear to get out of bed. Both are normal. We need friends who wince along with our pain, who tolerate our gloom, who allow us to be weak for a while when we're finding our feet again. We need to perform those functions for ourselves; to give ourselves a break and be kind. To find our grit, but in our own time.”

Tricia Hersey, author of *Rest Is Resistance: A Manifesto*, has taken the concept of rest a step further. She has founded a group called the Nap Ministry, that brings rest from the personal to the collective. This, she argues, is how we will fight hustle culture, repair broken relationships, and correct systemic inequalities.

“When we're rested, our brain is at its peak height... to be able to create, to invent, to imagine... This radical way of thinking that we need to [create] a whole new system is not going to come from an exhaustive state.... This is not about self-care. This is about community care...collective, communal, interconnected care.”ⁱⁱ In MHS speak, this is about the common good.

So, Class of 2023, as you move on from MHS, take with you the lessons you have learned and the relationships you have forged. Whatever you are called to do, know that you are ready. When the challenges come, remember to rest, and, occasionally, to winter. Remember that you have a choice of where you invest your time and attention. You get to decide what you are most passionate about and what is background noise. The choice you make today doesn't have to be forever; it doesn't even have to be the same next week. You have the right to shed an old skin and leave behind what you don't need. We are proud of you, for your accomplishments, passion, your humility, humor, and caring heart.

We send you forth with love and admiration.

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Wintering: The Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times by Katharine May, Riverhead Books, 2020.

ⁱⁱ <https://prismreports.org/2020/09/03/qa-nap-ministrys-tricia-hersey-talks-rest-and-racial-justice/>