

Eleven years ago I began my career at Durham Academy as a Spanish and English teacher fresh out of UNC. Eleven years ago TONIGHT I stumbled over a major hurdle of that first year— Open House. It's funny to think back on the experience of that evening. My first few weeks at DA had gone reasonably well – none of my four classes had yet risen up in open mutiny— but nonetheless the idea of Open House had generated all kinds of fears. Sure I could stay a page ahead of my ninth graders in class, but what in the WORLD would I say to their parents? At 22, I was young enough to BE one of the children of these parents, let alone EDUCATE their children.

Another factor that ratcheted up my adrenaline that night: the presence of Katie Dominguez and Bryson Brodie in my first period Spanish class. These two were delightful students, but their FATHERS struck fear in my heart. Katie's dad happened to be the head of the Romance Language department at UNC, Spanish was one of my majors there, and Dr. Dominguez, I imagined, would probably stand up in the middle of my mini-class and begin yelling at me in Spanish that I would not understand. Bryson Brodie's father happened to be President of Duke University at the time. So I thought – great. This is what Durham Academy is all about – parents who know everything there is to know about education, whose careers have been longer than my life, who will see through my lack of experience and leave me weeping in a heap of youth and shame.

To quell these nightmares I worked hard to prepare myself. I labored to craft a 10-minute lecture that left not a SECOND for questions from the audience. I had audiovisual aids that would surely dazzle those parents, or at least distract them from listening to me. I hadn't taken education courses in college, but I tried to stock my presentation with erudite and inscrutable multisyllabic buzzwords. I planned to use the word "pedagogical" at least a dozen times.

Thus armed with a good lecture, protected by multimedia devices, and enshrouded in a mist of obscure vocabulary, I felt confidence surge in me. I could handle this night, I figured. I AM A TEACHER. I can still remember sitting in this auditorium, ignoring the Upper School Director as he droned on about whatever it is those guys drone on about, my adrenaline pumping for the trials to come. As the bell rang, I scurried down to my classroom and waited by the door, double-checking the sleeves on my cheap blue blazer. The first mother came around the corner. She gave me a generous and welcoming smile. She looked deep into my eyes and said, "Oh how nice that they have student tour guides tonight. Could you please tell me where Mr. Steiner's room is?"

I survived that night, and now feel like I'm in a very different place. Durham Academy has changed significantly in the last decade. We've grown larger, we've become more diverse, we've reconfigured our campuses and updated our facilities, our curricula are more sophisticated and our teaching staff even more impressive than before. Our student tour guides now have clearly-indicated nametags.

I too have changed. I now shave almost daily. Somewhat more significantly, I myself have become a parent twice over. And as of a couple weeks ago, I've become a parent of a school-age child. So last week I went to my first Durham Academy Open House and saw the event through a vastly different lens. Three things struck me.

First, and most powerfully, I now understand what's at STAKE in the school experience of one's own child -- the incredible importance of every teacher, the heartbreaking fragility of each relationship -- just how much it all MATTERS. The evidence you gather tonight is so crucial,

especially for those parents new to Durham Academy this year. IS this the right place for my child? Will she find what she needs to succeed here? Will the school KNOW her? Will they LOVE her? Will she find herself here? Beyond all the buildings and the courses and the teachers, all that really matters is ONE child's experience.

Second, I now understand how enthusiastically parents are rooting for teachers to succeed. Dr. Dominguez and Dr. Brodie turned out to be among the most energetic of DA supporters. But ALL our parents, who COULD seem like adversaries in the educational process, are in fact our greatest allies. You are the FIRST educators of our students, and though you may not believe this from the one-word answers you get at home, you remain the CENTRAL mentors and role models in the lives of our Upper Schoolers. So I feel lucky to have so many of you here tonight and PRIVILEGED to work with you this year.

Third, and perhaps most urgently, I realize that you did not come tonight to hear ME prattle on about school-wide policies. You came to meet those closest to your children. So, while I DO want to share a few ideas, I'll try not to talk too long before I turn you loose to meet our faculty.

And what a faculty it is. I came back to DA from a paradise in Southern Switzerland, and the quality of this faculty was the primary draw. I truly feel privileged to be working with them. And it is PRIVILEGE, a word I've used twice now, that I want to talk a little about tonight.

It is often easier and certainly more comforting NOT to acknowledge privilege. It would be nice to believe in the fantasy of pure and unfettered American meritocracy, wherein all of us work for precisely what we deserve. I, for example, would love to believe that I haven't benefited from a long string of luck that began in the womb. I would love to think that being male hasn't been an advantage for me, hasn't made life easier in our culture. It would be nice to imagine that being white hasn't entitled me to certain privileges that I did absolutely NOTHING to earn. Like being straight, able-bodied and healthy, growing up in the upper middle class – all of these things have nothing to do with choice or work, or merit. They are the results of the universal birth lottery.

But it is tempting for those who enjoy privileges to think that we chose our lottery numbers with skill. Or, as Texas Governor Anne Richards said about her opponent, "It's easy when you're born on third base, to think you hit a triple."

Now, I am an English teacher sometimes, so I cannot resist the urge to look for meaning in *words themselves*. American Heritage defines privilege as

- a. A special advantage, immunity, permission, right, or benefit granted to or enjoyed by an individual, class, or caste.

"A special advantage" – isn't this precisely what all parents want for their children? Isn't it why so many of us have brought our children to Durham Academy? If we look more deeply, the ETYMOLOGY of the word PRIVILEGE gives us some clues (once we realize we have it) about what we ought to do with it.

Privilege arrives through Middle English and Old French, from Latin *privilegium*. And if we dig even deeper, into the Indo-European roots, we find *prvus*, *single*, *alone*; + *lx*, *lg-*, *law*. Privilege, then, is at its essence, A LAW DESIGNED FOR ONE PERSON.

Among the core privileges for students at Durham Academy is that every individual student has direct and relatively intimate access to the wisdom of his or her teachers. In the same vein, our small size allows us to make LAWS of sorts for each individual student. Our advisory system makes every child feel privileged. Our tutorials make private extra help sessions a daily possibility. We make individualized and detailed accommodations for the learning differences of 80 students. Chances for individuals to shine on sports teams and extracurricular activities are accessible to nearly everyone. Durham Academy has then, designed itself as a place of privilege.

But what about the darker side of privilege? The dangers it presents. Well, those sides lurk in the definition itself. American Heritage tells us that privilege is also

- b. Such an advantage, immunity, or right held as a prerogative of status or rank, and exercised to the exclusion or detriment of others.

Privilege can, then, exclude and hurt. Psychiatrist Robert Coles writes often about the risks of excessive narcissism among the privileged. He sees not only that wealth and power can create unrealistic perceptions in young people, but that the continual satisfaction of needs and tastes creates an excessive emphasis on individual achievement. Coles once said in an interview about independent schools like DA:

“I am going to be quite blunt and maybe uncomfortably so. . . What is the independent school but a social version of privilege? It’s a school devoted to those who have the means and the wish to separate themselves from others and get a kind of education that presumably is distinctive and better, that offers more opportunities, possibilities, and privileges. Independent schools are centers of privilege in our culture”

We might react to Coles’ words with defensiveness or guilt, but these emotions can only paralyze. Acknowledging our distinct privilege, and finding ways to leverage it for its PROPER use in the world, then, is among the responsibilities of any independent school parent, teacher or student.

So how can we use our privilege to good ends? How can we return to the universe some of the goodness we are lucky to enjoy? How can we insure that our privilege yields something more than the selfish protection of more privilege? I’d like to suggest three paths and a destination.

First, from the perspective of you parents, your children’s great privilege is not merely inherited. You EARN the money to pay this tuition. You SACRIFICE to have your children here. You LABOR to support them, both financially and emotionally. So while your children may have been born on third base, their parents have been running hard and diving headfirst in the dirt to beat the tag.

Second, our faculty works hard to stretch students beyond their limited selves. In our outdoor education and community service programs, in our classes and advisory groups, in sports practices and arts rehearsals, we are CONSTANTLY pushing students to look beyond themselves, to stretch their comfort zones, to see ideas from new perspectives, to connect their private selves with the public world.

The third characteristic that might protect DA students from the perils of privilege: they work AWFULLY hard. They are stressed and stretched, and indeed they ought to be. Amid a culture that caters ceaselessly to material comfort, numbed isolation, and immediate gratification, our students are learning to work, to make the most of their time, to communicate meaningfully with others, to reason their way through the world. If ever you worry about privileged and lazy youth, come to our room at 6:30 on a weekday morning. Talk to our 12th graders about Senior Challenge. Ask a junior how much homework she did last night.

So for parents, teachers, and students, WORK has the potential to redeem us from the dangers of privilege. But, as I tried to explain to our students in our opening assembly, work in itself is nothing but a means. It is a path that merely wanders until it has a destination.

The END of a Durham Academy education is what gives us the chance to leverage our great privilege into something truly useful. Our mission statement tells us that the END of all this work, the purpose of all these buildings and classes and carpools and teachers is

A moral, happy, productive life.

Without this ennobling destination, our work and our privilege are at best wasted and at worst dangerous. And if we're trying to avoid the kind of privilege that excludes and damages the world, we should remind ourselves often that, while we are a private school, none of these three is a private endeavor.

Among our central tasks then, as parents and educators of these young people (whose native narcissism, by the way, is PRECISELY appropriate for adolescents), is busting them out of their individual prisons, stretching them beyond their private privileges, and helping them to connect with the public world. Aristotle believed that a human COULD NOT GET to happiness alone, or even with ones friends. Happiness required participation in the wider *polis* – the city-state. Happiness derived from the quality of our connections to the big world. While we're tossing around big ideas from big thinkers, check this one out.

"The human being experiences himself, his thoughts and his feelings as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of our consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affections for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from the prison by widening the circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty." (Albert Einstein)

Now this is heady stuff. It borders on cheesiness almost. It reminds me a bit of the "We are the world video" and other flighty fantasies. But these ideas are powerful, and they are quite connected to our daily tasks at Durham Academy. In fact this quotation served as the focus point for a recent Upper School faculty meeting. For an hour after school last Thursday, we holed ourselves up in the band room and tried hard to think about how we can help students arrive at Einstein's insight. The frustrating fact is, they probably WON'T get there before graduation. They'll worry about homework and Bojangles, about AP's and instant messenger. They'll leave their trash in the quad and they'll complain about the many demands that we place on them. But we should not forget how PRIVILEGED they are to learn in a place with such a noble destination, and how privileged WE are to accompany them on that journey.

Upper School Open House, 2003
Michael Ulku-Steiner

Thanks for your patience, and have a great evening.

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