

## REMARKS FROM OPENING CONVOCATION 2014

September 4, 2014

It matters to each and every one of the passionate educators on this stage, that you are known and stretched to think and act in ways that will further clarify your evolving understanding of self and place in this world.

Together, last year, you may recall that we committed to three things. And I left them for you on a printed sticker. Let's shake the summer rust with an interactive quiz: Returning students, join me to assist our new students.

Shout out the answer if you remember the three themes from last year, in order:

Be kind. Be present. Have purpose.

Before we recess into the theater for opening meeting, I offer two unifying themes and the wristband on your seats for ambitious solidarity in a united call to exercise our brains and stretch our understanding of self.

My hope for each of you this year is that you consistently:

1. Stretch your algorithm
2. And to Do The Right Thing

Let's begin with Stretching your algorithm:

One thing I love about summer is catching up on music, movies, and books that have queued during the school year. When I'm lucky, with the change in schedule and more time for reflection, I discover that new band, movie, or author.

Using content and collaborative-based algorithms, my Flipboard app recommends articles based on my interests, Netflix recommends movies based on what I have watched in the past, My Spotify app - the BEST music app of all time - recommends bands and tracks based on my listening habits, and Netvibes delivers my news feeds through the political commentary and blogs most aligned to my opinions.

It's bliss. My own creative summer echo-chamber!

The goal of each of these tools is to inform and aid discovery, which I can't imagine living without now, and there's real beauty and power in the collaborative exploration and recommendation process behind these apps.

There is another side to this algorithmic bliss, however.

New studies are revealing that thoughtless consumption contaminates experience and influences our thinking at a low level, changing the way we think and narrowing our choices.

Think about it: How does your perception change when a friend tells you to see a movie or listen to a song they love, especially if it mirrors something you already like?

Use these tools, as they will provide interesting avenues of exploration, and celebrate your individuality - and complexity - and stay ahead of the algorithms that box your thinking.

I extend this to news and critical thinking about, well, everything.

I thought about you as I watched and read the news this summer. stories involving Market Basket, the Ukraine, ISIS, the Middle East, Robin Williams, James Foley, Michael Brown and Ferguson, Missouri.

To be more specific, I thought about you as I observed well-educated and “mature” adults unable to manage difference, complexity, and compromise. I considered how you, with your developing sense of your own points of view, might be receiving and absorbing this information. Strident opinions, raised voices, and limited listening seems to be the style of most experts today.

I am convinced more than ever that we need to use our time to engage in constructive, civil, and meaningful exchanges about complex topics - topics that defy the boxes of right and wrong.

Respectfully entertaining or stretching to understand a point of view outside of one’s comfort zone is where learning and personal growth live.

Your participation, your consideration of sources, and your engagement as mindful, listening creators and consumers trumps any algorithm. Surprise yourself with your thinking this year.

Let us move closer again to the center line between comfort and discomfort, of seeking moments of disequilibrium and dissonance. Because it is this place of openness that allows for understanding and tolerance.

In a personal effort to stretch and get to know you better, I have a request.

If you read or watched something this past year that you love, please share it with me this week. Email is best. I promise to read at least the first five books, blogs, articles, or movies and report back on my progress this winter.

The challenge is to stretch your thinking and participation in some form or shape every day. To exercise your mind, body, and spirit.

I'm now entering squawking seagull territory, Dan, so I have a quick stretching strategy for you.

Show of hands: Who has had a foot, leg, or arm fall asleep to the point where it feels like tingling pins and needles when you attempt to move?

Let's avoid that feeling now: Everyone, please stand, stretch to the sky with both hands, perhaps give a fist bump to your neighbor. Please be seated.

Back to pins and needles, We've got nerves running through our bodies that act as lines of communication between the brain and the other parts of the body, transmitting commands and relaying sensory information back to the brain for processing.

As Matt Soniak wrote recently in his post on Mental Floss, with a sleeping limb, your nerves are going a little haywire because prolonged pressure has actually cut off communication between that limb and the brain. This tingling sensation is called paresthesia.

Pressure puts the squeeze on nerve pathways and blood vessels, so the nerves can't transmit signals properly, and the blood vessels can't bring oxygen and nutrients to the nerves.

Eventually, if we catch this sleepy limb soon enough, we can "shake things up", get the blood flowing, restore the appropriate lines of communication. The tingling gets a little worse at first, but soon our sensory super highway is back up and running again.

Can you guess where I'm going here?

Personal, emotional, intellectual, and creative lethargy causes numbness, both literal and figurative. Shake things up. Get moving. Jump right in. The initial feeling might be a bit disorienting or uncomfortable. But, by stretching, the pay-off is that you'll be in the mix with all communication pathways open.

We keep our minds, bodies, spirits, and algorithms alive and well through this fresh influx of blood, through stretching.

Now, to our second theme: Do The Right Thing.

In 1989, on their first date ever, President and Michelle Obama went to see Spike Lee's movie, Do the Right Thing. I was a high school student at the time, blasting Public Enemy's Fight the Power - a perfect adolescent anthem - in my rusty red Toyota pickup as I drove through the mean streets of Groveland, MA.

"Do the Right Thing" was a bold, creative, edgy film, the story of a community with a Korean grocery store, a black radio station and an Italian restaurant, all located in the melting pot of Brooklyn.

During the hottest day of the summer, with the incessant soundtrack of Fight the Power, and references to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X throughout,

tensions rise. People stop listening to one another, no one feels heard, and assumptions based on race or ethnicity rule. In the final scenes of the movie there is violence, looting, and the police accidentally killing a man.

Did I mention this was a movie shot in NY from 1989, not the news from Missouri in 2014?

The movie and music had a major impact on me, and although I didn't fully grasp the depth of it at the time, I understood that there was more I needed to know about the world, my own identity and position on issues that were seldom discussed in my home or high school.

Now, 25 years later, the message is just as vital and relevant.

In a recent New York Times article entitled *Orchestrating Civil, Constructive Conversations*, David Bornstein writes that despite increasing diversity on college campuses today, many students end up hanging out with people just like them, and many of their conversations aren't very meaningful – there isn't a lot of talk about the bigger and deeper issues of life.

Then, when a controversy inevitably flares up around difference, things breakdown – as they have on college and high school campuses around the country.

In response to an unsettling incident at Northwestern, students formed the Ask Big Questions initiative. The big takeaway from the initiative, notes Bornstein, is that “facilitating a meaningful conversation takes both intention and skills – skills, he says, “that are not taught in schools or acquired at the dinner table.”

My question to you as we begin the year: Why not at Pingree?

Ask Big Question's central insight is that when it comes to dialogue about controversial topics, the way the initial question is posed makes all the difference. There are two kinds of questions:

A hard question – These require special knowledge to answer, so only some people feel they can speak up – for example: How can we bring peace to the Middle East? Such questions can lead to fruitful discussions only if participants already share a degree of trust and rapport. If they don't, the discussion can degenerate: those who think they know the most will debate and protest, while others watch and feel they don't have anything to contribute.

The second type is A BIG question – These matter to everyone and everyone can answer them – for example, Where do we feel at home? When do you conform? For whom are we responsible? What do we choose to ignore? When do you take a stand?

“Big questions open a space in which each individual can contribute, speaking from experience, without feeling pressured to win a debate or demonstrate loyalty to a position...Big questions can help build the trust that's necessary to grapple effectively with hard questions.”

In a few weeks, Byron Hurt will be join us on campus to discuss his work with students and athletes across the country and his award-winning documentary HIP-HOP: Beyond Beats and Rhymes.

Hurt asks both big and hard questions about masculinity, sexism, violence and homophobia in pop and hip-hop culture. And by doing so, he takes us on a personal journey of self-discovery and discomfort while looking closely at a culture he holds dear.

In the words of Chuck D from Public Enemy, "Being positive is like going up a mountain. Being negative is like sliding down a hill. A lot of times people want to take the easy way out because it's what they've understood throughout their lives."

The right thing and the easy thing are rarely the same thing. Do what matters, not just what is convenient. When faced with a choice, choose the path that strengthens you.

Will we allow ourselves - as kind, present, and purposeful members of this community - to consider the big questions, even if they challenge a long-held point of view?

Books, ideas, works of art, and the perspectives of the minds around you looking for their own answers in their own ways, are all opportunities to shake your sleeping limbs. Your attitude and perspective mean everything.

It is our primary responsibility at Pingree to establish lines of communication between the mind and heart, the mind and experience, and the mind and its neighbor, so that we may each define and redefine our own sense of self.

In closing, this summer marked the passing of Pingree's first headmaster, Robin Rogers. The youngest headmaster in Pingree's history came to this former home in the horse country of South Hamilton, MA, from his job as a history teacher at St. George's School in Newport, RI.

With only five years of teaching at St. George's, and few prior at an independent school in Texas, Mr. Rogers arrived to convert a home to a school and launch an all-girls school in 1960. Can you imagine the stretch experiences involved in this adventure!

I will never forget his kind letters of support in my first year here, sharing stories of how he scrambled to pay the electric bill and squeeze desks in old classrooms. His pioneering spirit lives with us at this convocation, as does his spirit as an educator.

As one of his former students noted: "More than anything Mr. Rogers was a champion of us, adolescent kids thrown together -- letting us know it's ok to be who we are, but yet we can always do better."

Later this month we will celebrate Mr. Rogers and the 50th reunion of that very first class of young women at Pingree. I can't help but wonder how their days here,

in the Pingree's family home, were spent wrestling with different, yet similar big and hard questions.

To that end, I ask each of you to err in the direction of kindness. Begin from that place that Marisa spoke of at the start of this ceremony. Stretch your minds and try new things as Dan implored. Break outside the algorithms that box you in. Surprise yourself; Do the Right Thing; and engage big questions that elude "right" answers.

Your teachers and I pledge to do the same and each one of us on this stage is rooting for you. This is going to be a great year!