

Convocation 2006

Headmaster's Address

A Wimp's Guide to Waring: How to Cope with a Place that Takes Over Your Life, Demands the Impossible, and Expects You to be in Two Places at Once

I took a lot of philosophy in college. Inevitably, I ended up having the same professor in a number of courses. This particular professor was known for giving essentially the same lecture during the first class of every philosophy course he taught. We called it his “philosophy-is-not-for-wimps” lecture. I can still remember wonderfully encouraging phrases from it like, “the cash value of philosophy is zero” and “philosophy is not on any career track” and “you can still drop this course without penalty if you want.” He would elaborate at some length, for example, about how the point of philosophy was to ask the really big questions to which there were not necessarily any real answers, and were we comfortable with that? Clearly, my professor was seeking to separate the serious philosophy students from the pretenders and dilettantes for whom he had little patience and even less inclination to invest his time and energy. He wanted commitment from his students right from the start, and this was his crude but effective way of getting it.

Now, I had been thinking that I might do something along this line for Convocation today, though, of course, in a more nuanced way than my old professor so that you would not all respond by filing out the door, as did many during those first philosophy classes years ago. Maybe, I thought, I should get everyone's attention with a little “gut check” as we set out officially on this academic year. But, that was before I heard the speeches of Sam, Rory, and Anna, which have served up some very strong medicine about what it means to be at Waring and which may have a good number of you already shaking in your boots. With all this talk about “the constraints of time and energy” being “considered inconsequential” and the necessity of being in two places at once, some of you may be wondering if success at Waring is, in fact, possible for hale and hearty mortals, much less for wimps. So, on the assumption that we all have our bouts of wimpishness and that some of us may even at this very moment be feeling just a little wimpy, I am changing the title of my speech from “Waring is not for Wimps” to “A Wimp's Guide to Waring,” or “How to Cope with a Place that Takes Over Your Life, Demands the Impossible, and Expects You to be in Two Places at Once.”

Sam is right, of course: Waring does tend to take over your life. He may have set a new benchmark with his gripping description of this well-known phenomenon. Keeping Waring out of your life is like keeping water out your basement if you live in the Mississippi delta: it just keeps coming in through every crack and crevice, finding its own level, forcing you to live with its reality. Sometimes, as Sam says, “you'll find yourself [just] wanting out,” just wanting to be left alone, just wanting to resume something like an ordinary, unexamined life without the constant encumbrance of having to ponder what it all means and how everything relates to everything else. After all, not every *oeuvre* is *chef*—Allegra!—not every moment is liminal—Jim!—and, for heaven's sake—John Wigglesworth!—there are things that are not ships!

Let's be honest, those of us who have been around here for a while, we have all felt this way at some point, and perhaps more often than we are willing to admit. Thanks to Sam for having the courage to point this out. And, his advice on how to cope with the all-encompassing embrace of Waring is equally on the mark. "You have to stick with it," he says. You have to let the journey "take you," for sooner or later you will come out of the woods and find yourself at a way-point, or even at your destination, and be able to look back over where you've come and realize that the route made sense all along, even when it didn't seem to.

This is the conventional wisdom on the subject, and it is true. I have given it myself on numerous occasions. But, it occurs to me that it may be a lot to ask, especially of younger students, for whom the two points of "taking on the Waring journey" and "coming out above the tree line" may be separated by years of what may feel like "aimless wandering," to use Sam's phrase. What can we say to you who are still deep in the Waring woods, feeling taken over by all that the school demands? What is my word to wimps on this subject?

It is this: If you feel that Waring is taking over your life and this is beginning to get you down, turn the tables and let your life take over Waring. This is more than a mere play on words. Your life—your story—is important, too. It is, in fact, essential, because the Waring story is not one but many stories, which, like streams of water, flow together to create the broad, deep, and living narrative that is our school. Without this constant inflow of new life, new energy, and new stories, Waring as we know it would very quickly become as barren as a dry river bed.

So, push back. Impose your life on Waring. Find your voice—in the classroom, on the sports field, in the studio, in the laboratory, in writing, in music, in expressions of creativity, compassion, and conscience. Find your voice wherever it is to be found, and tell your story. Weave that story in among all the other stories that make up the Waring narrative. You will feel better, and we will be all the richer for it.

Rory is right, too: Waring can make ridiculous and sometimes impossible demands on your time and energy. And in our infinite wisdom we have no hesitation about making every student participate in every program area, which produces apparent anomalies like avowed non-actors doing Theater and triumphant non-footballers like Rory ending up on a soccer team. Yes, this is unrealistic. But we have found that students are more likely to find out what they are *truly* capable of if they are asked to undertake *truly* difficult things: things they may not take to at first, or ever; things that may border on the impossible. What is more, we have found that Waring students often ask the impossible of themselves and seem to thrive doing it—though not necessarily at first, as Rory relates. I was particularly struck by the way Rory phrased his eventual realization of the importance of giving everything—including the things you're sure you can't do—your best effort. "A refusal to try," he says, "is the greatest of all Waring sins." Notice that not trying is not just bad form or a momentary lapse of commitment: it is a SIN! That

makes someone who doesn't try a SINNER!! And one can only imagine what may befall such a sinner in the hands of an angry Humanities teacher. I get all wimpy just thinking about it.

A word for wimps is definitely needed. Here it is: If a refusal to try is the greatest of all Waring sins, a willingness to try is one of the greatest Waring virtues. Listen to that last part again: **a willingness to try is one of the greatest Waring virtues.** New students: mark, learn, and inwardly digest this truth. If you do, your days at Waring will be long and prosperous. As Rory said, we don't expect you to be perfect, but we do expect you to try, and we love it when you do. At Waring, a willingness to try can cover a whole host of imperfections. I have noticed over the years that Waring teachers write in particularly glowing terms about students who try, even when they don't always succeed. This, by the way, is one of the distinct advantages of having narrative evaluations: that you tried may not come through at all with letter grades, while with written evaluations it can become the most important part of the story. So, what do you do if Waring seems to demand the impossible? TRY. You may be surprised by what you achieve. We'll love you for it whether you succeed or fail. And failure, as you may be discovering, is more often than not on the route to success.

Anna alleges that Waring has often required her to be in two places at once. She also notes that Waring has a tendency to play fast and loose with the time/space continuum by expecting more and more to be accomplished in diminishing chronological periods. This in turn has made it "essential to have a certain blind faith in the Waring experience." Now, with all due respect to acts of faith, this sort of thing really does seem to be unreasonable, even if it is done, as she says, "in the pursuit of some higher goal."

But, why do we do this? Why do we insist on packing so much into our Waring lives that time and space seem to sag under the weight of it all? I've come to the conclusion after years of reflection on the subject that it is an expression of who we are. We—this includes everyone, not just those of us who plan the program—are just interested in so much and so determined to do it all that we pack it all in, sometimes well beyond the conventional limits of time and space. It's rather like packing three large bags for a two-day vacation: we don't like to leave things out that we feel we may need. We are a "both/and" rather than an "either/or" culture. Yogi Berra could have been thinking of the Waring School when he gave his famous advice: when you come to a fork in the road, take it. We resist having to choose between two good alternatives and, more often than not, will try to do both. All of this, of course, has historical roots. The Founders wanted a school where all students, not just the "best" students, had access to all the best things the school had to offer. This was and is a wonderful vision, but it does get dicey when we try to do this all of the time.

So, what is my advice to the faint-hearted who are not sure they are fully up to warping time and space to fit the Waring program? Is there a word for wimps that is up to the task? Yes, I believe there is. Very simply, you need to let us know when you have reached your limit. Assert your finiteness! Say to us calmly but firmly: I cannot be in

two places at the same time. We may be disappointed, but we will understand. We are finite too!

In closing, I would like to say something about another way of being in two places at the same time that Anna also alluded to and that we should avoid. And this is for all of us, not just for wimps. We should avoid the state of *us-and-them*. To any community, but especially to a community like Waring, us-and-them thinking is like high blood pressure: it is a “silent killer” of vitality and well-being. It is insidious; it can creep in almost anywhere and take over the normal, healthy exchange of ideas and creative energy that are the lifeblood of any community. Us-and-them can quickly change into *us-versus-them*. It makes friends and colleagues into adversaries. It sets the stage for intolerance and the destructive pathologies of cynicism, which attack the personal and social affirmations on which the well-being of our school community depends.

As we stride into this 35th year of the Waring School, let us do so as *one* community, as US, united in our mission and ready to work together for the individual and common good.

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