

Convocation 2009

Headmaster's Address: "Learning as Personal Paradigm"

The word on the street about Waring, or at least one word on the street, is that Waring is a place where learning is personal. Already today, everyone who has spoken has, one way or another, incorporated this conventional wisdom about Waring into their remarks. Though the conventional wisdom about most things generally oversimplifies them to some degree, I find that it is often largely on the mark, that it is rarely dead wrong, and that it almost always contains an important element of truth. The conventional wisdom that Waring is where learning gets personal is, I am certain, largely true.

But what do we mean by this? What does it mean to say that at Waring the learning model is personal? The word "personal" is a "big" word. Not big in the usual sense of having lots of letters and a fancy etymological pedigree that makes it irresistible to effete pundits. But big in the sense that it encompasses a great deal of semantic space, meaning that it both denotes and connotes a lot of different things to different people. Words like this are often problematic because people tend to assume that what they mean by the word is what everyone else means by the word, which, of course, inevitably leads to misunderstanding. This can be especially true of words like "personal" that are very common and widely used. Over the years, I have found that when people use the word "personal" to describe Waring, they may or may not mean by this something that actually describes our school. Hence the question: what do we mean when we say that learning at Waring is personal?

Our Founders, I am afraid, are going to give us little help on this particular question. In preparation for this talk, I read over two early Waring brochures, and I couldn't find even one mention of the word "personal" in them. There was lots of language around things like "the ideal learning environment," the responsibilities—such as being "public"—of being part of a learning community, and the necessity for "honest, disciplined, and purposeful effort" in taking responsibility for one's own learning. But there was no specific language about learning being "personal." Of course, this does not mean that this idea was not present. After all, an idea can be represented by different words. An idea can also be implicit, that is, it can be so fundamental, so axiomatic to what is being said that it is never even stated at all but rather assumed. This is more the way I remember it. We were so focused in those days on what we had to do to create the school day-in-and-day-out that we didn't pause to consider that this was all an intensely personal experience, and far more so than in most schools. But, that was 25 or 30 years ago. What about today? Is the implicit idea of learning as personal still at play in the Waring community? And what does it look like in action?

For this, I sought help in the Waring School Statement of Mission and Guiding Assumptions, which, as everyone should know, can be easily accessed on the Waring website. Where else but there if I wanted to find out what we mean by learning being personal at Waring. As it happens, the word "personal" occurs five times in this statement. "Aha," I thought, "we're finally getting somewhere." But further examination

revealed that these five occurrences are really not that helpful. In all of them “personal” is more or less a synonym for the word “individual.” And two of these occurrences are used in expressions that describe behaviors that we at Waring are challenging or trying to discourage. Again, as with our early brochures, the learning-is-personal idea is there, implicitly, but it is not explicitly defined.

At this point, with my researches clearly not getting me where I wanted to go, I decided to do what I should have done in the first place: I put the question to Waring students! So, this past Wednesday at All-School Meeting, with the whole school wedged into the Polygon and with everyone feeling lazy and unfocused because they had just finished eating lunch and with the temperature and humidity in the Forum rising to its peak for the year so far, I asked each student and teacher to write me a note card with the prompt: “At Waring, learning is personal when ...”. Now, most experienced educators would tell you that such an exercise under such conditions is pure folly, a sure formula for disaster, something that not even Barack Obama could pull off! Imagine, if you can, 165 students and faculty sweating together in close quarters, trying to focus themselves on this task, trying to concentrate quietly in unison for ten minutes, and then being asked to volunteer in turn to read aloud before the whole school what they had written. What insane expectations? I should get real! This sort of thing just doesn’t happen in school. And yet it does happen at Waring, and it did happen at All-School Meeting last Wednesday.

And the results were quite extraordinary, a mother lode of practical insight by those who live the learning life at Waring every day. Virtually every note card written expressed something important about what it means that learning at Waring is personal. Given the constraints of time, I cannot mine this mother lode very deeply, but I would like to skim the surface a bit and share with you this morning a few of the essential ideas that emerged from this exercise. As usual, I will do this in the form of three observations!

First, I was struck by how many students of all ages mentioned the opportunity to exercise “choice” as something that makes learning personal at Waring. I was struck not because I don’t think this is true, but struck because it is such a mature insight, one that does not lie on the surface. Listen to Mary Ellis from Group 1: “At Waring learning is personal because you chose to do everything. Every night, you can either make the choice to work hard on your homework or to slack off. Almost everyone at Waring makes the choice to work hard, and therefore they make their work and how they learn personal. They choose to pay attention in class, which makes it personal.” Emily Friend, from Group 2, says: “Learning is personal because you can choose what, how, how much you learn, not because teachers ... tell you [but because] ... as a community we have helped each other cultivate a want to [take] control [of] our learning.” Cam McInnes, also from Group 2, frames this idea with startling candor: “Learning is personal because you have to [choose] for yourself if you will learn or not. Nobody at Waring can make you learn anything.” From Group 3, Evan Supple says: “The personal part of Waring is that your quality of education is based around how much of yourself you [choose to] put in.” Or listen to Peter Howes from Group 4: “As students we ‘personally’ choose to educate ourselves. We could all coast by if we wanted to, but nobody does.” Senior Walker Staples gets at this idea through metaphor: “Learning at

Waring is personal in the same way running is personal ... [the choice] is entirely up to you to keep going.”

Now, obviously, all of this talk of choice making things personal makes sense in the Waring scheme of things. But it also strikes me, as maybe it strikes you, as being somewhat counter-intuitive, perhaps even a little ironic. Waring, after all, has a program that is for the most part required. Students do not have many choices as to what courses they will take: everyone takes French, everyone takes Science, everyone takes Humanities, and so on. When applicants decide on another school over Waring, they often cite as a reason that they want to be in a larger school where there are more choices or options. Of course, this is a different sense of the word “choice” than we have been talking about. But the distinction between the two senses is instructive. One is objective and limited; the other is personal and dynamic. Choice in the sense of option puts the emphasis on the object chosen rather than on the chooser. And it is limited by the range of options available. But choice in what I will call for our purposes the “Waring sense” puts the emphasis on the chooser and on his or her personal qualities and sense of value. It is dynamic because the act of choosing is not foreclosed when the object is chosen but is likely to continue because it grows out of the personal passion and commitment of the chooser. Such choices beget more and better choices, which explains why Waring students, who have fewer options, always seem to be making more choices!

As the school year began, President Obama urged students across the country to make the choice to stay in school. This was surely good advice. But today, as we formally begin the academic year at Waring, I would like to take this good advice a step—maybe several steps—further. I urge you to choose your school every day, to make that choice again and again in the way you engage your yourselves in the Waring program and in the life of this learning community. Through the investment of your wise daily choices, you will not only create for yourself a future that is bright with promise, but you will personalize your Waring story along the way.

Second, by far the most common theme represented in the note cards was the idea that learning is personal because it happens in relationship with others. There were many ways of expressing this idea. Here is a sampling. “Learning is personal at Waring because you create a special bond with your teachers that stays with you the whole year.” (Grace Berntson, Core) “Learning is personal for me when teachers want to know what you think, not just what you know.” (Ellie Currie, Group 3) “Learning is personal to me when I can connect with teachers. ... Whether you are playing tennis [with them] on the weekends ... or emailing [them] an article that you found interesting ..., you are breaking that gap between student and teacher and almost becoming friends.” (Thomas Adam, Group 3) “Learning is personal when I can comfortably approach my teachers if I have a problem when it occurs outside of the ... classroom. Learning is personal when I can learn from those younger and those older than I am.” (Adrienne Ogle, Group 4) “Learning is personal for me when teachers call me by my real name. ... I like the sound of my name being called and seeing the inviting smile on my teacher’s face. ... I love knowing that everyone is looking out for everyone else and that there’s probably someone looking out for me too.” (Isabelle Skillen, Group 1) “Personal learning means

that if you're having a really horrible day, a teacher will ask you how you're doing." (Izzi Hughes, Group 3)

All of these examples point to the fact that real learning almost always happens in the context of a personal relationship. I know, of course, that there are probably countless examples of solitary monks who digested ageless wisdom isolated in caves or on the top of poles and that the pianist Artur Rubinstein is supposed to have learned most of Chopin's works secreted away in a hayloft out in the middle of nowhere. But these are exceptions that prove the rule. For most of us, most of the time, learning does not take place in isolation but in relationship with another person or persons, other human beings that we are learning from, with, or through. Learning relationships are of all kinds. They can be between equals or between persons who are radically unequal in ability or skill. They can involve all sorts and combinations of learning techniques, including imitation, didactic instruction, memorization, coaching, discussion, question and answer, simulation, problem solving, conversation, and collaboration, just to name some. But all learning relationships, whether between master and apprentice or between teacher and student or between classmates, are based on a personal commitment that is mutual and engenders trust and confidence. It is this personal knowledge and commitment that sustains learning relationships and makes them productive over time. Depersonalized learning, or learning that is not in the context of relationship, has no staying power and is ultimately unfulfilling. Sooner or later, it ceases to bear fruit because it must rely increasingly on unsatisfying external incentives to sustain itself, things like grades and standardized tests. We are indeed fortunate to be in a school where learning is made personal and where the internal passion of the teacher for the subject being taught can be realized through relationship.

And this brings me to my final observation. For this I'd like to come back to our Statement of Guiding Assumptions that I abandoned a few moments ago. The very first of these states: "We assume that learning is, in and of itself, an essential and defining human activity that involves the whole person throughout life." This broad and breathtaking assertion suggests yet another take on what the paradigm of personal learning means at Waring. After all, if learning involves the "whole person throughout life," it is necessarily personal. How can it not be? And yet, the statement is almost too big and broad for the close-in work that we are engaged in here. It's kind of like being given a couple of 10-foot boards when what you really need is a pair of chopsticks. The idea is there all right, but the application of it is going to be a problem. Is there a way that we can whittle these boards down a bit to make them more useful for getting at the question at hand? So, let's hear again what Waring students have to say on the subject.

Listen to these observations by three Waring seniors and a junior: "Learning is personal when you feel a passion for the subject you are studying." (Reeve Moir) "Learning became personal when I could sense my teacher's love for a subject. Their eyes sparkled, and they spoke faster. They abandoned the concept of breathing so they had ample time to get in all their ideas. It was this passion that stimulated my own interest, compelling me home to investigate the topic [further]." (Michelle Ammerman) "Learning is personal in those moments that go beyond the curriculum. It is the Humanities class when we talk

about Mr. Rodgers. It is the writing assignment to bring in baby pictures. It is the Physics class that made Francis so excited he had tears in his eyes. It is the moment you look at the clock and realize a whole period has flown by.” (Emma MacLean) “Learning ... becomes personal when you can’t bear the thought of staying home sick because you desperately want to participate in the discussion on Anne Hutchinson.” (Kim Pfister)

Reeve, Michelle, Emma, and Kim all understand that real learning is not a disembodied and impersonal exercise of the intellect. Rather, they know that by its very nature learning is deeply and wholly personal, involving our passions as well as our intellect. They also know that to realize our full potential as persons, we must be learners, always and everywhere and at every level of our lives. The great but much-neglected scientist/philosopher Michael Polanyi spoke eloquently of what he called the “intellectual passions.” This was how he referred to the deeply human and personal “craving” that resides in all of us to learn, to grow, and to make sense of reality.

We are meant to be learners. We are simply at our best when we continue to learn and to be open to all the joy, wonder, and opportunity that this amazing world has to offer. Today, we formally begin the 38th year of the Waring School. As we do, it is my deepest wish that this spirit of learning will continue to animate and define us as a school community, now and in the years to come.