

Chapel Address given by Hartley Neel, HMS class of 1959
Alumni Weekend , June 14, 2009

When I stood in this Big Room 50 years ago, I was 17. I was looking entirely into my future. Most of my life stretched ahead – and only in my imagination.

Now that I am 67, most of my life stretches back and defines who I have become. I stand here more defined by my past than by my future and I am struck by two things:

How much has changed in 50 years
AND
How much is still the same after half a century

How quickly the stream of half a century has rippled by
AND YET
How long ago it seems from now that I was 17.

When I was 17 in 1959, fifty years before that was 1909. The car has been invented, but the horse and buggy still dominated the life of men and women. Gas lights were still struggling to illuminate the darkness. Many of the things we take for granted today were just being invented. So, when we looked back at 1909, we thought of it as the “olden days”.

In 2009, when I look back 50 years I do not see 1959 as “the olden days”, and I do not think the graduates today see it as that. Much of our music is still in fashion, the clothes we wear have not changed a great deal, and many of the cultural icons of the 60’s remain the icons of today.

But we are in a moment where transformations are beginning. The digital world is transforming the way we interact in the world and to people fifty years from NOW, today will seem like the “olden days”. Imagine that newspapers will be gone, to a great extent books will be gone, phone lines will be gone. They will be transformed as the horse was to the car and gas light to electric light. We already see the book becoming the computer, and the phone becoming a small wallet of central capability: a phone, a dictionary, an encyclopedia, a calendar, a camera, a calculator... Knowledge, communication and transcription will come together and be accessible in our pocket without the weight of paper or of wires and poles. The look of the world will be transformed and with that transformation many customs will change. In 50 years 2009 will be seen as the “olden days”.

So, how do all these transformations affect us as individuals. I would say not much. They are exciting, they are fascinating and they do transform how we live, but what really molds us is our live experiences – how we are treated, how we are loved, what confidence we are given, what inspiration we receive.

I look back now and ask how much am I still the person I was at 17. How much have I changed? What has allowed me to deal with life's experiences and what has determined how those experiences have contoured my personality. I look back now to what has molded me, and I come back to this place I now stand – this Big Room, this campus, this rare few acres called High Mowing.

It is here that I was encouraged to be me. Education here was not about forcing me to conform to a role that broke me and re-molded me, but rather it was an education that inspired me to want to develop MYSELF into an individual who would present something wonderful to the world that by way of MY individuality would be worthwhile, would be creative, would transform and enlighten. I was given the strength to believe in ME , so that the experiences of the world would not break me but would contour me, and I in turn would have the strength and self-confidence to persevere.

This is what I thank High Mowing for. I thank High Mowing, I thank Mrs. Emmet who had the dream to create this school and I thank the dedicated teachers who believed so much in allowing me and encouraging me to be who I was that I gained a belief in myself. It is to these people, our teachers, that I want to say thank you. Many of them are gone, but many of us remember them, and I want to thank those who I especially remember, Mr. Eigah – “what is light”, Miss Friedl who persevered in the determination to teach me French, Mr. Currin who inspired my love of history, Sabina Nordoff, Helen Flood, Mrs. Karl....and the inimitable Mrs. Emmett for whom I had both respect and fear and from whom I not only took the most inspiring art history course I ever had, but learned life lessons too extensive to begin to list. For all this I say thank you.