

Waynflete Dialogue Project: Upper School Assembly Remarks

In my opening talk, I told you that the faculty and I want to make improving our dialogue skills a priority for this year. This morning I am going to tell you more about that. We're calling this effort the Waynflete Dialogue Project. Dialogue, by our definition, is a conversation in which participants are trying to learn from each other, to understand each other, not trying to persuade anybody of anything. That kind of dialogue bridges differences and can tap the wisdom from the variety of viewpoints inherent in any group.

Everyone has something to contribute to a dialogue because we each have our own story. On the screen behind me, you will see what we are calling the Building Blocks of Dialogue. We hope that the Building Blocks will give you the tools to hear each others' stories and have productive conversations about even the difficult topics that you might otherwise be tempted to avoid.

We are already pretty good at having respectful conversations at Waynflete. We know that because alums come back from college and tell us that they feel better prepared than most of their peers to engage in the kinds of difficult conversations that are going on on campuses across the country these days. Unfortunately, those conversations seem to be getting harder as our country becomes more and more polarized. People are talking past each other. People are yelling past each other. Too few people seem equipped to engage in dialogue. That is a problem. A big problem.

How many of you watched the presidential debate last night? Well, that was not an example of dialogue. It was not even an example of debate in any usual sense of the world. But it did touch on a number of the serious challenges that our country faces, including the difficulty we seem to have talking productively about our challenges. Your generation will inherit those problems and more. You will also inherit a world in which there is unprecedented opportunity for progress, despite the problems. You won't be able to solve the problems or capitalize on the opportunities alone. You are going to need each other. Not only are you going to need each other but you are going to need to be able to talk constructively with each other. That is why dialogue is so important.

So how is this Dialogue Project thing going to work? Well, we will frame a series of opportunities for us to practice dialogue together. Next week, we have invited to Waynflete Eric and Oliver, a hip hop performing and teaching duo. Eric and Oliver come from very different backgrounds. Eric is a white guy who grew up in Skowhegan, Maine, where he was obsessed with hip hop music but had very little exposure to the people and culture that spawned it. He attended Brown University where he got into the hip hop scene in Providence, RI, which is where he met Oliver. Oliver is a Dominican guy who grew up in the city, immersed in hip hop culture.

At the assembly next Thursday, they will perform and talk to us about how they managed to bridge the differences in their backgrounds to become friends, performing artists, and teachers together. They'll leave us with a question to discuss at a special Thursday advising lunch session. That evening, Waynflete will host an event featuring Eric and Oliver that will be open to the public entitled:

Hip Hop, Racial Inequality, and Cultural Appropriation: A Night of Cultural Dialogue and Hip Hop Performance. Be sure to invite your friends from other schools.

To get us warmed up for the Eric and Oliver visit, I have asked your advisors to lead a discussion at advising lunch today on the video I am about to show you. The video is about privilege. Privilege refers to the advantages we enjoy in life that we did not necessarily earn. We all enjoy at least some privileges depending on who we are and the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

I personally enjoy a lot of privileges. As an able-bodied person, I never have to worry about whether a building I need to enter will prove accessible. That is a privilege. As an adult, when I go into a store and a salesperson follows me, I know it is because they want to sell me something, not because they think I am going to shoplift. That is a privilege. As a male, I am almost always taken seriously when I speak, unless I say something really stupid, which is a different matter. Some females would know that being taken seriously is a privilege because they don't always have that experience. For example, I heard from a recent graduate that she had real trouble getting anyone to take her seriously in her college science classes. She would answer a question but the conversation would keep going until a male said exactly the same thing. Coming from Waynflete, she was shocked. Unfortunately, that experience is all too common for women and girls. For the record, she ended up excelling in all of her science classes, so I think they are taking her seriously now, but not until she proved herself in ways that her male peers did not have to.

As I mentioned in my talk on the first day of school, as a white person whose family immigrated to America a few centuries ago, I am never the target of the kind of suspicion and animosity to which Muslim immigrants are routinely subjected these days. And when I get pulled over by the police, I assume that the officer will tell me a taillight is out. I am never fearful that I might get shot. Unfortunately, that is not the case for everyone, as is evidenced all too frequently by events reported in the news as recently as last week. Being free of such fear is a privilege.

I like my privileges. I don't feel guilty about having them. In fact, in my view, there are only two things wrong with privileges. First, they are unevenly distributed. I know that I enjoy many more privileges than most people, which I don't think is really fair. Second, it's hard to see our own privileges because we tend to take them for granted. That tends to divide us because it gets in the way of really understanding someone else's experience who doesn't enjoy the same privileges.

Rather than feeling badly about having privileges, I would rather do something to help make sure that more people enjoy more privileges. I hope you all feel the same way. In that case, the first step is to understand the nature of privilege and how it can get in the way of us understanding each other. I think this video will help. After we watch it together, I'll send you off to advising lunch to discuss it.