

“The Insidiousness of Gender Bias”

Remarks to All-school Assembly by Head of School Tim Seeley

October 31, 2017

Some of the most important people in my life have been, and are, women. My mother, my sister, my daughters, colleagues here and at other places I have worked, my wife-- they all make my life better, they teach me things, they expand my world, they help me become a better person.

I believe I have only treated women respectfully, compassionately, and kindly. I can say this with some confidence, because a long time ago I made a commitment to treat everyone that way, always, no matter how any particular person treated me, and I think I have lived up to that commitment pretty well. Not perfectly, but pretty well.

Why am I telling you all this? If you have paid any attention to the news lately, you will have heard about an ever-increasing number of men who have been accused, and admitted to, horrific, disrespectful, and illegal treatment of women, treatment done thoughtlessly and as a matter of course, and by virtue of their power over those women.

We can all agree that is bad. Don't do that. And don't tolerate it if you observe people treating others badly, even if it is just someone speaking badly about another person. Boys, don't speak disrespectfully about girls, don't treat girls disrespectfully, don't let your friends get away with doing so. This is a much bigger problem from the male side of things, so that is why I specifically call out us males.

But that's not why I am telling you this. I am telling you because even though I personally have made every effort to treat well every woman I have ever encountered, and I have actively sought to ensure women are treated well in any school where I have worked or run, I have come to realize (because it was pointed out to me by two courageous women, one an adult and one a student), that I have been exhibiting a gender bias, unwittingly.

I have been doing a “Thought for the Day,” for the better part of two years. The point made by my colleague and your schoolmate was that none of those thoughts have been from women. I have a great many of those thoughts collected, ideas and sentiments that have struck me over the years; although not all are by men, the great majority are, and I think these two women are right—to date, I have only shared with you thoughts spoken or written by men.

What is the point? The point is twofold. First, by never including a woman, I have, unwittingly to be sure, but also certainly, contributed in at least a small way to the notion that the best ideas only come from men. This is a patently false idea, and a dangerous one, because it devalues all women. It is not an idea I believe. And yet, by only quoting men, I imply that I do believe it after all. My practice has belied my beliefs.

Two, the very fact that I didn't notice all the quotations were from men, or think through what that implied, even though I think about such things as gender equity all the time, shows how insidious such notions about the relationship between men and women are,

how embedded in our culture. Most of my quotations are from men, because most of the recorded and remembered philosophy and literature of the world is by men. Most of what I studied in school and college and graduate school was by men. This is not because most of the best ideas in the history of humanity have been put forward by men, or men are better at such things. It is because for most of humanity's history, men's thought has been honored more, and the opportunities for women to be part of philosophy, literature, politics, business, or any other human endeavor not directly related to child-rearing or menial labor have been severely, unjustifiably and unfairly limited. So women's roles in society have most often been in less important positions, beholden to men who have power over them, and some men use that to believe they can treat women poorly, that women's rights and desires are less important than their own.

That is what it means to say something is institutionalized—it is so ingrained in a culture, in the way a culture operates, that most people don't notice it or question it. Does this make all men bad? Of course not. The sexual predators and harassers, those who use their positions of power and influence to try to force women to engage in sexual behavior with them, are unquestionably doing terrible and wrong things. But I believe most men do not behave that way. But it does mean men, in particular, must be aware of this imbalance in our culture, and work to correct it. Men, in particular, must notice when other men are behaving badly towards women, and try to stop it. The burden falls more on us, my fellow males, because, sadly, we are the ones doing most of the harm.

Even if that harm is only something as seemingly small as whom we choose to promote as wise and important thinkers. I must fight against that institutionalized gender bias of most human cultures and societies to be sure in *everything*, even in my choices for thoughts for the day, I am giving women their rightful place and the respect they deserve.

So here is today's thought. It is from Susan B. Anthony, whom I trust you will study in your US history classes. Ms. Anthony was a suffragette, someone who worked to secure the vote for women in this country. She lived from 1820 until 1906, and was active against slavery as well as for women's rights.

Does anyone know what year women were given the right to vote in this country?

1920. Not even 100 years ago. 100 years ago, none of your female ancestors in this country could vote. So my grandmother, your great, or great-great grandmothers, were forbidden by law from voting in this country. Here is a timeline of women's suffrage:

- 1777: Women lose the right to vote in New York.
- 1780: Women lose the right to vote in Massachusetts. Since Maine was part of Massachusetts at that time, that was it for women in Maine until 1920. For those 140 years, if your family lived here then, your female ancestors could not vote.
- 1784: Women lose the right to vote in New Hampshire.
- 1787: The U.S. Constitutional Convention places voting qualifications in the hands of the states. Women in all states except New Jersey lose the right to vote.
- 1790: The U.S. state of New Jersey grants the vote to "all free inhabitants," including women.

- 1807: Women lose the right to vote in New Jersey, the last state to revoke the right.
- 1920 The 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment passes, giving women the right to vote.

For 150 years after our nation was founded on the notion all people are created equal, women did not have the right to vote.

Ms. Anthony said, among many wise things:

*[For] men, their rights, and nothing more; [for] women, their rights, and nothing less.*

To be clear: my using this quotation does not imply women only have had important things to say in connection with issues directly related to them. In coming weeks we will have quotations from women on all sorts of things. I chose this particular one because it connected with what I have been talking about.

I must note, here at the end, that the two women who pointed this out to me were inspired to speak to me by Mary's poem last week [about differences in attitudes towards Boy's sports and girls sports]. So here is one last take away from today—if you feel passionately that something is not right, speak up. Your courage will inspire others to do the same. And, by such things, the world gets better, with every spin.