

# Montana Academy

## Letters from Lost Prairie—8 August 2011

### Empty Chairs

In recent weeks, as August commencement approaches, the excitement has become palpable on both campuses. The MA community—ninety students, seventy staff—feels the seismic tremors that anticipate the moment graduates toss their caps and then cross the cattle guard with their parents one last time. In anticipation, other students now at star-clan are packing to move into town. On Friday the lodge will once again fill to bursting with proud parents and jubilant daughters and sons, with teachers, therapists, team-leaders and team-mates who know sadly that next Monday there will be unoccupied desks in the barn, open slots at lunch tables, and barren bunks in the dorms. We will miss them, but will be happy for them, too.

This Friday, too, there will be another sadness—about four empty chairs in the front rows among the graduates. Four wonderful young people, friends to other graduates, competent students in ranch and community-college classrooms, beloved bunk-mates, boyfriends, pals, will be missed. In brief, they have fallen down on the home-stretch and did not make it to this week's finish line.

In a community devoted to recognition, their not-having-made-it-to-the-finish-line could not be ignored. In a school devoted to clear limits and consequences, they had to take the painful fall for their ill-considered acts, messes there was no time to clean up. On the ranch and particularly at Sky House, where students struggle with old issues, make old mistakes or new ones, there are only a few sins serious enough to require immediate excommunication. These are acts that imperil others, that put at risk student or staff safety. They include smuggling illicit drugs into the community to tempt other students to relapse. Albeit we consider a student's use of drugs a serious mistake, a breach of the Sky House covenant, a flagrant violation of a student's pledge, we make it plain to all students that to bring another student (and family) down is much more unforgiveable. This felony emptied one chair.

To a wider, outer circle of perfidy belong the lesser infractions of rules, community norms or decorum, which do not automatically or necessarily put a student beyond the pale. Above I mentioned a student's slipping in sobriety, e.g., accepting an offered drug or drink despite explicit promises not to. In this lesser category we also put most sexual "boundary" violations, short of intercourse. For about these natural urges, and about various neglected duties (academic, personal and social) we think adults ought to recognize that teenagers are conflicted. They want to behave well, but also not to. They struggle to stay within the rules, and at times their conflicts are natural, their self-discipline fledgling, their moral thinking primitive. About such more minor "mistakes," which Sky House is intended to give students scope to make and deal with, we expect them own up, admit what they did and what they were thinking, to take care of harm or disgrace they have brought upon themselves, and so metabolize these regretted mistakes as individuals, and also as willing participants in a special community's ethical discussions. If students manage this, we allow them to remediate mistakes and to go on with their lives at Sky House, chastened but unbowed.

When students fail to face failings openly, however, and secretly repeat them over and over, begging friends to join in keeping secrets, they create a sneaky subculture invidious to their own and others' integrity. Friends told about these secrets face an ugly choice: to keep a friendship and lose their own integrity, or *vice versa*. Once a furtive subculture appears, secrets proliferate. Those hiding shameful secrets are glad to have company and so invite others to join. Soon many students cannot speak honestly with adults, for they have to censor what they say. A rift opens, and the community separates like stale salad dressing—into oil and vinegar that no longer mix. Groups, therapy and phone calls to parents all turn into shams of pretended intimacy and mimic the alienation that preceded exile to Wilderness. This is a regression. And sneaky students drag down their supposedly "friends," undermining the candor that is the basis of all psychotherapies. This sneakiness amounts to ducking out of the MA program, an alternative life in hiding. And so no student can properly graduate from the program while living this lie. For this kind of contagion of the Sky House community, three students will leave their chairs empty on Friday.

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You may wonder how other students react to these debacles. Among students graduating this week or moving to Sky House, who all met with me this week, there was sadness in anticipation of a commencement whose joy would not be unsullied. All felt sorry for “the parents.” They imagined “how badly they must feel.” For themselves they were “scared” about now-apparent opportunities to “screw up” at Sky House and not graduate, but exasperated with banished friends for doing what “could not possibly have been worth *this*.” I listened for it, but did not hear the sour leitmotif of perceived injustice. A few imminent graduates imagined how queasy they would have felt if compatriots had “got away with” wretched behavior and then “stood right beside us” at graduation, “not deserving it,” and so making a mockery of their own achievement.

And the four students? I was impressed with them. They handled the confrontation well, confessed when they knew they were “busted.” They were sorry about what this denouement would mean to their parents and their siblings. They were tearfully ashamed to have to face their therapists, team-leaders and families. But then, showing that not all was lost, they got on with what should come next. Their parents did well, too, facing the ugly truth, suffering, but getting on with what should follow.

The four plans were disparate. One student was yanked back to the ranch—immediately on probation, so as to determine whether he would, at eighteen, accept our offer to let him back up and do the last clans over again. Another student and family decided he should come home, and so radically changed the plan, putting off college for a year, since (obviously, it seemed) he was not ready to resist the temptations of an open college campus. Two other students will pick up the pieces, pull themselves together, finish incomplete course work, renegotiate terms for starting their imminent first semesters (putting more safeguards in place, particularly around substance abuse), and then get on to college. For all these students we have open the possibility that, assuming they handle these debacles well and sustain their self-discipline with relapse prevention plans through the next semester, they could come back and sit in one of those blue chairs at the December commencement.

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Coda: Some parents of current ranch students or Sky Clan students unready as yet to graduate, hearing these ill tidings, have expressed anxiety about their own son's or daughter's potential future belly-flops. Have we all done all we can to prevent such a debacle? Is there more to do? a sure way? Some parents of this coming week's graduates, knowing "there but the grace of god, . . ." sighed with relief a son or daughter had managed to resist temptations at Sky House—and were counting the days until the end of this suspense on Friday.

But it is not all about graduation. As I said to one girl who will graduate this week, "This is not the *finish* line; it's the *starting* line." Moreover, to all, I would point out that some regression is inevitable when young people move from more to less supervision. Some regression happens every time we send a new cohort of ranch students to Sky House. But it does not end there. These four regressions, had they not been caught at MA, surely would have surfaced in the first months of college, and some of Friday's grads will regress, and my cause some sort of flap or mess in the coming months. This is not really surprising, however worrisome it is. And it is not because of parental error, necessarily, nor to do with MA not having done its job to perfection, but rather it is because psychological development is not linear. It is more like two steps forward and one back—and sometimes it can seem like *two* back. This is the nature of the progress. And, as a little reflection will remind you, kids who never needed a Wilderness or a Montana Academy program still do childish, dingbat or awful things in the weeks or months after they enroll at college far from home.

When it comes to graduates' prognosis, two considerations seem to matter: (a) the degree to which maturity has been achieved—i.e., the more mature, the better the prognosis; and (b) the aptness of the fit of the structures (curfews, driving limits, urine testing, AA, therapy, family therapy or coaching, etc) put in place by parents, relative to (a). The younger and the less mature a graduate the more containment and supervision will be required to sustain emotional self-discipline after departing the protected precincts of MA.

In all four of these cases, regression occurred in the transition from ranch to Sky House, where there was less supervision and more opportunities for sneakiness. Some students managed this well, but the four could not manage it. Some regression occurs when

graduates move from MA home or on to a college campus, where supervision suddenly is relaxed. The outcome depends not only upon the mistakes young people make but on the way they (and their parents) handle mistakes. Ideally when graduates err, life (and parents) set limits, and continue to prod young people toward a grown-up approach. When there is honesty, open communication with adults, solid collaboration and well-sustained maturity, then graduates pick themselves up, find their feet, and start again down the track of their lives—chastened, but unbowed.

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