

Montana Academy

August 3, 2009

Graduation: The Long View

In mid-May we celebrated our first of two summer graduations, mainly for students leaving Skyhouse. We will shortly be celebrating our second graduation in mid-August for students leaving for college or returning home to finish school. These are times when we celebrate the important work that your children have accomplished during their stay at Montana Academy and wish them well on their launch into the next stages of life's journey. This is a time to look forward and consider the longer view.

It so happened that on the very eve of our May graduation I received my monthly copy of *The Atlantic* (June 2009) and began to read an article entitled "What makes us happy?" by Joshua Wolf Shenk. This article details the findings of an important longitudinal study, the Harvard Grant study of adult development, which has interested both John and myself over the years. The Grant study, begun in 1937 to follow a group of 268 healthy, well adjusted Harvard (male) sophomores over the course of their lives, has now been in progress for 70 years. George Vaillant, a psychiatrist, discovered the study in 1967 and began to work with the material that had been gathered around the time of the 25th college reunion of the group, and has spent his entire career studying these men, as well as material provided by a normal control group for a study begun in the same time period of juvenile delinquents – the Glueck group. The results of these two life-long studies are instructive and seem to support both the philosophy and the work that we do at Montana Academy.

So what are the findings? Like us, Vaillant is concerned about his subjects' "adaptations" (think "approach") to life's struggles. He, like we, looks to the work of Anna Freud in understanding human defenses and believes that much of what is labeled as mental illness is a reflection of "unwise" deployment of defense mechanisms. "If we use our defenses well, we are deemed mentally healthy, conscientious, funny, creative and altruistic. If we use them badly, the psychiatrist diagnoses us as ill, our neighbors label us as unpleasant and society brands us as immoral." Vaillant notes four categories of defenses, ranging from the most primitive (paranoia and hallucination) to "immature" (acting out, passive aggression, hypochondria, projection and fantasy) to the common "neurotic" defenses of

intellectualization and repression and, last of all, to the healthiest or most “mature” adaptations of altruism, humor, anticipation (looking ahead and planning for future discomfort), suppression (a conscious decision to postpone attention to an impulse or conflict to be addressed in good time) and sublimation (finding outlets for feelings). He notes, as we also do, that immature defenses fade with maturity and that the capacity to employ mature adaptations bodes well for healthy aging, along with education, stable marriages, not smoking, not abusing alcohol, exercise and healthy weight. The single most significant finding of this study is the power of relationships, and Vaillant emphasizes that the only things that really matters in life are relationships to other people. We cannot know what troubles our children are going to face in their lives, but we can seek to fortify them so that they can approach life’s challenges with the requisite strength of character.

Coincidentally, the same week that I read about Vaillant’s study in *The Atlantic*, I also found myself reading an article in the May 18th *New Yorker* entitled “Don’t” by Jonah Lehrer. This article discusses the long-term effects of the ability to delay gratification. An ingenious study, the marshmallow test, is described. Four-year olds were left alone in a room with a marshmallow for a few minutes and instructed that if they did not eat the marshmallow until the examiner returned they would be given two. A decade later those students who were able to wait fifteen minutes at age 4 had an S.A.T. score that was, on average, two hundred and ten points higher than that of the child who could wait only thirty seconds! Young children who struggled to delay gratification were noted to struggle in stressful situations, often had trouble paying attention and found it difficult to maintain friendships, in addition to receiving lower S.A.T scores later on.

These extraordinary predictive findings suggest the enormous importance of self-control and raise all kinds of questions about how we best teach our children this essential life skill. This task begins early in life, as the study suggests. I recently read elsewhere that in our society most Americans prefer to accept \$50 now to \$100 in six months. Like the general population, many of the students at Montana Academy have, for one reason or another, failed to learn the lessons of self-control and patience. Our highly structured environment tries to make up for this failure. We repeatedly insist that students not only wait (for promotions, for privileges, for attention), but also that they work to earn their rewards. Nothing is more gratifying than to hear from parents of our graduates that their students have learned to work hard, to pay their own way and to understand the value of

money and, particularly, of relationships. Two parents who accompanied their alumni students to our May graduation glowed with the new-found maturity of their young adult children who were headed to college this fall ready to handle the tasks ahead of them. Two other alumni passed an adolescent “marshmallow” test in the weeks following their graduation in December. They attended a well-known outdoor program following graduation and were invited by their fellow participants to smoke a little weed on a mountain top behind the staff’s backs. They declined. In due course, the staff discovered the breaking of the “no drug use” contract by 6 of the 12 students on the trip who were dismissed in disgrace and our students graduated the program honorably. Small wonder, then, that we have confidence in them for the future. We are all proud parents at such moments.

As we pause on the threshold of our August graduation we do not know what the future holds for our graduates, how they will be tested and how they will meet these life tests. I take comfort in the words of the final chapter of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* –

“Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending. Who can quit young lives after being so long in company with them, and not desire to know what befell them in their after-years? For the fragments of a life, however typical, is not the sample of an even web: promises may not be kept, and an ardent outset may be followed by declension; latent powers may find their long-awaited opportunity; a past error may urge a grand retrieval.”

So, to graduates and their families, I say please stay in touch. And to those who remain, we still have work to do together.

Warm regards,

Rosemary McKinnon