

September 8, 2011

Letter from Lost Prairie

A Sense of Belonging

The campus has filled up with unprecedented speed following our mid-August graduation. Usually it takes several weeks before we are full again at this time of year, and we can take our time getting to know new students and families as they arrive over a 6- to 8-week period. This August we have been enrolling as many as five new students a week. This influx of new faces is both stimulating and also somewhat overwhelming for both staff and students. Those who have gone on pass or vacation for a few days arrive back on campus to find two or three new members on each team. The impact of all these new arrivals on our small campus inevitably changes our intimate culture. However successful in their wilderness programs, new students have to settle into a new community and unfamiliar routines, and they have yet to form the relationships which will make their treatment possible.

Our staff and more senior students have braced themselves for a campus culture where immaturity is the norm, and they have talked together about how best to make new students feel welcome and to help them to settle in and get down to work. The student council held a welcome dinner for all new students and on Friday we held a community meeting in the lodge to introduce all of the students who had arrived on campus since our last community meeting in late July. Our student council president and other senior members of the community spoke in an effort to reach out to new students, expressing a willingness to get to know them. A few brave new students spoke of their anxieties about being judged, and some students who had struggled recently took ownership for the effect of their relapses on the greater community. I am often moved at such meetings by our students' willingness to be vulnerable in public and felt again that those who had the courage to speak set a tone of safety and openness. When the meeting in the lodge was over the entire community walked over to the lawn outside the gym where we honored one of our night staff, Deb Sherman, who has been taking care of our students for 10 years. Then staff and students hung out for an hour playing games and talking until it was time for a BBQ.

Perhaps the most significant change in our student body over the past year has been in the number of students who have ties outside the U.S. Some of these families work abroad and their children have grown up in other countries and with other languages. Others have a parent who is a foreign-born immigrant to the U.S., and still others are international adoptees. They straddle several worlds. These children have been called, for lack of a better term, "Third Culture Kids" (TCK), which designates a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside of her parent's (or parents') culture. Additionally, although these people may have assimilated parts of several cultures, their greatest sense of belonging comes from those who share similar backgrounds.

This past week we had an educational consultant, Becky Grappo, on campus. Becky has lived and raised her own children outside the U.S. and has made a practice of helping international families to find school and college placements. I invited Becky to talk with our staff about the particular circumstances and needs of these students and, as you may well imagine, I identified with much of what she had to say. Their story is my story also.

For those of you who do not know me well, I will tell you briefly that I am the daughter of a British diplomat and Irish mother and spent most of my childhood in five different countries in the Middle East, as well as two others elsewhere. My parents chose to send me “home” to boarding school in England when I was 12 years old, and I remained there for university, and so I imbibed a good deal of my British culture and acquired the accent that still alerts people that I am a foreigner in the U.S. to this day. At Cambridge I met John, who was born and raised in northern California, and when we married I immigrated to the U.S. where I have lived for the past 40 years, 20 of them in Montana. Montana is the place where I have put down roots and that I now identify as “home.”

I do not recall having much trouble moving from country to country growing up and always enjoyed both my vacations with my family abroad and also my return to school and friends in Wiltshire. I relished flying alone at a young age but was usually met at Heathrow by a member of that stalwart British group Universal Aunts, who would see me safely across the city and on the train back to school. All this was exciting and, if I didn’t entirely feel that I fit with the more conventional lives of my rooted schoolmates, I took some pride in being the exception. It was not till I moved to the U.S. that I really felt unexpectedly isolated and uprooted. Indeed, although I did succeed in putting down roots eventually, John and I made a good many moves for professional training and jobs in those first 20 years and each one cost me dearly. I paid with unexpected and sometimes long-lasting depression with each move. It was not until I tuned into the effects of moves and cultural changes in the lives of our international students that I realized how much the cycle of losses had caught up with me. The French expression, “Partir c’est mourir un peu” (To leave is to die a little) expresses this more eloquently than any English words.

All of this came up for me again around my mother’s death nine months ago. For the past decade I was fortunate to be able to travel back and forth to England to see her twice a year, and consequently I was able to reestablish a sense of belonging with my mother country. The question of “where is home” became nuanced again and also complicated as I renewed old friendships and visited childhood haunts. My grief at her death was mixed with sadness that my ties with England were becoming more attenuated.

We all know that we can’t go home again. When our alumni return to visit they experience the shock of a community of new students whom they do not recognize. Just recently I said goodbye to my oldest daughter, who has gone to study in Cairo. I lived there for four years as an adolescent and still have a strong sense of attachment. Now I am planning a visit there after an absence of 40 years and preparing myself for the fact that it is no longer “my Cairo!”

At Montana Academy we want our students to attach to staff, to other students and to the community as a whole, and we work hard towards this end because we know that forming close relationships is the only way in which we can begin to bring about change.

It is these attachments that make a young person want to change their behaviors. When they refuse to attach and stay aloof then change cannot and will not occur. Making these attachments may be more difficult for those who have had a different cultural experience, and they may have a special hurdle to overcome before they are willing to make this investment. All students at this stage of life are struggling with issues of identity and, whether they know it or not, they are also seeking a sense of belonging and community. If we are successful in our therapeutic work they will make close friendships and attachments here, and there will be a commensurate pain when it is time to leave and move on. Those who come from far afield may bring new and interesting viewpoints to this community, but they also will need to build a strong sense of self so that they know who they are no matter where they are.

It will not be too long now before all of you far-flung parents will be joining us on campus for our October workshop, and we look forward to welcoming you too and getting to know you and your varied backgrounds. We hope that you will find a home away from home here in Montana.

Warm regards,

Rosemary McKinnon