

Remarks by John and Elizabeth Phillips Award recipient D. Michael Shafer '71  
Assembly on October 23, 2019

I want to thank everyone for this great honor...and I must say that I am amazed to be here.

From that first day 50 years ago when I slid into my bench as a newbie Lower, I never dreamed that I would speak at Chapel – in this hallowed hall, lined with all these gold-framed paintings of dead dudes. So, how did I get from the flight deck of Cilley Hall to being here today, honored as “Mr. Nice Guy 2019”?

First, the background.

I came to the Academy as a baseball jock who arrived two weeks before Lower year for football camp – and promptly blew out my knee. This was a real shock. Suddenly, I had to make it on smarts to keep my bursary. NOT EASY.

But what I want to tell you about are the two lessons I learned when my dad dropped me off at football camp.

First, he taught me to tie a tie, SOMETHING NONE OF YOU HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT, but me, I had never worn a tie before, and in those days, woe unto the boy caught without a tie. After my dad left, I spent hours practicing in front of the mirror, terrified that I would forget and be expelled for failing dress code.

Second, he told me, “At Exeter, you are going to mix with the sons of the important and great. But,” he said, “never forget that important and great don’t count for anything...your measure as a man will be how much better the world is when you leave it than when you entered it.”

Think about that for a moment.

Your measure as a man will be how much better the world is when you leave it than when you entered it. I didn’t understand until long after I graduated. But that challenge – “What does it mean to be human?” – has defined my life. How’s that?

Let’s face it, the Academy is a competitive place – dog-eat-dog competitive. It’s a very “me” place. You HAVE to be the best to get in. You HAVE to stay hot just to keep up. Just like you, I was smart. Just like you, I was cocky. I was CERTAIN that I was the whole story:

- I studied hard
- I busted my ass
- it was my efforts that made me this incredible success.

Why shouldn’t you feel like that, too? School, life, school as preparation for life - everything’s about relative ranking.

- It’s all about winning, right?
- I beat you or you beat me.

ME. ME. ME. I’M A WINNER.

Wrong. Today I think that’s all BS. What changed my mind?

In the summer of 1975, I went alone to Northern Ethiopia. At the time, the Stalinist Derg ruling Ethiopia unleashed a huge army with Russian piloted MIGs and Cuban-crewed tanks against the peasants of the Northern Province of Tigre. The people of Tigre had nothing except 3 college students – philosophy majors nonetheless – who were trying to organize an insurgency to fight the Derg. There I was, all alone, in the middle of nowhere, but in the middle of this war. Best classroom you can imagine. Talk about experiential learning. I got to watch as these guys inspired peasants armed with nothing but wooden pitch forks – I BS you not, wooden pitch forks – to fight against the huge, Ethiopian army. How did they do it? They talked about the peasants’ communities, about how their children would grow up – what stories their children would tell and what values their children would learn from them. These poor, dirty, unarmed men and women rose up and fought and died for each other, for their community, for their shared values, for their heritage and for the legacy they would leave their children. They fought for each other. That was 1975. For years, all they did was die. I saw a lot of them die. But in 1991 – 16 years later – their stinking, hungry, rag-tag army – an army of their children – marched into Addis and overthrew the Derg. Two years later, in 1993, those 3 guys invited me to talk to the first Constitutional Convention about how to make the rights and duties of citizens the bedrock of the new Constitution. Rights and duties.

What I learned through all this is that none of us is a lone ranger. We may work super hard. We may compete like hell. But we are never alone. We are no bigger than the community we belong to. Our hopes, dreams and possibilities can be no bigger than what our community offers. We are here and able to live this good life because others died to make and defend it. We are here because others do their duty to protect the rights we enjoy.

So who am I and what am I to you? Do I think that you should rush off to Africa or Asia to care for at-risk children like my wife and me? No. Do I think I have the moral authority even to suggest that you do so? No. No, I don’t want you to try to be like me. I am not a role model. I am not special, in spite of all the nice things they said in that introduction. I started out as a scared, newbie Lower sitting right over there. I did not plan to be what I am today. All I have done is to lead a self-conscious life. I have learned always to ask myself, “Why are you doing this?” “What will it mean for others?” “Is there a better way to do it that will help more people?”

What do I want from YOU? I am asking you never to stop asking the basic question: “Who am I as a human?” The answer is really simple: “I am a member of the human whole.” What am I asking of you? I am asking you never to stop acting out your humanity. And how? I ask only that you commit small, daily acts of kindness, that you enact your humanity by offering yourself to others.

What will be your measure? Well, it’s tough to stand out in the crowd today. Thing is – EVERY one of you can leave the world a better place than when you entered it.

So my parting question to you, my challenge to you is simple: What will be your measure?