

2022 Founders' Day Award

Andrew W. Hertig '57; '31, '69, '83 (Hon.); P'83, P'86, P'88

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First of all, I would like to thank all those who contributed to my receiving this award and describing my career in such positive terms. Certainly, I had not expected to be honored in this way. The day-to-day rewards of the work itself were ample compensation for the effort involved, but of course, I am grateful at this stage of life to have whatever contribution I have made to Exeter formally recognized. So again, many thanks.

I want to emphasize, though, how much the real reward has been in the work itself and the environment I was fortunate to enjoy. It has been said that if one likes one's job, it's not really work, and I think that generalization applies to me. To have such supportive colleagues, who stimulated my thinking, improved my teaching, and encouraged me to embrace new opportunities, was indeed a privilege. Most important, though, were the students I encountered -- literally thousands over my 45-year career here. Their eagerness to learn and to tackle the challenges of adolescence inspired me on a daily basis. In short, the Exeter community in all its manifestations made teaching here for me so rewarding.

My first encounter with Exeter, though, was not nearly so positive. I grew up in a comfortable suburb of Boston, with a happy family life and a small, but close circle of friends. The school system was strong, as well, and I saw no need for a change. My parents, though, thought I should go to a boarding school, and so I landed at Exeter in my Upper year. I found it grim, not because of any traumatic experience or because of the way I was treated, but primarily because of my own shortcomings. I am not athletic nor especially gregarious and I am an inefficient worker. As a result, I spent most of my time coping with the workload. In addition, having spent my entire education in a coeducational public school system, I found the all-male Exeter environment

unnatural. If you had told me I would spend most of my adult life here, I would have been dismayed, to say the least.

What brought me back was what I knew to be the quality of the students. As I was nearing the end of a PhD program in history that was ostensibly preparing me for a college teaching career, I recognized that I was unlikely to find a job at an institution with students as interesting as at Exeter. So I returned, and as you have just heard, the students met my every expectation.

Exeter was still a single-sex school, however. When I arrived as a teacher in 1968, there was one female instructor, and she was here on a one-year appointment. Only two faculty wives worked outside the home. As a result, in addition to bearing a disproportionate responsibility for child rearing, faculty wives were also expected to help with dormitory activities. Clearly, this environment reflected a bygone era, which in Exeter's case dated back many years. To change it would be a major undertaking and one that at times involved considerable tension.

I recognize that as a privileged white male from an older generation, I am not in a good position to judge the success of our efforts to achieve gender equality at Exeter. The women and girls in our community today must be the judge of that. But I do think that some of the experience of that transition might be helpful in our navigating the current tensions I sense Exeter is experiencing.

Back in February of 1970, the trustees struggled with the decision to make what seemed like such a momentous change to Exeter's traditional enrollment policy and the school's reputation for academic rigor. In opting for coeducation, they stipulated that under no circumstances should the number of male students be reduced and no special accommodations with regard to quality should be made in order to admit, what at the time was believed to be a reasonable number of girls. As it turned out, the quality of the female applicants was so strong that the standard admissions procedures produced a balanced coed student body within a relatively short time.

The first years were difficult, though, because the trustees had elected to introduce coeducation gradually, beginning with a few girls in the senior class. And women joined the faculty only as existing teachers retired or moved to other jobs.

Early on, the small number of female students and faculty undoubtedly felt isolated and sometimes misunderstood. Any of you who have ever felt marginalized in a group can imagine how the one or two girls in a history or English class felt when asked for the female point of view on a controversial question -- a question they may never have considered and for which they had no idea of what the "female point of view" might be. Female faculty struggled, too, with their lack of influence in such a predominantly male dominated environment. These early coeducation pioneers deserve great credit for their patience, perseverance, and organizational ingenuity. Susan Herney, who eventually became dean of students, and Jackie Thomas, the future school librarian, skillfully chaired a newly formed support group entitled the Committee to Enhance the Status of Women, which provided an institutional mechanism for formally addressing the tensions and misunderstandings associated with the transition to coeducation.

In essence, the males in the community, particularly the men, had to change their thinking about the role of women in their lives. The women played a major role in this transformation by fostering a dialogue that educated rather than threatened. And of course, the competence of the women and girls in all areas set an example of excellence that greatly bolstered the support for gender equality in the school.

Exeter, as you have probably heard several times in this room, prides itself on teaching both knowledge and goodness. I think we do reasonably well with knowledge but are much less successful in teaching goodness. Perhaps that's because goodness involves the modeling of behavior, a process that does not necessarily lend itself to the traditional techniques of classroom teaching and evaluation.

Behavior reflects a mode of thinking, and although legislation can outlaw extreme forms of behavior and create government institutions that promote diversity, the success of these measures depends on the general public's acceptance of their intent. Now, six decades after the landmark legislation of the civil rights movement, it is clear that a significant minority of the population does not accept the premise on which the movement was based. Extreme manifestations of this sentiment, such as the tragic massacre in Buffalo and similar hate crimes, clearly require coercion to punish the offenders and prevent further violence.

But in normal social interaction, coercion is more likely to harden divisions by reinforcing prejudices or driving them underground.

This is particularly true in an academic community, which is supposed to encourage the free exchange of ideas. In a difference of opinion, the expression of some ideas can be hurtful when they are rooted in a personal bias that has no knowledge of another's lived experience. Ignorance must be overcome. But if we automatically assume the worst of those who have reached different conclusions than our own on controversial questions, we are condemned to perpetual ill will in the community.

One of the lessons I think we can take from the women who led the transition to coeducation at Exeter is the importance of dialogue as a means of reaching some sort of common understanding. Threats discourage productive conversation -- a serious impediment to learning in a school based on discussion-oriented education.

And leadership, too, can challenge traditional assumptions. I had the privilege to serve as Kendra Stearns O'Donnell's dean of faculty for much of her tenure as principal in the 1990s, and one of the first things she did was to investigate the circumstances surrounding the event we are celebrating today, the founding of the school. Although John Phillips had historically been assumed to be the sole founder, Principal O'Donnell discovered that the money that financed this

event came from the inheritance of John Phillips' wife, Elizabeth. As a result, Founder's Day with an apostrophe s has changed to an s apostrophe, signifying the existence of two founders rather than one -- a minor grammatical change, perhaps, but words matter in how we understand our past -- in this case, in demonstrating the prejudices we didn't even know we had. What else have we yet to learn about our present way of thinking, and how can we maintain a sense of community while still acknowledging our differences? That's your challenge.

So seek goodness as well as knowledge. Speak up in class, but above all, LISTEN -- listen especially to unpopular views. -- THINK. Only then should you act. I wish you well.