

GOODNESS AND KNOWLEDGE DEFINED | By Principal Tyler C. Tingley '48, '64, '68, '01 (Hon.); P'99


“Upholding goodness and knowledge,” Principal Ty Tingley says, “often means standing with people who need support and are misunderstood or marginalized.”

I began the 228th school year at the Academy as I have started each of my years as Exeter’s principal, with an address at the opening of school assembly. This Focus column consists of excerpts from that talk.

Each year, the subject of this address is Exeter’s Deed of Gift. This is the 12th talk I’ve delivered on what is, in fact, a very short document. And while reading the text over and over again is probably good for me, it also challenges my creativity.

Thus, I thought that this year I might do something different and talk less about the deed and more about my own life and three individuals who illustrate the Deed of Gift’s message.

John and Elizabeth Phillips gave the assets that formed Phillips Exeter Academy through a Deed of Gift dated May 17, 1781. Its most oft-quoted passage is, “Though goodness without knowledge is weak and feeble, yet knowledge without goodness is dangerous.” The individuals that I will tell you about manifested in their lives the powerful blending of goodness and knowledge that the deed suggests. Two of them are principals—one the third principal of Exeter and one the principal of my elementary school, who was also my third-grade teacher. The third individual graduated, not long ago, from the Academy.

They are Mrs. Potter, Principal Soule, class of 1813, and Rebecca.

I heard about Mrs. Potter before she was my third-grade teacher. I was a precocious reader as a little boy but very sloppy at spelling. “Mrs. Potter will straighten out your spelling,” my mother would say. I was into projects and crafts but very bad at cleaning up. “Mrs. Potter will teach you to be neat,” my mother would say. When I was playing at a friend’s house, I had a tendency to arrive home late. “Mrs. Potter will teach you to be on time,” my mother would say.

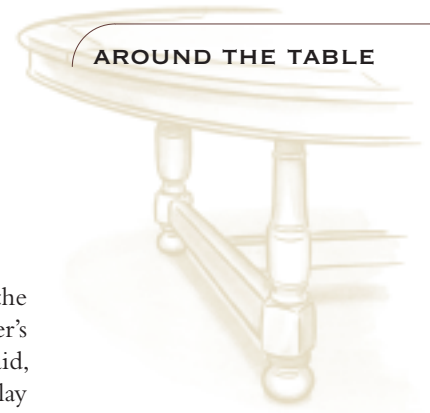
As you can imagine, I wasn’t looking forward to having Mrs. Potter as a teacher. You know how you can anticipate something and build it up in your mind until you really dread it, and then when you finally experience it, it isn’t at all as you had imagined it? This wasn’t like that. This was much worse than I had ever imagined.

Mrs. Potter was the strictest teacher I ever saw. Every classroom at our school had those peanut-sized desks and chairs that you can slide around and push into little work groups. Not in Mrs. Potter’s classroom. Mrs. Potter’s desks were bolted to the floor. Mrs. Potter did not believe in sliding.

But I respect Mrs. Potter for her unique ability to size up each of the 30 kids in her class and her refusal to let us do anything less than our best work. There is an ethical component to doing good work, and that is one of the ways that goodness and knowledge unite in education.

And for all her sternness, she was a wonderfully creative teacher. When the town got a new fire engine, we were at the firehouse to see the engine and hear from the firemen how it worked. Soon we were riding and tooting around town like the most special third-graders on earth. Back in class, we wrote news stories about our visit to the firehouse and read a book about a fireman.

One final story about Mrs. Potter, and I will allow you to determine how goodness and knowledge fit into this tale. In December, the school prepared for an all-school pageant for the parents. Even then I was aware I didn’t have a good singing voice. Following the auditions for the holiday chorus, I was informed that I would not be singing in the holiday pageant.



There were three other boys in the school who had failed their auditions. Just four of us in the whole school! During pageant rehearsals, we were sent to the principal's office—Mrs. Potter's office. Mrs. Potter looked at us as we walked in. "What am I going to do with you four?" she said, and then she reached in her desk and pulled out a deck of cards. "Do you know how to play poker?" she asked.

Thus, I learned to play poker in the principal's office. I also learned how to spell, to keep my things neat, and to be on time. My mother was pleased—but not half as pleased as I was by the look on her face when I told her that Mrs. Potter was teaching me to play poker.

The third principal of the Academy, Gideon Lane Soule (1838-1873), was very different from Mrs. Potter, but similar in some critical areas. Soule was principal during the American Civil War. And in the tense days leading up to armed conflict, he admitted the first African-American student to the Academy. Emanuel Sullavou, class of 1867, came from New Bedford, MA, went on to Harvard University and Harvard Law School, and had a distinguished career as a federal judge. But when he entered Exeter, on the eve of the Civil War, he was a vulnerable and surely lonely boy. Principal Soule gave him the support he needed.

Seven Southern boys trooped into Principal Soule's office in the fall of Sullavou's first year and demanded that he be removed from the school. Their families believed in segregation, and they told Soule that their parents would make them come home if Sullavou didn't leave Exeter. The histories report that Soule hardly paused and said, "Boys, you know where the train station is. The negro stays." The seven Southern boys left the school.

Principal Soule had the opportunity to exercise visible, ethical leadership at a critical time in the nation's history. Upholding goodness and knowledge often means standing with people who need support and are misunderstood or marginalized. History has recorded this challenge for Principal Soule, but often these tests occur in personal and private moments. When you reach a place like that in your life, recall what the deed says about goodness and knowledge, and take its message to heart.

So now we turn to Rebecca, who graduated from PEA and went on to Harvard. During Rebecca's time there, the president, Lawrence H. Summers, a well-known economist and former secretary of the treasury, left his position with little notice. On the day of the announcement that he was stepping down, President Summers was scheduled to have dinner with the seniors in Rebecca's dormitory. He arrived too late for dinner, but he offered to answer questions from the students.

Rebecca's was the last query Dr. Summers took: "President Summers, as you reflect on your tenure at Harvard, do you wish that you had spent more time emphasizing the teaching of goodness?" President Summers looked a bit surprised and responded, "No, I haven't thought much about that."

The next day, Rebecca sent him a copy of Exeter's Deed of Gift, and, in her cover note, told him she had gone to a school where the founding document required the principal to talk at least once a year about goodness and knowledge.

I don't know what President Summers' reaction was to Rebecca's suggestion that he read the Deed of Gift. I do know, however, that I was impressed by what Rebecca had done. It is difficult to ask a prominent person a tough question, but she had done just that and then followed it up with helpful advice.

I was pleased that, at least for Rebecca, hearing about the Deed of Gift for four years had had an effect. This was, I am sure, exactly the result that John Phillips wanted 227 years ago. It is unusual for a school to have its founding language hold such a place in the contemporary life of the institution.

And thus, as you depart from this assembly today, I hope you will remember the stories of friends and teachers I have told you about this morning and combine those stories with your own, and those you will hear from your friends and teachers at the Academy. These stories and your experience at Exeter will help you to hold standards like Mrs. Potter, or make a decision like Principal Soule, or ask a question like Rebecca. Value the stories you tell and hear as, together, we begin the 228th year of Phillips Exeter Academy. ●

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