

EXETER THE TRUE PLACE

by Harvard V. Knowles '77, '78 (Hon.)



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(Adapted from remarks to the class of 1978 on the occasion of their 25th reunion in May 2003.)

Whenever I meet alumni who have been out for a few years, they always want to know about the students. “Are they still the same?” they ask. “Do they still feel the weight of the institution in its rules, its demands, in its insistence that work be done and done to high standards?” I confess I’m never terribly confident in my answers, but I’ve heard those questions enough to have a conviction about where they come from. Those questions are rooted in a deep respect for Exeter’s essential values and in the anxiety that they could be easily lost. The people who leave here know what Exeter stands for, what it believes, and especially the sense of purpose it gave them. I can feel in the urgency of the questions old students put to me that they want to know that students are still pushed hard enough to learn that it is serious and focused effort as well as capacity that creates success. They want to believe that students leave here each June with the knowledge that it is the challenge of their best effort that is the standard they must measure themselves against. Every alumnus has probably wondered if back in New Hampshire there is left any part of the school they carry around inside themselves, which of course is another way of asking, “Is there any part of me left back in New Hampshire?”

Suspecting what might be on your minds as you journey back to reach across the years, to hear again for a day or two voices that were once a part of your daily life and which for too long perhaps have become only echoes from the past, I asked some of my students to share with us tonight some of what Exeter means to them. I have found what they have to say powerful and moving and I hope you do too.

Listen to this senior as he thinks about himself and Exeter. “I remember writing about my initial impressions of Exeter

almost four years ago when I first saw the misty Academy lawns and marble steps. I had a plan for my future not exactly exclusive of my parents’ plan for me.” How many people, do you suspect, come to Exeter to fulfill their parents’ dreams and leave having discovered their own? How many have been challenged enough to discover for themselves the ways in which they need to grow in order to lay claim to what is best in them? “I envisioned philosophical debates over coffee, walks and conversations with pretty girls coming back from classes, intellectual curiosity in all its most superficial forms. Most of all I wanted from Exeter a kind of ambitious detachment. I wanted a scenic shortcut, something useful and entertaining while it lasted, but ultimately eclipsed by the destination, doomed to be forever forgotten, always prefixed or suffixed, like the underappreciated handle of a knife.” I can’t resist commenting on the unselfconscious way in which that last sentence evolved into metaphor. It is such apparently effortless achievement that makes my job such a wonderful one. But back to the student... “So now, four years later, I think of all the nights I should have slept, all the days I did nothing, all the opportunities I have directly or indirectly missed, all the people I did not get to know better. And, in poetic contrast to detachment, I’ll remember all the emotions: ugly, beautiful, frivolous. When I leave though, I will not be thinking of the school, but of the emotions embedded as deep inside the bricks and mortar as in my own person.”

What intrigues me as I listen to these students’ reflections is that they mention buildings only in passing. They appreciate, I’m sure, the physical plant but it seems neither central to their experience nor does it play any explicit role in their affection for Exeter. I’m sure they notice and admire the grandeur of our buildings. The spectacular Phelps Science Center probably fits into

their thoughts, for example, as it does into ours, as something a great school ought to possess, but it doesn't inspire lyricism. One student did, though, come close to that tone when describing the campus: "I like the way the land lies here. The campus is compact and centralized, as if it were a rib cage protecting a heart." In turning the campus into metaphor, this student, like the previous one, puts people at the heart of this place, gives primacy to the human interactions that further their development by enlarging their capacity to see more and see it more clearly.

This is a place that teaches students by asking them to listen carefully to each other so that they will learn to value ideas they once thought different from their own. It is a place whose very classroom furniture declares that individuals matter and the deepest learning comes when individuals realize that their insights are limited only by imagination, their success determined by their ability to speak and to listen. One student confirmed all this by saying, "Exeter has been a crucible; an intense journey in which I've given much and received much. My experience seems to have been an excuse to get all these intriguing people together who have so much to teach each other, so much to learn from each other." Another student wrote that "Exeter breaks you down to the bone, and the whole learning experience is putting you back together again." If that is a true assessment, then that would justify the prevalence of the word "stress" in the students' reflections. It would also suggest the need for lots of support, lots of emotional padding to ensure a soft landing by graduation.

That virtually every student asserted the need for solid and nurturing relationships while defining the high quality of his or her own seems to demonstrate that Exonians know what they need and have the wits to get it. The fulfillment of that

need roots them in this place, as one student makes clear. "Even as I leave the physical place, the people with whom I have lived for the last four years will forever remain a part of who I am." Let me share with you a final vignette that reveals and confirms by innuendo what the previous speaker just said.

"I remember one day coming back from class and passing one of my friends on an icy pathway. Everything about him seemed perfectly composed, except that he was trudging along the path in open-toed sandals. I stopped to ask him what reason he could possibly have for exposing his toes to this kind of torture. He answered me in a calm and logical way. He had had a free period, so he had been doing homework. He figured that his biology reading was a more critical issue than the possible frostbite of his extremities. The extra review he could get in during the time it would have taken to tie laces was evidently worth the temporary discomfort. Even though I momentarily questioned his mental stability, I had a kind of admiration for the dedication of my fellow student. When I got back to my room, I remember putting a little extra time into my math homework."

In this seemingly casual exchange we see how one student's commitment to do his best can quicken and renew another's resolve to give more than duty requires. The desire to do well is deeply embedded in Exeter's culture. Part of what makes this place a great school is that even small moments carry great lessons.

My experience with so many of you, as well as with the students I've quoted this evening, encourages me to think that much of what I've told you sounds familiar to you; that the Exeter you've heard described takes shape through the mist of memory as your own. If that is so, then it is also true that where you are now in your connection to your Exeter experience is where they will be decades from now.

There is a brief moment in *Moby Dick*

when Ishmael, talking of Queequeg, says, "Queequeg was a native of Kokovoko, an island far away to the West and South. It is not down in any map; true places never are." It is easy to pass over those lines, and if my students are representative then many readers do. The paradox is worth our attention, however, for it reminds us that true places are spiritual places and thus Ishmael's remark helps us understand the powerful impact Exeter has had on those young people I've quoted tonight as well as on all those who have come before. "True" places in Melville's terms and, I assert, in the experience of all of us, are not created by geography; rather, they grow out of the lives that people live in them. They are defined by the love and the joy and the heartbreak and the pain that give them purpose and meaning. The Exeter you once knew no longer exists and no map can lead you back to it. Your Exeter is a habit of mind that keeps you at a task until it is done to the high standards you once deplored when you were here perhaps, but which you now know are the only ones which satisfy you. It is the laughter shared with someone you met in the middle of prep year and have loved ever since. It is the joy you feel in moments like the one you have right now when the years seem to fall away and you have again, if ever so vicariously, the excitement of being young and vibrant and invincible. Your roots here are deep. You are now bound to this place by what Lincoln called "the mystic chords of memory." True Exeter lives inside ourselves, and it is there that we must go to find its greatest riches.

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