

Brotherhood, Fraternity, Belonging

By David O'Halloran



“What is belonging? ... Where loneliness ends.”¹

A sense of belonging, a sense of connection to something greater than oneself—the essence of brotherhood—is essential to a boy. At Saint David’s, this sense of connection, of fraternity, is something we not only encourage but also cultivate, foster, and integrate into all we do. Our mission identifies Saint David’s as “a true community known for its sense of family, compassion, and kindness.” We believe it is this development of compassion, kindness, and sense of family that builds the bonds of brotherhood and establishes a sense of connection and belonging among all our boys regardless of where they’ve come from, what they believe, or their family circumstances. “That they be good men,” the aspiration of our founders and the school’s motto, is not the province of one individual; but rather a whole-of-school commitment to every boy’s well-being.

Merriam Webster defines brotherhood as “a fellowship, an alliance, an association,” and to an extent, it is. However, to fully appreciate brotherhood we have to go deeper than any dictionary’s literal meaning to a more abstract understanding of the idea or the “ideal” behind the word. In this way, we can view true brotherhood as a sense of fraternity, of kinship. It connotes a familial connection and commonality of purpose where the bond is even greater than blood.

Boys have an innate desire to bond, to tribe, and we know that they achieve this through shared experiences. “Clubs, fraternities, nations,” E. B. White tells us in *One Man’s Meat*², “are the beloved barriers in the way of a workable world.” In order to build a true brotherhood, he says, notions of alliance and association, of ‘the club’ and ‘the tribe’ “have to surrender some of their rights and some of their ribs... ‘Fraternity,’ in this popular sense, is the antithesis of fraternity.” A ‘Fraternity’—a club, tribe, or association (think college fraternity)—is often predicated on the idea of exclusion; whereas the fraternity that Saint David’s wants its boys to aspire to, the one that helps them characterize a ‘good man,’ is of a brotherhood defined by compassion and kindness. This more abstract notion of fraternity views it as a feeling of equality between and among the boys that extends to others beyond their school and lived experiences.

In Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*³, a work boys study at Saint David’s, we can usefully explore this idea of brotherhood, belonging, and fraternity, by relating it to the way a group of boys become sharply divided in terms of what they believe and value while

marooned together on an island free from the influence of adults and social organization. A clear distinction quickly develops in how the protagonist, Ralph and his followers and Jack, his moral antithesis, and his followers define belonging. Even though Ralph is elected leader and represents order and civilization and the greatest chance for successful rescue, the egomaniacal Jack begins to challenge and unravel Ralph's influence. His almost magnetic pull appeals to the boys' savage instincts and desire for power.

We are reminded in Golding's story that when things are going relatively well, order and civilization flourish; however, when things take a turn for the worse, when the system — "society" — is under stress, the values and beliefs around order and civilization can quickly be tested. Jack's group becomes increasingly physical, violent, and powerful and more and more boys align themselves with his 'fraternity.' It is raw and uncomplicated. It is exciting. They want to belong to a group that they can be identified with and that they hope will protect them. Both Ralph and Jack appeal to a primeval desire for fraternity, but via disparate means, celebrating very different values and beliefs.

Like the boys on Golding's island, our boys, in and out of school, are constantly challenged to identify between moral extremes. Brotherhood, cultivating a sense of 'fraternity' and belonging, is not a simple matter. Like most things, creating an inclusive culture of mutual respect and understanding must be nurtured, modeled ... taught. When things are going well, when everyone comes from the same or similar backgrounds, belief structures, race, ethnicity, or socio-economic circumstances, it's much easier. When everyone doesn't, it's more challenging. To thrive in a diverse, multicultural nation and world, to contribute to and find their place in the world, to be "all that they can be" (the first

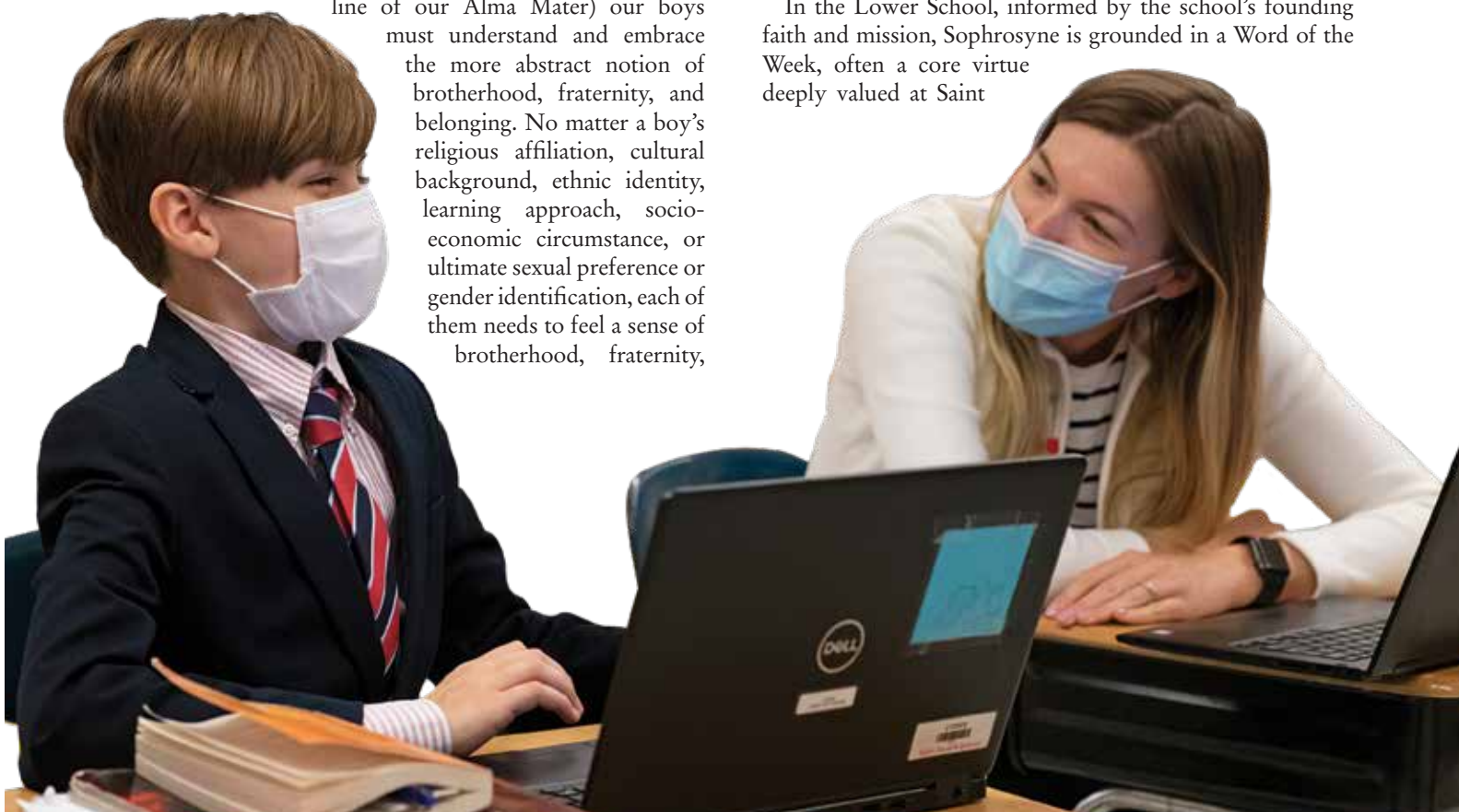
line of our Alma Mater) our boys must understand and embrace the more abstract notion of brotherhood, fraternity, and belonging. No matter a boy's religious affiliation, cultural background, ethnic identity, learning approach, socio-economic circumstance, or ultimate sexual preference or gender identification, each of them needs to feel a sense of brotherhood, fraternity,

and belonging to each other and to an institution with values and high expectations.

"I love you, my brother, whoever you are," author and poet Kahlil Gibran writes, "whether you worship in a church, kneel in your temple, or pray in your mosque. You and I are children of one faith, for the diverse paths of religion are fingers of the loving hand of the one supreme being, a hand extended to all, offering completeness of spirit to all, eager to receive all." When we talk of the spiritual pillar of Saint David's, this is what we mean. In so many ways it is what differentiates us from many other schools. And we use it to help shape the moral compass of our boys. By employing the school's Catholic faith tradition and its classically informed pedagogical underpinnings, our Religion and Sophrosyne curricula, Chapel, our Advisory Program, Service Opportunities, and the work of our Committee on Community and Inclusion, we provide a framework for true brotherhood and a sense of fraternity and belonging.

Created several years ago, Sophrosyne is named for the ancient Greek ideal that speaks to excellence of character and a healthy state of mind (healthy-mindedness). It is characterized by self-control, moderation, temperance, and an awareness of one's true self. To the Ancient Greeks, the essence of being a balanced, whole person was found in knowing oneself. So important was this concept, they etched it in stone on the side of Apollo's temple at Delphi. This ancient virtue represents the dual, interrelated strands of character education and social-emotional health. We believe that it is essential for a boy to possess an honest understanding of himself—his strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes, prejudices and beliefs—in order to experience lasting relationships and a true sense of brotherhood with others, especially those who may be very "different" from him.

In the Lower School, informed by the school's founding faith and mission, Sophrosyne is grounded in a Word of the Week, often a core virtue deeply valued at Saint



David's—Dignity, Agency, Citizenship, Adversity, Equality, and Inspiration, for example. These words and virtues also align with one of five cognitive and behavioral competencies identified by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning: self-awareness, self-management, relationship skill, social awareness, responsible decision-making. As Kathryn Hunter, Lower School Sophrosyne Coordinator, wrote in a previous issue of *Saint David's Magazine*, the goal in First Grade is for the boys to develop a sense of themselves, celebrate their differences as strengths and stories, and relate to others by understanding their own feelings during situations of exclusion, unfair treatment, or because of who they are or what is important to them. Understanding goals for each unit are framed with questions like: *Who am I, and what are my stories? How do my experiences shape my understanding of myself? What happens if we view our differences as strengths? Whose stories and voices do I hear?*

In Second and Third Grade, that work extends to the lives of others with understanding goals for each unit framed with questions like: *How do I describe who I am? What informs my understanding? How do I respond to exclusive actions and inclusive actions? What is the difference between wants and needs (such as civil rights)? What happens when I consider others' perspectives?*

In the Upper School, Saint David's values grounded in

schools' graduating classes. The book club selection, *New Kid*, is a graphic novel by Jerry Craft that relays the story of a seventh grader's experiences upon enrolling in a new private school and the variety of challenges it presented. Boys in all three schools began their discussions about this book from a similar shared experience: looking forward to graduation and the transition to a new secondary school. As the discussions unfolded in small-group breakout sessions over several weeks, they delved deeper into their individual feelings and thoughts, and shared their various perspectives across cultural, socio-economic, and racial dimensions. Beginning with similarities and then delving deeper into differences helped build a sense of belonging and brotherhood.

Similarly, through the cumulative experience of daily Chapel, our boys learn the importance of humility, gratitude, patience, empathy, equality, and respect for difference in all manifestations. They learn to see beyond themselves — to contribute to their community and act on behalf of the greater good. Personal experiences and stories with a moral message shared by teachers, alums and Seventh Grade peers during Chapel give our boys additional tools to navigate life's challenges with strength, courage, and integrity.

Service to others is another dimension we believe is necessary in cultivating a sense of brotherhood and fraternity. Again, the shared experience of serving the greater common good together builds the bonds of brotherhood. Examples include

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the Classical and Theological virtues collectively function as a beacon, guiding each boy's growth as he reflects upon and responds to the various challenges he faces—whether academic, social, emotional, athletic, or artistic. By helping him develop self-knowledge and ultimately self-advocacy, he is guided to consciously reflect on his own feelings, needs, and motivations and then to articulate this knowledge by appropriating Saint David's values for himself. Rather than being passively told what to think, our boys are given the opportunity to envision their own ideal state of well-being, of what's right and good, their own values, beliefs, and thoughts on any particular issue and from there, discern how to pursue it. As Evan Morse, Upper School Sophrosyne Coordinator, has noted, “This approach builds trust, allowing boys to advocate for themselves, and encourages them to seek support from across the community.” We use a historical lens and employ a critical mind to inform our thinking and discussion in Sophrosyne, allowing (but not directly teaching) boys to connect with more current issues and ideas.

By way of example, in the late winter and spring of last year, Saint David's partnered with George Jackson Academy and the Buckley School to host a virtual book club for the

our Seventh/Second Grade Buddies program, our work building schools in Ethiopia, our Horizons program, and our charity work with Graham Windham, Ronald McDonald House, Seeing Eye, Gbowee Backpacks, Cardinal Cooke Health Care Center, Daniel's Music Foundation, Carnegie East Nursing Home, and Manhattan Childrens Center. Here, Saint David's commitment to a balanced education shines: a boy's awareness and expression of his own feelings build on and inform the experience of empathetically working to help and support others in our extended community.

We also look to cultivate brotherhood through our Advisory Program in Grades Six, Seven, and Eight. The program provides our boys with access to another dedicated teacher (other than their homeroom teacher) to support their growth across our educational pillars, providing academic guidance, promoting their social-emotional health, and engaging them in moral and spiritual reflection. Throughout the year, boys meet during dedicated 30-minute advisory groups each week and in one-on-ones with their advisors for structured conversations. The individual relationship between a student and his advisor ensures that every student feels valued and cared for. We do something similar for boys

new to the school. Our New Student Liaison helps to welcome and ease the transition for boys joining Saint David's in non-traditional entry grades and their families.

Saint David's is committed to building an ever stronger and more inclusive school community among the boys, faculty, staff, and parents with the continued support of our DEI consultant Dr. Derrick Gay. Jessica Pagan and Pedro Morales, Inclusion, Diversity and Community Co-Directors, in conjunction with Allison Vella and the parent-driven Committee on Community and Inclusion, along with our Sophrosyne Coordinators, Evan Morse and Kathryn Hunter, and Religion Chair, Jim Barbieri, lead the school in further advancing this work. Our efforts in this area address a broad definition of difference, are mission-guided, and include focus on character, socio-emotional health and well-being, and incorporate the cultural competency initiatives undertaken with Dr. Gay.

Alexei Karamazov's elder brother Zosima, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, in trying to teach Alexei the idea of equality tells him that equality "lies only in human moral dignity" ... and "Let there be brothers first, then there will be brotherhood."⁴ The strong sense of brotherhood, fraternity, and belonging in our all-boy environment at Saint David's allows our boys to enjoy creative expression without inhibition — while giving them an outlet to connect with their emotions rather than suppress them. Mastery in multiple arenas informs a boy's confidence and helps him find his voice, define his sense of self, and connect with dignity and respect for all those he encounters. Our emphasis on manners, civility, social graces—the look in the eye, the firm handshake, the 'please' and 'thank you', the acknowledgment of someone new to the room, the offering of a seat, the warm smile—is the all-important social lubricant that fosters respect and grounds our boys.

In *The Deep*, the source of my opening quote, the protagonist, Yetu, charged with remembering the history of her people and overcome by this immense burden, escapes from her home and embarks on a long journey of self-discovery. In so doing she learns the truth about herself, her people, and their future. Along the way, she encounters a unique 'friend' who begins to help her see her world and the wider world differently than she had experienced, and learns from this friend that in the end "we must each be where we belong." Hearing this advice, in a real attempt to understand, she asks, "what is belonging?" Her friend replies, "where loneliness ends." Ultimately, isn't this what we want for every single child, every single person? ■

Notes:

1. *The Deep*, Rivers Solomon, (2019). Saga Press, New York.

2. *One Man's Meat*, E.B. White, (1942). G.K. Hall, Boston.

3. *Lord of the Flies*, William Golding, (1954). Faber and Faber, Boston.

4. *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, (p.423). Translated from the Russian by Constance Garnett. The Lowell Press, New York.

Dr. O'Halloran is Headmaster
of Saint David's School.

