Thank you, Dr. O’Halloran. Good Morning boys, good morning faculty. I am speaking to you from my kitchen table. I did not expect to be at home today, but my daughter’s classroom is closed because of a positive Covid case.

A good friend of mine, Kate, grew up in New Hampshire and along with her brothers and friends spent many summer days at their town pool. They made up a game called “Jump or Dive.” When I met Kate, in college, she introduced me to the game. It goes like this: You stand at the far end of a diving board and sprint toward the bouncing end, and leap off while your friends, who are on the pool deck, or treading water, shout either “JUMP!” or “DIVE!”

You have to listen, and contort in the air so that you either enter the pool feet first if they shout JUMP or hands/head first if they shout DIVE. In order to have a fighting chance, you must leap with your body parallel to the surface of the water in a way that splits the difference, sort of a half-jump, half-dive position. Nine times out of 10, you can’t react in time, and you slap your entire body on the surface of the water in an epic belly flop. It hurts, your friends laugh, and now it’s your turn to shout “Jump” or “Dive” and watch your friend react.

Teaching and parenting for the last 12 months has been one long game of Jump or Dive. It’s hard to know what to prepare for, and no matter how you prep, there’s a curveball. And you fall flat on your face. And I am over it. I want to stop playing. I would like to either Jump OR Dive. I can do both. I can do both pretty well. A year ago I felt good about my jumping and my diving. But this belly flopping is getting really old.

Yet I persevere. We all do. We show up. We do our best. And we try to get better. Fewer flops. Even when our skin feels hot and stingy and our ribs ache. We. Get. Back. On. The. Board. PERSEVERANCE.

Perseverance is the ability to keep doing something in spite of obstacles. People who persevere show steadfastness in doing something despite how hard it is or how long it takes to reach the goal.

In August 2019, NASA launched an essay writing contest for students in grades K-12 to name the Mars Rover that would be part of the latest NASA mission. (The mission successfully landed a wheeled rover and an incredible helicopter drone on Mars, last month.) By now, you all know the name of the rover: PERSEVERANCE.

The name PERSEVERANCE and winning essay were penned by Virginia seventh grader, Alex Mather. Alex became deeply interested in Space after attending a Space Camp in the summer before Sixth Grade, and has been passionate about Space and Space exploration ever since. In his essay and in subsequent interviews, Alex emphasized that the name he chose describes the people behind the mission, and not merely the rover itself. Here is his essay:

“Curiosity. Insight. Spirit. Opportunity. If you think about it, all of these names of past Mars rovers are qualities we possess as humans. We are always curious, and seek opportunity. We have the spirit and insight to explore the Moon, Mars, and beyond. But, if rovers are to be the qualities of us as a race, we missed the most important thing. Perseverance. We as humans evolved as creatures who could learn to adapt to any situation, no matter how harsh. We are a species of explorers, and we will meet many setbacks on the way to Mars. However, we can persevere. We, not as a nation but as humans, will not give up. Even

Nora Sundar at The Edge during the Grade Eight Adventures in New York week.
faced with bitter losses such as Opportunity and Vikram 2, the human race will always persevere into the future.”
— Alex Mather
Alex’s rover name and essay were chosen from among 28,000 entries. A panel of judges whittled the number down; the finalists’ entries were posted to NASA.gov and the public was invited to review and vote for their favorite. The winning name was announced in February of 2020.
At that time, no one knew, not Alex, nor anyone voting, not even the brilliant NASA scientists and engineers, just how critical perseverance would become for all of us as we weather the storm of a global pandemic.
We persevere as we steadfastly wear our masks, even playing sports, even on playdates. As we keep our social circles tight, even though we desperately miss our friends and family. As we log in to Zoom. As we mourn lost opportunities: Plays and Musicals we do a version of— thanks to creative and hardworking teachers—but without the thrill of a live audience. Sports seasons you can’t ever get back. The eighth graders’ trip to Italy. Of course, many are also mourning the lives of loved ones lost. WE PERSEVERE.

The landing of the Perseverance rover was live streamed, and many gorgeous images have been shared, including this iconic image (see image above, right), taken by the rover’s own upward pointing camera of its enormous orange and white parachute, as it glided down to Mars’ Jezero crater.
Allen Chen, a NASA engineer, dropped a hint as he narrated a livestreamed video of the landing, that a coded message was visible to those who would look for it. This set off an international frenzy of collaborative code breaking. A college computer science student in Paris and his dad (in London) were the first to share the decoded message. And NASA confirmed: An engineer named Ian Clark had designed Perseverance’s parachute to include words - represented in binary code by alternating panels of orange and white fabric. The words are “DARE MIGHTY THINGS” which is a line from a speech given by Teddy Roosevelt in 1899. I’ll read a short quote from that speech:
“Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure, than to take rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much, because they live in the gray twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat.”
If there is going to be ANY silver lining to this tragic Covid ordeal, let it be this: Let us make it a habit to persevere together, though checkered by failure: Don’t curl up and opt out, although the temptation is strong. Instead, try to live and learn and be your best self. We’ll make mistakes and we’ll keep going. We’ll keep asking “Can you hear me?” on Zoom calls. We may attach the wrong doc to the Google Classroom assignment. You may need a reminder to close tabs and stay on task when working on your computer. Or a reminder that your hoodie is not part of the dress code. Maybe you’ll return from a months-long stint of virtual at-home learning, only to have your entire cohort go on quarantine the SAME DAY! We’ll feel sad about what we’ve lost, but we’ll also try to remain present in the moment, thankful for what we HAVE. We’ll keep our eyes and ears open for “glorious triumphs” large and small: the beauty of the birds’ songs, which Ms. Iannicelli spoke about in Chapel yesterday, or the wonder of a call to action, woven as binary code, into a parachute, on Mars. 

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