

## **Opening School Remarks on Charlottesville, September 7, 2017**

Dom Gerard

It would feel dishonest for me to open our school year today without taking a little time to acknowledge the painful events that occurred in Charlottesville almost a month ago now. I know that many of you are in different places about what happened. For some of you it may still be weighing heavily on your mind, and for others you might be thinking about any number of other things. Some of you were riveted by the events, and some of you may not have noticed too much.

However, we need to talk about Charlottesville, because a mass rally of neo-Nazis, white nationalists, KKK, and armed militia cannot occur and go unmentioned. Because racism, anti-Semitism, and white supremacy are wrong. Because a neo-Nazi sympathizer drove a car into a crowd, killing one young woman and injuring several others. There is no excuse, no explanation, and no justification for those hate-filled ideologies in Charlottesville, here in Pennsylvania, or anywhere else.

If you think of that rally as the center point of the Charlottesville discussion, there are a lot of debates that surround that center: the removal of Confederate monuments, the use of violence by counter protesters, appropriate police response, and of course, the responses of various politicians to the events in Charlottesville. For the moment, I want you to think of those as distractions from that central point. A mass rally of neo-Nazis and white nationalists marched in full display in a major US city in 2017.

However, it is easy to put that racist rally up on a mental shelf in the back of the closet and say, "Okay, that happened, and it was terrible. But it was far away from here, I didn't have anything to do with it, and it's over anyway." You can say that, and honestly, it reminds me of the way I used to think about racism.

I used to imagine racism was like this ugly, scary house I had in my neighborhood growing up. Maybe you have a house like this in your neighborhood too. Old, broken down, boarded up windows, the yard was a mess, and the place sort of felt haunted or like terrible things had happened inside. And you felt like if you just crossed the street or went to school a different way, you could avoid that scary house.

The events in Charlottesville are like that house, but that's because they are the ugliest manifestation of racism we've seen in our recent lives. They proclaim their RACISM in big capital letters with an ideology of hate, violence and extremism. But really, when you get down to it, the real problem is deeper. Racism is not the house. Racism is the ground the neighborhood is built on. Racism is in the water, it's in the air. To avoid racism, you can't just cross the street. To say I'm going to avoid racism would be like saying, I'm not going to breathe.

I know what I'm saying can feel overwhelming. And it is. The everyday marginalization people feel from racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, homophobia and transphobia is overwhelming. But as members of a Friends school community, we can find answers in the radical Quaker testimony of equality. That doesn't mean the answers are easy, because they're not. To truly believe in equality doesn't mean I'm just going to be colorblind or I'm going to follow the Golden Rule. To truly believe in equality means I'm going to treat others the way *they* want to be treated. I'm going to see them fully, and I'm going to hear their experiences fully. As Dina said in a meeting last week, it means having a deep reverence for each other's light.

And we have the extra blessing of being here in an intentionally diverse community like AFS. Friends, this may be one of the most diverse communities you will ever be a part of. There are few places that more truly represent Philadelphia in all its diversity. We have people from around the corner and around the world. Here we are together in one room. Though it can be challenging at times to bring all these people together, the mess is worth it. In that mess we have the opportunity to develop the answers, the antidote to the hate.

First, we have to learn each other's stories. Everyone has a story to tell, and we need to recognize each person's story in the larger context of the great American story. We cannot divorce our current events from our history, and we cannot deny someone the context in which their narrative exists. And sometimes, we have to recognize that the narratives we've been taught about people that are different than us aren't always accurate and usually don't give us a full understanding of their lives. If you really know someone's story, they can no longer be a caricature or a stereotype. To truly know someone's story is to have reverence for their light.

In order to learn each other's stories, however, we have to have courage. The courage to put ourselves out there and share our stories. We have a lot of opportunities to do so here at AFS, but I'd like to invite anyone who wants to reflect on Charlottesville to come to Mary Lynn's room (US 20) at lunch today to talk. To take a risk and tell someone how Charlottesville made us feel or how things that happen every day here in Philly make us feel. But - and this is a so critical - we also have to have the courage to listen. The courage to take in someone's story - no matter how uncomfortable it makes us - and to really hear it. Not to see it as an invitation to debate or to argue or to defend, but just to see it as the opportunity to grow in your own understanding of humanity and to strengthen the bonds of community. Have the courage to be silent sometimes and just listen.

More than anything else, we have to hope. Hope is not a passive thing. We can't just sit back and say "Well, here's hoping!" Hope means action. It means engagement. It means doing all the work here in school and in the larger community to, as Gandhi said, "Be the change you wish to see in the world." We've all got to do it. And I have hope. And I know the adults in this community have hope too. Our hope is in you. Now, let's go out and do it. Have a wonderful start to the school year. Go well.