

November 25, 2009

Head's Message: Thanksgiving
by Susanna A. Jones



Below is my speech for this year's Thanksgiving Assembly. You will see that it is inspired by the columns I've been writing on happiness, and asks the girls to put one of the "happiness interventions," namely the gratitude note, into practice. While I realize that not all girls will take up my challenge, I hope some of them do. I will follow up with them by asking those who wish to do so, to share their "gratitude note" experiences with me.

Have a wonderful Thanksgiving!

I know that for many of you this is one of your favorite events of the year. A junior told me that she teared up at the Admissions Open House when she heard the Lower School Chorus practicing *Now I Walk in Beauty*. Part of why we love it, I think, is certainly the music – I treasure singing *This Land is Your Land* which reminds me of my childhood – and I think we also love it because it's one of the two times in the year we are all together in one place.

Togetherness, along with food, defines Thanksgiving. But, of course, the true purpose of Thanksgiving is for all of us – the entire nation – to pause and give thanks. As many of you probably know, Abraham Lincoln declared Thanksgiving a national holiday in the middle of the Civil War, a time of wrenching suffering and pain.

We are living during another period when our nation faces many challenges, but just as there was reason to give thanks in 1863, there is today. Life isn't perfect – nor is it ever really. You may not be happy with a grade you got or maybe you didn't make a team. Maybe your best friend is mad at you or your boyfriend broke up with you. Or maybe you're fighting with your parents or they are fighting with each other; maybe the atmosphere in your home is tense and even unhappy. Maybe, like me, you've recently lost someone you love. But even if you are having those experiences, you still have reason to be grateful.

And if you can spend some time thinking about what you can be grateful for, and explicitly identifying those aspects of your life, you will feel better. And that's not just your mother or your head of school telling you that – psychologists have proven that dwelling on the positives in your life rather than the negatives makes you happier.

Even if everything at school isn't perfect, you are still incredibly fortunate to go to a school like Holton-Arms. Your teachers are dedicated to teaching and they care deeply about you, their students – they are invested in your success. We live in a country with as much or more freedom as anywhere in the world. Because our constitution protects dissent, we tend to focus on the negative and forget how fortunate we are to be able to openly criticize our government. Even in these challenging economic times, we are better off than most of the

world's people who live in poverty and conditions unimaginable to most of us. Most importantly, my guess is that all of you have at least one person in your life – and most of you probably have many people like this – whom you feel make a difference for you; it might be a parent, a teacher or coach, a camp counselor, a friend, a grandparent, aunt or uncle, a neighbor.

My challenge for all of you over the next few days is to take some time to write one of these people, these people who make a difference to you, a note thanking them for how they help you or care about you. If you can, take the note to the person and share it in person with him or her. If you can't meet in person, send it and follow up with a phone call.

You know instinctively that such a note and conversation will make the recipient feel really wonderful – though you probably don't realize how wonderful. I know, for example, that I can speak for every teacher in this room when I say that nothing – absolutely nothing – makes them feel happier and more gratified than receiving a heartfelt note of thanks from a student. But I'm not asking you to limit your note writing to teachers – anyone who matters to you is fine.

So writing a note of gratitude will surely make the recipient's day, but psychologists have discovered that sharing your thanks in this way will also make you feel good – indeed, it will lift your spirits for as long as a year. Not only that, but when you're happy, research shows that your friends are also more likely to be happy. Moreover, Mrs. Holton wanted her school to provide an "education of the mind and also the soul and the spirit." Being mindfully grateful is an excellent exercise for our souls and spirits.

So I hope you have a wonderful Thanksgiving full of delicious food and whatever your traditions may be; I hope you enjoy the time with family and friends; and I hope you nurture your soul and spirit and that you spread happiness by thanking someone for making a difference in your life.