



Reflections on a trip to my Alma Mater

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After 51 years away, the time was finally right for me to make a first formal trip back to my chosen high school Alma Mater, Andover. I've made several brief visits to campus over the years by myself while an undergraduate at Brown, as a young married man, and as the father of a Gordon student, but never attending an official class reunion or function. After missing last year's highly successful 50th Reunion, I was inspired by the warmth and organizational skills of Al Blum, Vic Obninsky, and other enthusiastic Classmates of 1962 to make the commitment to gather this past weekend for a 51st anniversary time of mutual reflection on our shared past, present, and future.

Initial Impressions

Susan and I arrived at the newly restored Andover Inn¹ on Friday afternoon and immediately stepped across Chapel Ave and joined our classmates on a guided tour of the Addison Gallery of American Art's main collection. Many of us returned during the weekend to take in the Gallery's current special exhibits, which I'll discuss in more depth later on. Browsing the wonderful works in the collection, starting to get reacquainted with classmates separated by decades, and wandering about the sunlit campus taking in the old, familiar buildings and grounds, the vista, the elm arches, the ambience, and the deep establishment of the place brought back a flood of memories – memories of classes taken, meals shared around formal tables with proctors, favorite and dreaded teachers, youthful pride, adolescent loneliness, surreptitious smoking, piles of winter snow, playing fields with lacrosse, bridge and billiards, and all the joys and struggles of living together with a bunch of boys away from home, most of whom were at least as spoiled as I was.

So much was the same and yet different. The campus was populated with girls, seemingly more than boys but perhaps so because of its historic incongruity, all dressed so informally, walking about so casually, some hand in hand, while my aging/maturing/experienced classmates and I drifted about on the same premises in what almost seemed like a parallel reality, they in their world and we in ours. I became increasingly aware of a perceptible shift in the zeitgeist, the ambient philosophy, perhaps even the underlying values of the place. This was, and yet wasn't, the Andover I had left as a youth.

We checked into our room at the Andover Inn, wonderfully renovated in an understated but solidly "this is for the ages" way and then gathered with a small cohort of classmates and spouses to walk through the Cochran Sanctuary to our dinner at the Log Cabin that evening. The air was clear and both the walk along the sculptured garden path in the sanctuary and the conversation were invigorating. Shared interests began to emerge – Dinny has a wry interest in birds and their calls, Wendy loves the Allagash – as we all quietly began to let a sense of deep appreciation soak into us: so many had given so much over the decades and even centuries before we became partially willing recipients as students to make this place the mysteriously life-changing experience that it was and is.

As the evening progressed, our thoughts shifted from those of the young students we once were, and the lingering questions were no longer “what does future hold for us as we move on from this place?” but “what legacy can we leave for those who are coming after us?” What is good about the changes we see and feel that should be celebrated and enlarged, and what has been lost that needs to be rediscovered and strengthened? Is there any way that can we do for the entire school and its philosophy and values what the architects and workers have done so skillfully for the Andover Inn when they stripped it down to its solid foundations and rebuilt an even better reality than what was there before?

The Great End and Real Business of Andover

Samuel Phillips’ original intention² was, in his words, "to lay the foundation of a School or Academy for the purpose of instructing Youth, not only in English and Latin Grammar, Writing, Arithmetic, and those Sciences, wherein they are commonly taught; but more especially to learn them the Great End and Real Business of Living." Phillips further stated that "This Seminary shall be ever equally open to Youth, with requisit qualification, from every quarter." It was an inspired establishing that has stood the test of time. Many of these founding principles have been carried faithfully through to our day, especially the first commitment to laying a broad base of academic study, coupled with the last commitment to admit qualified young people from all walks of life. The central theme, however, that Phillips Academy was to be a “Seminary” that “more especially” taught its students about “the Great End and Real Business of Living” has in significant measure been altered from Phillips’ clearly focused Calvinistic vision of ordaining its graduates to advance the Kingdom of God to a much more secular philosophy that encourages its graduates to advance the kingdoms of this world through selfless “Non sibi” service.

Let me interject a question here about our motto, “Finis Origine Pendet”:

1. What kind of Beginning is needed to produce the “Great End” that Samuel Phillips envisioned?

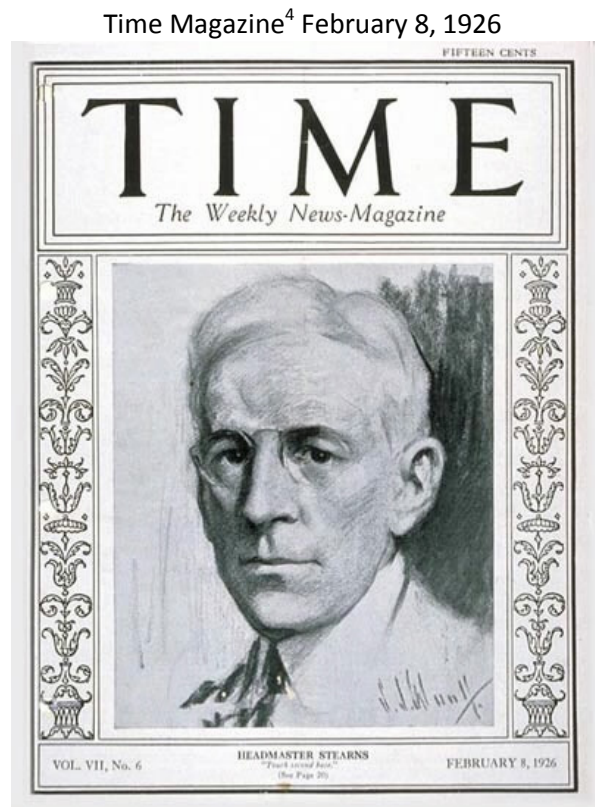
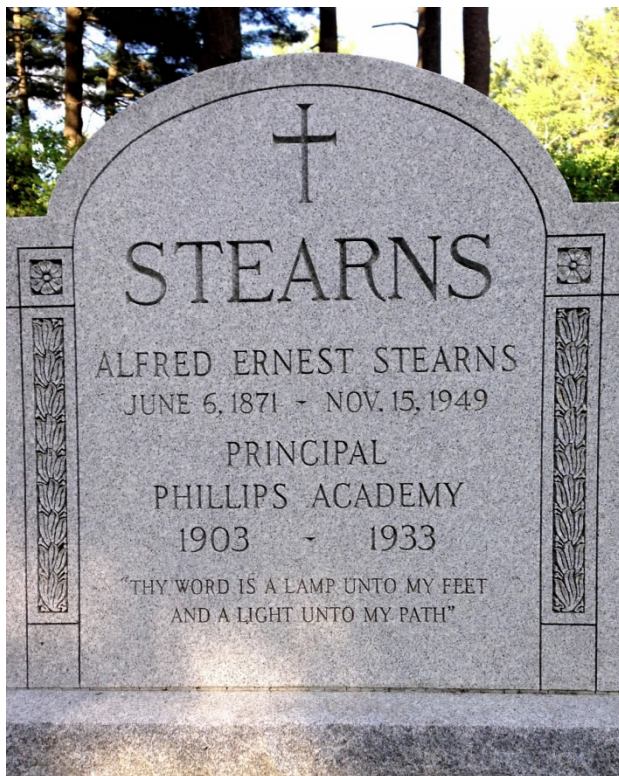
Matthew records a conversation between Jesus and some of his more serious detractors outside the Temple in Jerusalem the week before he was crucified in which he boiled the teachings of the Mosaic Law down to two fundamental commandments:

Now when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they assembled together. And one of them, an expert in religious law, asked him a question to test him: “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus said to him, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. The second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.”

The Phillips Academy³ of our era has remembered and tried to instill in its faculty and students the general principles of the second commandment – a key but derived element of Samuel Phillips’ “Real Business of Living” – while distancing itself from the crucial first element, which identifies the underlying “Great End” from which the second draws its meaning, strength, clarity, and purpose.

The roots of this disconnect may stem all the way back to the early 20th Century when the Andover Theological Seminary separated from Phillips Academy and moved to Newton after sharing the same Board and Andover campus for a century. The original founding of the Theological Seminary in 1807, as I

understand it, had to do with profound Calvinist concerns over the academic mainstreaming of what was to become Unitarianism at Harvard. Perhaps Phillips Academy was leaning too much toward liberalism for the Seminary to tolerate, resulting in its decision to separate and abandon the Andover campus in 1908. Others would know far more about that than I, but it was interesting for me to note on this visit the following tombstone in the graveyard across from my then new, now old dormitory, the Alfred E. Stearns House:



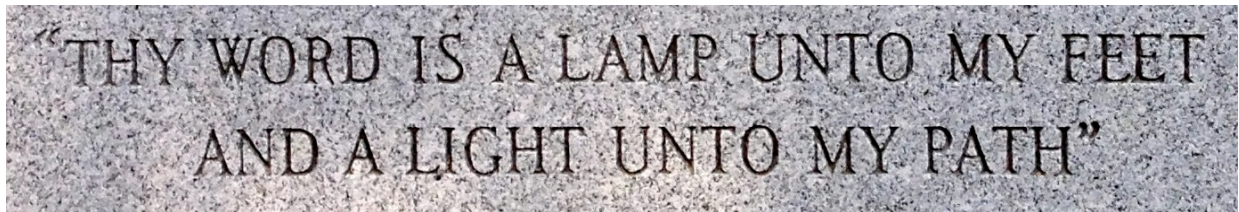
Here's one student's later recollection of his Headmaster⁵:

"Stearns' particular gift was his capacity for moral leadership, which was aided by a commanding presence and one of the most beautiful speaking voices I have ever heard, deep and resonant as a perfectly tuned bell. He worked closely with the wise treasurer, James Sawyer, whose simplicity of manner charmed and disarmed even the most tight-fisted prospective donor. Al Stearns seemed to personify the school. He was then at the height of his powers, and when he preached at vespers even the mavericks among us felt the radiance of that personality. Perhaps most of us looked at him too uncritically, but it is well for a school to have its headmaster for a hero.

"The early going, as I say, was rough and formative. One Sunday, Al Stearns bounded down from the chapel pulpit and grabbed my arm in a grip of steel. He'd been watching my work throughout the services. "Spit out that gum!" he shouted, his eyes flashing. It was something like Jehovah intervening in a dime-limit stud game.

“Al Stearns came into our lives at 7:45, and he mattered, too. From Al Stearns in daily chapel I learned to respect and fear authority, and to accept my elders' simple and emphatic ethical discriminations of black from white, wrong from right, the "vile" from the "manly." This, it developed, was a useful enough guide for running one's life so long as the Word came thundering down every morning at 7:45, but it was of decreasing use later on, when one was out of range and beyond recollection of Al Stearns's piercing eye and prophetic presence.”

I don't know how much of a youth empowerment model Stearns followed or how liberal or strict his theology was, but the tombstone erected over his grave less than 3 generations ago has only one content-based inscription on it:



Two questions come to mind:

1. Would the source and content of Stearns' simple memorial message represent, in any way, the content and character expected of Andover's leadership today, or are the guiding principles of Stearns' life outdated and irrelevant in our contemporary world?
2. Does Phillips Academy expect its current leaders to be able to fill a pulpit at Andover and in the broader society and, if so, when and with what message content?

The Admissions Dilemma at Andover

Saturday morning some of us shared a delicious breakfast at Samuel's restaurant downstairs in the Andover Inn as we prepared for the day ahead. A window was open, and Susan noticed that there weren't any screens on it. "Oh, that's right! I forgot. Andover is perfect, so there aren't any flies here," she noted with amusement. It was true: we were immersed in a culture of human perfection that said in so many subtle and not-so-subtle ways "We are chosen human beings. We have brains and personalities and connections and money. We can do this right."

Thus invigorated and sobered, we then migrated to the Stevens Room downstairs, aptly named in memory of the Abbot Stevens⁶ family, whose old and new money blessed Phillips Academy generously over a span of decades. There we spent a marvelous time with Jim Ventre, Dean of Admissions par excellence, finding out all about Andover's sophisticated admissions process, complete with its joys and challenges. We revisited some amazing virtual candidates we had met in our Inboxes earlier, including the multitalented Cindy Lou Who (who could have been applying to college, for crying out loud) and her illustrious cohorts Kermit D. Frog, Nala Lion, and Christopher Robin. Jim took us on a PowerPoint tour-de-force of admissions, how to select among so many qualified applicants those that will fit Andover the best and how to gracefully steer other less promising potential candidates away before they even apply so that the acceptance rate of completed applications won't drop too low for the market.

I was struck by the contrast with my neighborhood and life's work among the disenfranchised poor in urban inner-city Rochester, NY, so I noted that in our community we had quite the reverse set of problems, how to educate a mass of unselected, often unmotivated and ill-prepared students, and keep them in high school long enough to learn something valuable and graduate. I shared a recent statistic from the Schott 50 State Report⁸ indicating that only 9% of African American boys starting the 9th grade in the Rochester City School District end up graduating on time, placing Rochester in *last place* nationally among high school with significant black student populations⁹. I then asked what the group thought that a successful and forward looking secondary school like Andover might offer to help.

I noted that the population Andover serves is at the tip of the pyramid, while mine is at its base¹⁰: is there any connection? The causes of the critical dilemma we face in Rochester, which is being played out in countless similar cities around our nation, are multifactorial, but what part does education play in its solution, and what kind of education do our students and leaders of tomorrow need? What many of us are observing with deep concern is an almost total eclipse of moral insight and behavior among youth¹¹, unguided or even misguided by parents or community leaders who should know better.

There was sincere interest, not only in the entire admissions process, which has been very carefully thought out and attended to in detail, but in my observations and question. As the weekend continued, several sought us out to dig deeper into the subject and brainstorm a bit.

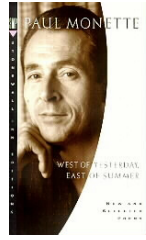
The Addison Gallery¹² and Pattern Recognition

Saturday afternoon after a tasty lunch in the elegant Mural Room upstairs in the completely renovated Paresky Commons¹³ and a walk down into town to visit my cousin on Morton Street, Susan and I ambled around campus and then took in the special exhibits at the Addison Gallery. The first floor exhibit, personally associated with Phillips Academy through Paul Monette, Class of 1963 (1945-1995), was titled "Secrets, Loss, Memory, and Courage: Works by Gay Male Artists" and addressed "issues such as the marginalization of gay men and the emergence of a new cultural acceptance of gay people in many circles." Upstairs a traveling exhibit called "For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights," graphically chronicled "the historical role played by visual images in shaping, influencing, and transforming the fight for civil rights in the United States from the 1940s to 1970s." Both exhibits were excellent in their selection, display, and content. What struck me was their apparently intentional juxtaposition and its strong implication that history is repeating itself in a recognizable pattern that will lead inevitably to an increase in human liberation and freedom.

One exhibit addressed human differences based primarily on desire, attraction, inner thoughts and feelings, and the outward expression of these in social and interpersonal behaviors, some of which have had lethal health consequences¹⁴. The other addressed human differences based on racial genetics and the outwardly visible physical characteristics that accompany these inherited traits.

Two more questions emerge:

1. Is the pattern being recognized by Addison and others true?
2. What is Truth?



There certainly is a moral tidal change underway in our nation, stemming from the early advances of the sexual revolution in the 1950s and 60s to the full swing of the 21st Century. What was once considered to be morally impure and unacceptable behavior is becoming an increasingly celebrated norm. From my vantage point as an inner-city primary care physician, the results are disastrous. The neighborhood we serve has some of the highest STD and abortion rates in New York State, if not the nation. Personal boundaries are dissolving, indiscriminate sexual activity is rampant, and an entitlement mentality for dealing with the consequences is being fostered at the highest levels of government. City school clinics pass out condoms and prescribe birth control, including placing intrauterine devices in adolescent girls without parental consent, in vain attempts to improve the situation.

Meanwhile, a current national news report tells the sad story of a high school senior cheerleader who seduced a 9th grade girl into lesbian experimentation and has been arrested when her 14 year old girlfriend's parents complained. Shocking? It certainly is. Why? According to the media the scandal is that the 9th grader's evil parents and old-school police intervened in a situation where these girls should have been left alone to enjoy their youthful passions without being questioned. "Stop the Hate, Free Kate!" rings the battle cry¹⁵, advanced with this justification: "The law is designed to protect our children, but the law does not serve its purpose when it is applied to consensual behavior between peers."

Developments like these beg questions like:

1. Where are we going as a society?
2. How is Andover handling "consensual behavior between peers" on campus?

We've entered an area where law is a very poor bulwark against popular immorality. I can imagine George Washington, standing with his horse under a small but spreading elm tree on the nascent Andover campus, with his heart filling with revelations like these:

"Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim tribute to patriotism who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness – these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens... reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principles."

Very true, George, but just what religious principles? From our superior vantage point we can see clearly now that our world, which must have seemed so simple in George Washington's day (was it really?), is filled with global religious principles from a variety of sources. How do we choose? One popular method is to look for a pattern¹⁶ among all the religions, a best fit line¹⁷ that will join them all into one fairly coherent whole. We'll find the least common denominator of them all that we can subscribe to as world citizens, and then we'll promote that. Where they agree, we will agree (unless we know even better),

and where they disagree, we will be silent and just let people come to their own unguided conclusions. Jesus? His life and claims are so unique that he just drops off the fit line without even having to be physically crucified again.

Or we could begin to come to grips with our 20th and now even more advanced 21st Century conceit and reinvestigate the “religious principles” that guided Samuel Phillips, Jr. to found what is arguably the most successful secondary school the world has ever seen; the principles that informed George Washington as he fathered what is perhaps the most free and successful society the world has ever seen; the principles that motivated Jonathan Edwards¹⁸ to awaken and unify an entire nation that was on the verge of collapse; the principles that inspired Alfred E. Stearns to provide moral leadership to the students under his charge; and the principles that impassioned Martin Luther King¹⁹ to lead the world’s most profoundly successful nonviolent civil rights movement. What did they have in common? A life-changing understanding of the self-evident truth that is found in the Judeo-Christian scriptures and personified in the life, sacrificial death, and amazing resurrection of Jesus, the savior of mankind.

What these anointed leaders discovered, studied, applied to their own lives, and then disseminated around the globe was and still is a very reasonable, practical, and true set of “religious principles”, grounded in a proven Word and verified by a wealth of current and historical human experience. This is the kind of truth that provides the necessary inner conviction, repentance, forgiveness, and guidance that sets men free. It also provides excellent pulpit material. Why have we abandoned our roots?

Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.

Dinner at the Log Cabin

With my mind filled with thoughts like these, we rested for a while at the Inn and then joined our gathering group at the Log Cabin for a wonderful time of feasting, fellowship, and enlightenment. The high point of the evening for me, aside from Annie Wales’ delightful origami creations, was the time we spent with Andover’s new Headmaster, John Palfrey²⁰. I must say that I was deeply impressed with this young man’s intellect, mental organization, manner, passion for youth and education, and vision for combining innovation with tradition as we move forward. I have confidence that John is the man to lead at this time in Andover’s history and am looking forward to seeing how he grows and adapts to meet the crucial needs of our time.

John was attentive to my concerns, and I found myself imagining how Andover’s growing edge in reaching out to underserved youth, both on campus²¹ and off²², could apply to our situation in Rochester. There are ideas out there²³ – all we need is the inspiration and motivation to pursue them. How about mining the abandoned shafts of our heritage, regathering clear insight from Samuel, George, Jonathan, and Martin, and then combining them with the educational wisdom and moral leadership of Alfred E. Stearns to bring forth a practical revival of Truth on the Andover campus that will spread across our nation like a transforming wildfire? Impossible? I don’t think so. I’d be happy to help with the new Infirmary project, but as I told Al and Karen Blum “I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!”



Quick References:

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