

Headmaster Nat Conard P '09, '11
2018 Convocation

Convocation marks a special time each year—the start of a new school year. For those of you who are students, this might be your seventh new school year, or it might be your 13th. And for some of us on the stage, it might be the...well, perhaps that number is best left unspoken! For me, adding up my years as a student and my years teaching and working in schools, this is my 52nd first day of school. That's more than a half-century of first days of school to remember and think about, and I want to take you through each one of them today, starting with Kindergarten.... I'm kidding, of course!

As you know, this year is my last as headmaster here at Pingry, which means that this is my last Convocation speech. In June, I'll be “graduating” with you seniors, although for me it will be a PG year, since this will be my 14th year here. I'm not sure if you seniors are feeling nostalgic yet about your final year, but I can tell you that I am—a little. I've found myself reflecting on my own middle and high school years, which took place in the late 60s and early 70s. Those were times of great social upheaval and protest—think civil rights, women's rights, and gay rights; think the environmental movement; and think Vietnam. They were also times of great music—think the Beatles, Rolling Stones, Grateful Dead; and think Aretha Franklin.

This past weekend, we, as a nation, honored the passing and celebrated the lives of two iconic Americans, who both came of age in the 60s and 70s, different in many ways, but also with much in common. I am referring to John McCain and Aretha Franklin. Both of them helped to define that era, and both were, in many ways, also defined by it.

The daughter of a preacher, Aretha Franklin began her extraordinary musical career in the mid-1950s, when she was 12 years old. Her list of accomplishments is simply amazing. She won 18 Grammys, she sold over 75 million albums, and in 1987, the second year of its existence, she became the first woman inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame—this was two years before the Beatles, three years before the Rolling Stones, and seven years before the Grateful

Dead were inducted. She was a recipient of the National Medal of Arts and the Presidential Medal of Freedom. She was also active in the civil rights and women's rights movements, as a supporter and a performer at benefits and protests, and two of her songs, *Respect* and *Natural Woman*, are strongly identified with the movements to this day.

John McCain's path was very different. The son and grandson of U.S. Navy Admirals of the same name, he embarked on the path of his eponymous relatives and attended the United States Naval Academy. He became a naval aviator, flying ground-attack aircraft off of carriers, and in 1967 he was shot down over North Vietnam and taken prisoner. A prisoner of war for five-and-a-half years, McCain was regularly and severely tortured for much of that time. At one point, the North Vietnamese offered to release him, but he refused to be released unless all those who were captured before him were released first, in keeping with Article III of the military Code of Conduct. After retiring from the Navy in 1981 and moving to Arizona, McCain, a Republican, served two terms in the U.S. House of Representatives before being elected to the Senate in 1986. He began his more than 31-year tenure as a United States Senator in 1987, the same year that Aretha Franklin was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. A straight shooter who put principle above partisanship and a man who was not afraid to admit his faults or his mistakes, perhaps nothing speaks louder about his character than the fact that two former presidents, Republican George W. Bush and Democrat Barack Obama, both spoke at his memorial service in Washington. Both, notably, had defeated him in elections, Bush in the Republican presidential primary in 2000, and Obama in the presidential election in 2008. Both disagreed with him on some policy matters, and both respected him and were, in turn, respected by him.

The deaths of these two icons come at a time when American society is polarized to an extent that is greater than any that I can recall.

We have always had a tendency to seek out other people and interactions that validate our own view of the world, and confirmation bias ensures that we are more likely to hear and remember

information that supports our perspective than information that does not. And, of course, we all think that our opinions are correct. Let's take a minute and do a little experiment. How many of you can think of an opinion that you hold that you believe is definitely wrong? ... Look around. See a lot of hands? ...

Okay, so let me ask another question. How many of you believe that an opinion that someone else in this room holds is definitely wrong? ...

Let's think for a minute about that result. Basically, on the one hand, nobody in this room thinks that they're wrong in any of their opinions, yet everyone thinks that others in the room are wrong about some of theirs.

What we can choose to do about this?

One choice we could make would be to only interact with the people in this room with whom we agree. Outside of this room, that is the choice that many, many Americans are making these days. The term that people use to describe this situation is "echo chamber," which is pretty descriptive. Because what you hear in an echo chamber is your own voice coming back to you over and over...over and over...over and over.... You get the idea!

People increasingly live their lives in echo chambers where they do not need to hear or engage with ideas that differ from theirs. The media and social media support these echo chambers, both passively and actively. People can—and do—choose only to watch, read, or listen to media that reinforces their previously held opinions. And the algorithms that curate people's social media feeds provide them with a steady diet of "news" stories that confirm rather than challenge or even balance their world view.

Kathryn Schultz, in her book *On Being Wrong*, describes the series of assumptions that we tend to make when we disagree with people. First, we assume that they don't have all the facts that we

do—we assume that they are ignorant. If, after we discover that we have the same facts, and they are still not convinced that we are right, we assume that they are idiots. And then, if we somehow learn that they are, in fact, every bit as smart as we are, we assume that they are evil. These assumptions become institutionalized in echo chambers and the result is dangerous.

Another choice we could make—and one which I would argue you *have* made—is to be part of a community like Pingry, a community based on a mission to foster a lifelong commitment to intellectual exploration, individual growth, and social responsibility. Hopefully, it is obvious to everyone that those Pingry goals are not compatible with creating or supporting an echo chamber. However, it requires your *active* engagement and attention to ensure that, when we have differences of opinion, we have the kinds of respectful conversations that are central to our philosophy and, indeed, our democracy. The stakes are high—higher than they have ever been.

Pingry's Honor Code, to which you all committed or recommitted this morning, is different from many honor codes. It asks a great deal of us, and it does so primarily by articulating clear expectations for both our behavior and our attitude. It is this latter expectation that sets our Honor Code apart, and it is what contributes to making this an extraordinary community in which to live, learn and grow. It asks that our attitude be one of “personal integrity and genuine concern for others.” It asks that we “honor the rights of others.” It asks that we “act as responsible members of the community, working for the common good rather than solely for personal advantage.” And it calls on us to do all of these things “throughout [our] lives as citizens of and contributors to the larger community of the world.”

I charge each of you, this year, to walk out of any echo chamber in which you find yourself, to engage with each other and with each other's ideas in a respectful manner, to entertain the possibility that you might be wrong, and to assume good intentions on the part of others.

Given the nature of public discourse today, it is powerfully ironic that the Senator who embodied respect and the Queen of Soul who made it an anthem should die within days of each other.

It is up to all of us in this extraordinary community to ensure that respect itself does not die with them.

Let's have a great year!