

Ode to the Division Head 3

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For the past two years I have begun our gathering with a piece entitled, “Ode to the Division Head.” I will try my hand at this once again.

The perspective for this year’s ode is different from last year’s or the year before. Last spring, after 27 years of service as a division head at St. Louis Country Day School and then MICDS, I stepped down and became director of our school’s sesquicentennial celebration and a ¾ time teacher of 7th and 8th grade English.

When this first happened I felt a bit like Alexander Kerensky, the Prime Minister of the Russian Provisional government during the Russian Revolution. When Kerensky published his autobiography in the 1960’s, David Levine drew a cartoon of him. There was Kerensky in the saddle riding furiously; the problem was that he had no horse.

I have always loved this group and this gathering. We come together to share commonalities, but we are individuals on different career paths. Some of us are young and ambitious and want to become school heads; being a division head is excellent preparation for the next step. Others of us are middle aged and ambitious and find that being a division head still stretches and challenges us; at present, we are not interested in being a school head, but we haven’t ruled it out. Others of us are older and ambitious and wiser and find eternal challenge in being a division head; we are not sure when or how our service will end.

Associate Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas spoke to our school several years ago. He told us that as a young man he had always made a point to talk to friends and mentors who “were

further down the road.” I am now in that position and I can give you a brief report of what I am seeing from this new vantage point.

There are some things I miss now that I am no longer a division head, and there are some things I do not miss. I have to admit that during the summer, I felt my brain doing a giant flush. When I returned in August to teach and to write about the history of the school, I could walk past my office relieved to know that someone else was worrying about how to deal with the parents who were dissatisfied that their child had been given a PE teacher and not an “academic” teacher as an advisor. I could head on to my classroom and begin to prepare for my classes.

I do not miss having to straighten out who stole Goldberg’s shoe and having to hammer five 7th grade boys into fessing up to partial guilt. Where did Goldberg’s shoe end up, anyway? We never did find out. I suspect someone threw it in the trash. I solved that one by buying Goldberg a new pair of shoes out of my slush fund. I don’t miss having to tell a faculty member who can’t get his grades in on time that if he were subject to the same standards he expects of children in his classroom, I’d have to put HIM on detention. I don’t miss having to send the faculty an e-mail telling them not to cut into the lunch line ahead of the students. I don’t miss cone duty where I had to set up cones from 3:15 to 3:35 in the afternoon to keep parents from picking up their children illegally; it was not a duty I would inflict on any dean or faculty member. I was called everything from a conehead to “dean of cones”, and I would reciprocate by asking them if they had notes from their mothers. I do not miss a parent rushing into my office and telling me that we need “an emergency brown bag lunch.” I could go on, but you know the list.

So what do I miss about being a division head? Well, if it’s in your blood, you will miss something. It’s one of those things I just have to accept; I don’t think it will ever go away. I

would shy away from quoting this to you because as he was more and more besieged, Richard Nixon would turn to these words for solace. Although this passage used to be quoted as often as the Gettysburg Address, I haven't heard anyone use it lately.

“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”

Those are the words of a man who, when shot in an assassination attempt, kept on delivering his speech. I'm sure you know who it is.

What I miss most, believe it or not, is the constant barrage of problems that cause you to give your best on behalf of children, and teachers, and parents. I miss the teamwork and the camaraderie of developing creative responses to complex issues and human dilemmas. I miss the opportunity to be part of an administrative team that debates how to implement the strategic plans that need to be woven into the fabric of the school over the next five years. I miss the opportunity to talk to middle school students in Chapel each week.

Is it possible to step out of the arena, or at least, to redefine how you will continue to be an active man or woman? Yes, of course, it is. The division head phase of your life will end one day

for each of you. And I guarantee you that you will miss it as much as I do. In all my odes I have quoted my good friend, the headmaster, who once told me, “You have the best job in a school. Don’t forget it.” How could we want to forget the best days in the best job in a school?

As a teacher again, I’ve learned a very important truth. When the division head is doing her job effectively, she makes my job much easier. I have enormous respect for what you do each day to keep the school directed toward achieving its mission. It is difficult, complex, sometimes tedious work for which you receive little thanks and less credit. It is because we love the work so much that it is difficult to let go of it. Each of us will handle that moment differently.

I am well served by my first love. I was a teacher before I was a division head. Somehow I always knew that I would finish my work in schools as a teacher. I’m loving each day in a different way from how I loved it before. There is life waiting for you when you step out of the intense moments you’ve experienced in the arena. Be open to it.