

BOUNDARY LINES IN PLEASANT PLACES BY CHIP DENTON

It is a helpful exercise to say what one is not. A school's excellence is bounded by its calling, its mission, its resources. A school cannot be all things, else it will end up being too many things, and none of them particularly remarkable. We have long said that that most curious word in our mission, unhurried, means at least this: to do a few things well. What are those few things? And what are the many which one has chosen not to do—or, if you believe in God's calling, which do not fall within God's good and perfect will for this school?

Such a pruning of the wish-lists would have been almost heretical even a year ago. But the times they are a' changin', and have changed in fact. Limits are coming back en vogue. Saving, reducing debt, planning cautiously, budgeting—these are all at the top the agenda now, like it or not. The current climate has forced us all to learn how to hitch appetites to outlays (in the words of George Will) and not the other way around. It seems to me that every institution I know— certainly every school I know—is being forced to exercise thrift, moderation, and prudent selfgovernance. I do not want to make light of the pain which many are feeling in this present economic climate, but such virtues are worth fighting for, and if we can come out of this with more temperance and less greed, we will have gained something valuable.

Trinity is not immune from the leveraging and hopeful optimism which attended this cultural journey, now interrupted by such a precipitous fall in the general economy. We've grown every year in our enrollment. We've built new buildings before we had the students to fill them, on the hopeful premise that if we build it they will come. And we've birthed a new Upper School, which has been like starting the school all over again.

Recently the school leaders gathered on a Saturday for a marathon session of strategic planning. Six months ago, long before we had a whiff of this downturn, we invited a seasoned consultant from Independent School Management to come and lead us through this process, which would end in a five-year plan to guide the school in its growth and allocation of resources. I think every Board member and Senior Staffer would agree with me that the timing of this planning could not have been more providential. With the economy in a tailspin, it was the perfect time for us to ask hard questions about where we wanted to take the school and what resources we would need to get there. Much of our time was spent in facing the reality that there were many things on our wish-lists which were simply not possible in the next few years.

This may sound dismal, but it is not. Limits are good, not bad. As Wendell Berry has pointed out in a recent essay in Harper's ("Faustian Economics"), hell is the place where there are no boundaries (like Lewis' sprawling purgatory in *The Great Divorce*), and it was Milton's Satan who could not abide the necessarily limiting nature of being

a creature. The saints think and speak differently: "The boundaries have fallen for me in pleasant places" (Psalm 16).

In pleasant places indeed. On the cusp of this Thanksgiving season, let us give thanks for the wonderful land we enjoy as a school. And for the mission, still healthy and intact after fourteen years of being an orthodox (talk about boundaries!) Christian school which cares deeply about good education. We may not be able to offer the bells and whistles which would be ours if our boundaries were different, but that is not simply OK, it's good. There are some resources which, though bounded and limited, are inexhaustible. Like faith, hope, and love. And the joy of learning the truth. So in this season when we tighten our belts and learn to do without, let us do so with the confidence that God, who has been very good to Trinity School, will continue to guide us. And in a few months, when we publish our strategic plan for the next five years, don't expect everything you could imagine. But do expect something worth investing in: A Trinity School striving to offer an excellent Christian education.