

EXCELLENCE THROUGH MODERATION: IN WHICH THE  
HEADMASTER ATTEMPTS TO EXPLAIN A PUZZLING WORD IN THE  
MISSION STATEMENT  
BY CHIP DENTON

Peter Drucker, the Grandfather of Institutional Wisdom, says that every organization should have a mission statement and that it should be short. His first point seems to be more universally acknowledged than his second. The Torah and the Declaration of

Independence, to take two fairly important examples, would surely qualify as mission statements; but neither Moses nor Jefferson seems to have been much concerned with brevity, at least by today's standards. Still, a concise statement—like the Shema of Deuteronomy 4:4-6 or the Preamble to our great Constitution—has certain pragmatic advantages. It is easily memorized, and we can take it with us wherever we are, ready at hand when we need it, like some Vade Mecum in our coat pocket. And so it is that the Board of Directors of Trinity has written a succinct mission statement for our school:

The mission of Trinity School is to educate students in kindergarten to grade twelve – teaching the classical tools of learning; providing a rich yet unhurried curriculum, communicating truth, goodness and beauty – all within the framework of Christian faith and conviction.

I think it was Abraham Lincoln—if it wasn't it could have been—who said to a correspondent, "If I had more time I'd write you a shorter letter." Indeed.

Succinctness is to writing what trimness is to body building: Such beauty and utility do not come without sacrifice. The

Board of Trinity has worked hard—repeatedly hard—at this mission statement. It is a good statement, one we are proud of, but still perhaps a bit flabby in spots. If we had more time we'd write you a shorter statement.

When I talk with people about our mission statement, the word that raises the most eyebrows is unhurried. It is a word people take sides over. For some, it conjures idyllic images of life and learning as it should be, what Bruce Cockburn calls "the southland of the heart." But for others it connotes all kinds of things unwanted: laziness, mediocrity, passivity. Of course, the Board of the school had no intention of promoting anything slovenly or sluggish, but if we sow a privative in our mission statement then we're bound to reap negative associations in someone's mind. But until we discover a better way to say this, let us live with unhurried and try, as best we can, to say what we mean. To that task I now turn.

I propose that the educational good that is being circumscribed by this word unhurried is the notion that excellence or perfection comes to us humans only through moderation. This idea, like so many good ideas in a fallen world, is counter-intuitive and bears a little explanation. The word excellent is missing from our mission statement not because we disdain it but because it has, in our culture,

lost its shape and become the vapid dream of nearly every institution that exists. To say that a school strives to be excellent is to raise a critical question: "What is the best that you can be?" Our answer: To be happy, first in God, and then with others and finally with one's self. And for the attainment of such happiness, there is but one road, the way of virtue. The pursuit of God through faith, hope, and love; the good life with others through prudence, justice, courage, and temperance; and the blessed happiness with ourselves that comes from knowledge, wisdom, art, wit, and the like. Now for the living of such a life, one principle is key: The happy Yes comes only through the painful No.

How do we know this? Let me count the ways. First, and most importantly, we have our Lord's example, who "learned obedience from what he suffered" (Hebrews 5:18). Thus also did he counsel us, his disciples: "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell" (Mark 9:43). Like so much of Jesus' teaching, this great truth was not new, but simply the fresh wind of the Spirit filling the old sails of the sayings of the wise: "Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind" (Ecclesiastes 4:6). All truth is God's truth, and here again we can learn from the Greeks, who in their prime lived by this great ideal: Moderation in all things. And so it was that they built small but perfect temples. Their pottery, their clothes, their jewelry, their plays— all these aimed at perfection through moderation. Aristotle, one of their greatest thinkers, said that virtue was the character or habit of choosing the mean between two extremes. For example, the happiness of courage is a high road that must be taken instead of two others, both easier: cowardice on the left and rashness on the right.

In his masterful *The Story of Mankind*, Hendrik van Loon recounts the story of a powerful runner who came to Sparta and boasted that he could stand longer on one foot than any other man in Hellas. The Greeks drove him from their city because he prided himself upon a feat at which he could be beaten by any common goose. The Greeks recognized that this extremewas not virtue but something else, something unworthy. We, however, would give him a signed contract and add a new event to the XGames. Ours is not a century or a culture that is known for moderation.

We mean to change that, even just a little, here at Trinity. We believe that we can't have everything if we want to have something really good. We believe that too much of anything good turns it sour—homework, sleep, recess, beer, exercise, board meetings. . . . We believe that true rigor is measured not in the quantity of our work but in its quality, which, like Portia's mercy is not, at its best, strained. We believe that we are called to offer an intentional resistance to cultural pressure to push and accelerate kids. We believe that less homework, shorter days, nine months of school, and a few good books well read make an atmosphere in which children can flourish intellectually. We believe that the freedom to play as well as to work is a mark of the good life. We believe that the sage is less hurried than the

fool because he has learned a thing or two worth knowing: patience, humility, trust, mercy, and open-handed love.