

Dear Grace Community,

I look forward to seeing many of you this evening at 7:00 pm for our second Town Hall of the summer. The Zoom link for our gathering is included at the end of this email.

Last evening, Dr. Travis Gayles from the Montgomery County Health Department issued a new directive prohibiting private and parochial schools from opening in person this fall. He has said that he will revisit this decision in early October. **Given this directive and in alignment with our own assessment of local conditions in Montgomery and Prince George's Counties, Grace will open virtually with no outdoor gatherings for Preschool through Grade 5 on September 8.** At the Town Hall tonight, we will share sample schedules and our distance learning platform for both of our scenarios: 1. hybrid with one day of outdoor learning and 2. fully remote.

It goes without saying that all of us at Grace are deeply disappointed that our months of work to imagine face-to-face learning have been dashed, and that the moves to open parts of society early this summer have led to a rise in cases that makes it unsafe to reopen schools next month. Despite our deep disappointment, I am grateful to the many faculty, administrators, parents, and board members who have poured their energy into making Grace safe. I am heartened by the tireless work of our community and will continue to strive to get our students and teachers in person with one another when it is prudent. I also believe strongly in our distance learning plan and capacity at this moment. Our faculty have worked hard to learn new skills, and we have built a schedule and offerings that we believe are rich and impactful for our students.

We are enduring a very challenging season of life with this pandemic. Add to that the greater awareness of the inequities that exist for Black Americans and have existed for so many years, and it can feel like a hopeless and overwhelming task to face each new day. Amidst my own weariness and anguish this summer, I wonder what it is like for many of you to balance your work, your parenting, and your daily fear and worries about what more is to come. I am grateful for the moments we have had to share what is on our hearts with one another at this summer's Head of School calls and 1619 Project podcast conversations. Those connections have been a source of great love and strength for me as I continue to ponder how best to lead us through this challenging time.

Last week, I needed to travel to North Carolina to help my elderly father move into a retirement community. The car ride gave me the chance to sit with my thoughts for the first time in many months. I was soothed by views of the Blue Ridge as I drove down I-81. Having grown up in the Champlain Valley of Vermont, a mountain ridge can ground me in ways that no other vista can. The long drive also allowed me a chance to re-listen to a favorite interview between Krista Tippett from “On Being” and John Lewis. This also happened to be on the day of his funeral. In that interview, Lewis speaks of “love in action.” His lifelong commitment to non-violent protest is rooted in his deep love for all of humanity. To hear him speak of his unparalleled commitment to ending racism through active love for a community moves me beyond words. It also makes me think of Grace.

This fall, we will begin a yearlong celebration of our 60 years as a school committed to providing academic excellence for children of many races, faiths, ethnicities, and socioeconomic statuses. Born at the inception of national school integration, Grace has envisioned a beloved community from its beginning. As we prepare to re-engage in our care for another and the advancement of our students, I hope we can all remember the words of John Lewis and particularly the [letter](#) he shared posthumously in the New York Times last week. Though he is gone, he made sure we had this message: “Though I may not be here with you, I urge you to answer the highest calling of your heart and stand up for what you truly believe. In my life, I have done all I can to demonstrate that the way of peace, the way of love and nonviolence is the more excellent way. Now it is your turn to let freedom ring.”

I hope to share with you very soon our action plan for deeper work in equity and inclusion at Grace. With the good work of our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion task force, the plan will include concrete steps we can take together to deepen our own commitment to being anti-racist. In our latest 1619 Project podcast conversation, parent Denise Robinson, who led professional development for our faculty this year, referred to a recent piece by Imani Perry in the Atlantic entitled, [“Racism is Terrible. Blackness is Not.”](#)

In that piece, Perry -- who also wrote a recent stunning book, *Breathe: A Letter to my Sons* -- captures the notion that we should not dwell in pity for the experience of Black America but instead revel in the intense strength and power of the story and the struggle. She writes: “The trauma is repetitive. We weep. But we are still, even in our most anguished seasons, not reducible to the fact of our grief. Rather, the capacity to access joy is a testament to the grace of living as a protest...” The title of her article reads to me like the mission statement for what we must teach our young students at Grace: Racism is terrible. Blackness is not. We can no longer

shelter them from racism. We will not be blind to color. Our children have witnessed the uprising of resistance and revolution this summer in ways that will impact them for years to come. As a faculty, we must be prepared to answer their questions and engage their growing understanding of racism as a dominant force in our country. But we can also celebrate Blackness, Black joy, Black success, and further center the stories of so many Black Americans like John Lewis as we tell the fuller story.

As we continue to endure a deeply challenging time, I hope we can remember that we do so in community at Grace. While we all crave the ability to be back in person as a collective, now is the time to double down on what binds us together. It is my hope that we can use this 60th anniversary to commit more fully to our mission of being an anti-racist institution. Now, more than ever, we are connected in ways more powerful as we wear our masks in the name of protecting others. We have more challenges ahead of us, but as a community of parents, students, and teachers we are united in our desire to stand up for our common belief that all human beings are worthy of grace and dignity, and that we are stronger in our service to each other. I look forward to all that we will build together.

My best to you always,

Jen Danish