

From Peter Cheney, Interim Headmaster

It's hard to believe that it is nearing late October. The Yankees are out of the playoffs, and Joe Torre is no longer the team's manager. You can tell where my heart is!

My heart is also very much here with you and your beloved children at St. Richard's, and from my vantage point the school year is going very well. Schools are very much human institutions, of course, so there are plenty of complexities in the life of the school just as there are in each of us. I often need to remind myself, and those I work with and serve, that intellectual, emotional, spiritual and physical growth do not come without moments, and even periods in life, involving struggle and pain. Parenting itself can be taxing and painful, and I often find myself in conversations with parents when they are experiencing anxiety about themselves as parents or about their children or about things here at school. We are vulnerable to the trap of expecting *perfection* from ourselves as parents, or from our children or from the school's that serve them. Perfectionism, in fact, has become a major issue in parenting and education. It's as if we believe that child rearing and teaching are like brain surgery, or worse, building a new automobile. This is a formula for deep unhappiness and genuine anxiety. Our "product" as parents and teachers is the human being, and human development is messy and so are the institutions like schools, colleges and churches that are dedicated to our ongoing formation.

In today's society it seems more difficult than ever to allow ourselves the luxury of simply being human – of not getting "it" right all the time (or at least appearing to). In a speech given at Fairfield University in 1991, Fay Vincent, then the Commissioner of Baseball and a trustee at the Hotchkiss School in Connecticut, said the following:

Baseball teaches...how to deal with failure. We learn at a very young age that failure is the norm in baseball and, precisely because we have failed, we hold in high regard those who fail less often – those who hit safely in one out of three chances and become star players. I also find it fascinating that baseball, alone in sport, considers errors to be part of the game, part of its rigorous truth.

Substitute the words "Authentic parenting and formal education" for "baseball" in Vincent's statement and consider again the matter of perfectionism. Episcopal schools are dedicated to formation – academic, spiritual and physical. They are founded on the conviction that all humans are created in God's image and that our essential goodness and worth are gifts from a loving and empowering God. Yet too often the standards we apply and reward are those of perfectionism and "works righteousness". People are finite, fallible creatures. To be human is to be inherently imperfect. That is okay: it's the way life is. To deny this truth or to hide from it is to do ourselves or those we parent or educate a great disservice. The ethic for a satisfying, dare I say, joyous, existence must transcend the notion that we can work everything out and become a completed package or finished product. To paraphrase a favorite writer on this subject:

The best education involves learning how to live with imperfection... and the core paradox that underlies great teaching is that it empowers the student to embrace the haunting sense of incompleteness, of being *unfinished*, that comes from the reality of living on this earth as part and yet also not-part of it. For to be human is to be incomplete, yet yearn for completion; it is to be uncertain, yet long for certainty; to be imperfect, yet long for perfection; to be broken, yet crave wholeness.

All these yearnings remain necessarily unsatisfied, for perfection, completion, certainty, and wholeness are impossible precisely because we *are* perfectly human – which is to say humanly imperfect. *

Our children themselves remind us regularly that we are far from perfect. The good news is that we don't have to be and neither do they. That's no excuse for not doing our very best or for settling into mediocrity. On the contrary, accepting and embracing our imperfection can free us to do wonderful things.

* pages 17,18 and 19, *The Spirituality of Imperfection* by Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham. Bantam Books (Random House, Inc.)