



# THE ACADEMIC JOURNAL

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Character Scholarship Community



Welcome to our twenty-fifth edition of "The Academic Journal," a bimonthly bulletin in which you can read about MCA's educational philosophy, instructional methodology, and the various viewpoints and positions of our faculty, staff, students, and families.

## Charge to the MCA Eighth Grade Class of 2014

The classical education that you are receiving is consciously couched in a world of words, in language. We, however, live in a postmodern world where there is an errant notion that everything is relative, including language. Many in our culture act as if any individual can ascribe to another's words any meaning that suits his or her fancy. These postmoderns ask, "What does the text mean to you?" rather than the transcendent, Paideia seminar question, "What does the text mean?" Of course, the application of any text might vary from person to person, but not its intended meaning. Unfortunately the postmodern culture does allow for meanings of words to be changed by mere opinion—any opinion—because they believe that truth is relative. Let's extrapolate: If the meanings of text can be changed by mere opinion, then words, even language itself, becomes senseless and trivial at best and at worst a utilitarian power for those seeking to control.

Would it matter if I changed this "Charge to the MCA Eighth Grade Class of 2014" to "A Talk to Some Middle-School-Aged Kids?" Obviously, yes. It moves the content from an exacting exhortation to a tame, generic drivel. It moves the recipient— you— to any old common group of pre-teens who go to school somewhere. Why do we call this event tonight "commencement," and not "graduation?" Why does our Honor Code say "endowed," and not "inherent?" Why does our school's Vision Statement use "truth" and not "truths?" Why is my position "headmaster," not "principal?" Why in our school do we talk about discipline and character development, and not behavior modification?

If truth is nothing less than language that lines up with reality, in this postmodern world where people live to create their own worlds (even their own realities) the stability of language really does matter despite the arguments. What you say counts. It really does make a difference exactly which words I choose for in this address. Not only does it make a difference *how* we tell a story, it also matters *what* story we tell. The words you choose give evidence of who you are, and they also effect change. They can encourage others or they can decimate them. They can build relationships or they can destroy them. They can build a world of virtue, or they create a façade of a deficient, untenable, relativistic reality, or they may even construct a world of evil.

In the ancient Hebrew culture, there was a particular emphasis on words spoken: one could not retract words. Once they were spoken, their meaning could not be retracted. There's an historical account of a Hebrew father who had two grown sons. As the father was aging and blind, the younger son tricked him into thinking he was the elder son, so the father gave him the elder's blessing. When the father discovered what had happened, he found it impossible to nullify the blessing and to give it to his older son. The blessing he gave unwittingly to the younger son set the course for generations to come, and history verifies his words.

At the beginning of this school year, you created a symbolic wall of our new high school, actually our Upper School as it is officially called. You created a wall with words, but not just words alone. These words carry with them ideas, values, and dreams. They carry with them the possibility of what might be... even what should be.

Despite nearly 140 students, divided into thirteen independent advisory groups, the words with which you created this paper brick wall lay mortared almost flawlessly. The words have an amazingly coherent quality: respect, courage, safe, honorable, perseverance, united, leadership, integrity, friendship, justice, family, fortitude, benevolence, compassion, virtuous, and truth. Do you go to a school where these ideas are lived out everyday? Hardly! But, the ideas do reside here, and they impact you, me, and our families. They impact school culture. They impact our community. As you move about on this planet, these ideas— as long as they inhabit your hearts and actions— impact the world.





When you wrote the wall, you resurrected a myth— a wonderful, invigorating myth that still lies almost dormant across our nation. Here, I am not using “myth” as a fallacious fable or a story of ancient Greek gods and goddesses, but rather in a broader sense. Here, “myth” is a complex set of beliefs, values, and attitudes. It is our imaginations’ projection of the good life, which is written in our individual and collective hearts. It’s the Garden of Eden. It’s what we picture in our minds’ eyes. It’s what we hope for.

You drew these words from a set of beliefs that express your prevailing attitude, or *mythos*. And this *mythos*, this picture of what could be, provides direction for us to live. As we live it out, it unites us, giving all of us a better chance to thrive in the unknown of the years to come. It’s a story that embraces what is true and good and beautiful. Your wall of words is a metaphor for the consummate school. A place made up not of gods and goddesses, but of flesh and blood. It’s an Ideal that looms before us, inspiring us, pressing us, calling us to grow: physically, intellectually, morally, and spiritually.

In the postmodern culture that surrounds all of us, where everyone’s truth is just as good as the next, where stories are peculiar to the individual, and where there is no real sense of *e pluribus unum*, there are no apparent myths, no grand stories, nothing to unite us, nothing to call us forward toward a singular goodness or truth. This is why the myth— a piece of a grander story— that you resurrected is important. “... Myth assures mankind that certain values transcend reason to give human existence meaning within an unchanging frame of reference, while ensuring unity among the members of the community concerning these values.” (David Hicks in *Norms and Nobility*, 1999) Myths inspire, just as the *White Stag*, a mythical retelling of the Huns and Magyars journeys that I read nearly fifty years ago, left me with a mental image of a majestic, illusive, white stag, who instilled courage and benevolently showed the way to wandering tribes.



A quality myth, like the one you wrote on that paper wall, grounds us. It makes us look to the richness of our past. It makes us look inward: How do I fit into this grand story that is much bigger than I? It tantalizes our imaginations as to what might be, and then we measure ourselves against it: How do I measure up to this Ideal? This myth helps form our character, our community. Myth brings individual coherence & social cohesiveness. It can show us that we are somehow related to a story grander than ourselves, a story that both precedes and postdates us. It can inspire us to selfless deeds. It can help us understand that what we do has an eternal significance.

Besides the *mythos*, there is a second facet of your words I want you to notice: the *logos*. *Logos* is the precise and fundamental essence of the word’s meaning, the denotation. It implies reasoning.

If you allow the *mythos* (that noble imaginative thinking) and the *logos* (words that actually line up with reality) to battle in your minds, essentially having an internal Paideia seminar, you can preserve the integrity of both by synthesizing the imaginative, value-rich connotation (the *mythos*) and the logical, analytic denotation (the *logos*). This dialectic will keep you from living in a fairy tale, while providing an infinite expanse so that you can grow into whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, anything worthy of praise as you encourage others to live out these words with you.

So, here’s my two-part charge: First, make the imaginative tangible. Apprehend the power of words, as did the blind Hebrew father, and choose your words carefully. Then, take these words and build with them more than a paper wall. Inscribe them on your hearts by your will and by your actions. Build an Upper School in which the Ideal takes human form and brings the mythopoeic, internal reality to life. MCA is not a school where detached analysis reigns in a sterilized vacuum, but one that is willing to wrestle with metaphysical truth, goodness, and beauty, one that believes in a grand narrative, and one that allows the noble poet to paint a picture of what might be. Bring into your ninth grade classes the Ideal and the *mythos* of an Upper School unlike any other, where transcendent ideas (concrete and abstract) and your passions sharpen who we are. Then, we will have an Upper School about which, to this point, we have only dreamt.

Lastly, help us continue to raise the quality of our nation’s education, which for the most part is lost in a mishmash of meaningless data that has become the end rather than the means, an education that has essentially neutered itself by refusing to accept truth and any universal archetype— no *logos*, no *mythos*— reducing life to valueless data bits. Help us enrich the narrow, purely descriptive language of today with value-laden, suprarational abstractions, like prudence, justice, temperance, courage, faith, hope, and love. You begin to lead this nation into what is true, what is good, and what is beautiful.

*Kirby R. McCrary, Headmaster*

