I believe that a fulfilling and impactful life includes a cycle of struggling, gathering oneself, and thriving, struggling, gathering oneself, and thriving, over and over. If we lead lives that are purposeful, compelling, and satisfying, as we seek to do at Pasquaney, I believe this cycle will likely be present in them.

I think we can ensure that our lives comprise such a cycle by making a habit of venturing out into the arena and coming back to our corners, venturing out into the arena and coming back to our corners, again and again. This pattern is what I’ll speak about today. In the arena, we struggle. In our corners, we gather ourselves. And in the journeys between, we thrive.

Last fall I moved to Richmond, Virginia, to work and live at St. Christopher’s School, where I began teaching history and coaching football. I lived in a small apartment on the corner of campus, and the community welcomed me, as a new member, with warmth and grace. At once I knew that I’d found a wonderful place in my new job and home. In my excitement at having been granted such an opportunity to start my career, I put a lot of pressure on myself. I wanted my integration into the community to be seamless, and I was intent on performing my very best at work. My mind and body held on to a lot of stress and tension, and I failed to pay attention. There were a couple times during the fall when the stress became overwhelming, and I lost my physical composure. When I sensed the onset of these moments, there was no question about what to do: quickly retreat to my corner apartment. Once inside my apartment, I felt free to call a loved one, have a glass of water, lie down, and cry if I needed to. In time, I could gather myself and find a calmer, more peaceful state of mind. In those quiet moments, I found the importance of returning to my corner apartment.

From that space I could venture back on campus and teach or coach again. With my own mind and body in a healthy place, I could try to make a positive impact on those around me. I could throw myself back into the arenas of the classroom and the playing field and give up a bit of control over my surroundings. In the presence of students and players and co-workers and new situations, I could count on there being space for me to be challenged and to struggle, and to learn, and to grow, and hopefully to contribute, the same way I could count on my corner apartment to ground me and help me feel restored.

As the weeks and months passed, I began to internalize this routine. At the end of the workday, after several hours of teaching and coaching, I could, with a quick walk across campus, be back in my corner, where I discovered countless ways to find restoration and peace at the end of the evening. I could read a book, listen to a favorite album, call a friend, sit by the fire, or write in a journal. In the mornings, meditating and sipping coffee would provide comfort and a sense of ease before I ventured out of my corner apartment for work. By the spring, there were moments when I felt I was thriving in my new world. I felt more and more at home during my daily walks from my apartment to the Middle School or from the playing fields back to my apartment.

I encourage you to visit your corner regularly. When we don’t return to our corners until moments of urgency, like the ones I experienced last fall, we struggle endlessly. If we are to be fully present and alive for ourselves, for our loved ones, and for the world we inhabit, we must regularly return to our corners to rest and reflect and prepare and to gather ourselves and to avoid the moments of urgency or panic that necessitate a frantic return.
In order to visit your corner regularly, you must first discover it. One of the most important ways that we can learn about ourselves is by identifying the places, pastimes, and people who help us to recover. Your corner might include your favorite couch, a blank canvas and a paintbrush, a weekly gathering with friends, a song you never tire of, a run around your neighborhood, or a particular home-cooked meal. An extrovert’s corner might be full of people and noise and excitement, while an introvert’s could be quiet and still. It might be a place you go to be alone, a time you spend with a group of loved ones, or both of these. In one of my favorite song lyrics, Willie Nelson articulates cowboys favorite corners: “Cowboys love smoky old pool rooms and clear mountain mornings.” In another, Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys describes his own: “There’s a world where I can go and tell my secrets too / In my room, in my room / In this world I lock out all my worries and my fears / In my room, in my room / Do my dreaming and my scheming / Lie awake and pray / Do my crying and my sighing / Laugh at yesterday.” Wherever or whatever your corner is, I encourage you to celebrate it and make the most of it by returning to it often.

We also should note that if we spend all our time in our corners gathering ourselves, we’ll never thrive or make a positive impact on those around us. Once you’ve gathered yourself, venture out to encounter a struggle; go into the arena that Theodore Roosevelt famously described. Roosevelt said, “The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose faced is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs; who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause.”

By venturing into the arena regularly, I believe that we’ll struggle. By returning to our corners regularly, I believe that we’ll be able to gather ourselves. By repeatedly struggling and gathering ourselves, I believe that we’ll thrive and we’ll find and share beautiful moments in our everyday lives.

When and where do these beautiful moments occur? In the transitions and in the journeys, I think. In travel. When we go out on the road to seek a challenge or an adventure or an experience we’ve not had before, we’re entering the arena. We feel a healthy nervousness, a heightened sense of anticipation, an excitement for the unknown. We seek the sensation of the wind against our face, the wisdom of people we’ve never met before, or the delight of finding a new place. In another lyric I’m fond of, Jackson Browne sings, “When we come to the place where the road and the sky collide / Throw me over the edge and let my spirit glide.” Let’s throw ourselves over the edge and into the arena.

Then, when we turn around, we also might thrive in our journeys home. When we begin such a journey, seeking that which is familiar and known and warm, we feel a nostalgia for our corners. We often treasure our trips home, knowing that we’ll return to a place where what we see, hear, smell, touch, and feel will ground us by its familiarity. John Denver sings, “Country roads, take me home / To the place I belong.” And once we’ve spent enough time in either the arena or our corners, we long for the other. We begin to love the pattern itself. We find beauty in the contrast or the variety between the two. Brad Paisley sings from his corner, recognizing how important it is that he seek an arena: “I can see the ways that I’ve grown / I can’t see this world unless I go / Outside my Southern comfort zone.” And James Taylor writes from the arena, longing for his corner: “Oh it’s a lovely stretch of the highway / Leading me on / And my favorite thing is to miss my home / When I’m gone, soon as I’m gone.”
I think many of us love Pasquaney because it can serve as both an arena and a corner. At camp we go out into the arena to “struggle on lake and on diamond,” and we come back to shared corners for special moments “gather[ed] around a campfire” or “nestl[ed] in leafy sunshine.” New boys, I congratulate you for putting yourself in the arena six weeks ago when you ventured to make a home for yourself on a new hillside, in a new community, daring to struggle with the challenges of homesickness and making friends and the unknown. Returning boys, I wonder if you felt, as you arrived and unpacked your suitcases without having to ask where anything ought to be put, that you were returning to a corner with friends and values and customs that can be counted on and that can restore and refresh. In this sense, I think Pasquaney is the largest corner I know. One hundred thirty strong, our community and hillside still maintain the intimacy of a place where we can come back to for reflection and healing. And camp is also full of opportunities to venture into the arena. Surely our departure on expeditions, after merely one week of preparing our nest on the hillside, is a moment in which we all venture out into the arena. Our Eastbourne Long Walk ceremony is a moment in which we celebrate a group of boys who will test themselves in the arena of the White Mountain forest. Our return from expeditions, likewise, is a homecoming to our corner as is the ceremony for the return of the Long Walk, which serves as an example of how much all of us value our shared experience on the hillside. I imagine that you’ve probably found activities that serve as arenas and others that serve as corners. Some might serve as both.

There will be days when the pace of life will not permit a true return to our corners; days when life will move at such a speed that we’ll have a hard time finding a moment to leave the arena. This summer I’ve struggled through some days like that, even as recently as yesterday. It is my hope that in those moments, we can find, for even just a minute or two, some small corner, some brief reprieve, perhaps with a person with whom we might share our struggle. I’m grateful to many of you for offering me and one another that moment, for bringing me or someone else to that momentary corner. You’ve shared it with me in a walk down the chapel path, a look in the eye, a spontaneous “How are you doing?,” a few casual words of encouragement, a pat on the shoulder, and many other acts of kindness. Thank you. We’re blessed to spend a summer at Pasquaney, where there are so many of these small corners.

In a little more than a week, we’ll all begin heading our separate ways, packing cars, and boarding planes for our respective journeys from the hillside back to our homes or schools. It may not be entirely obvious whether your trip is a return to your corner or a venture into the arena. It may well be both. Either way, I encourage you to find some time to reflect on how you struggled, how you gathered yourself, and how you thrived this summer. Maybe you will recall some beautiful moments that occurred along the way.