

By Chris McColl

This Good Place

LIVING OUR CORE VALUES ON THE HILLTOP

When I came for my interview at Hackley in November 2006, I immediately sensed that Hackley was unlike the other schools I had visited. It was hard to put my finger on, but I remember thinking of the scene in *Being There* where Chance (Peter Sellers) walks into the hyper-oxygenated room of the dying Ben Rand (Melvyn Douglas). Having never encountered such rarified air before, Chance inhales deeply, smiles, and says, “Ooooh. I feel good in here, Ben!”

That was how I felt at Hackley—I felt good. Whole, embraced, known, content. In just my first day, I sensed that everything about Hackley—the people, the buildings, the lush greenery, the very rarified air up on the Hilltop—wanted me to become the best version of myself.

Thus, when I learned that Hackley’s first headmaster Theodore Chickering Williams had intended from day one that Hackley be “a place where it should be easy to be good,” it just made sense to me. But if what I sensed was true, how did such a place come to be? It seemed to me that you couldn’t make people improve morally and ethically without a plan for character education; that said, how could any character education plan be successful if it wasn’t the product of an already good place? Bit of a Chickering-and-egg situation there.

This past January, NBC ended its delightful sitcom about character education, *The Good Place*. Okay, no, it wasn’t billed as “a sitcom about character education,” but that

doesn’t change the fact that this is EXACTLY what it was, and over the course of its four seasons, producer Mike Schur’s beautifully implausible brainchild offers, I think, a possible explanation for the way in which Theodore Williams’ Hackley came to be.

“Enter Here to Be and Find a Friend”
—the first of Hackley’s core values

“...Someone Like Me as a Member”
—the ninth episode of *The Good Place*

In the first episode, the late Eleanor Shellstrop arrives in *The Good Place*, the place that all “good” people go. It’s paradise, and she knows there has been a mistake. She’s not good, and she doesn’t belong there. Knowing that, unless she can learn to pass as a good person she will be sent to *The Bad Place*, she asks the first friend she meets, Chidi, to teach her how to be good. But Eleanor’s mocking and selfishness make Chidi regret his decision to help and while she tries to make up for her behavior, she can’t truly begin to grow until she confronts her distrust of Chidi’s kindness.

I often interpret the first of our Hackley core values as emphasizing individual responsibility over expectation: if you wish to find friendship, you must first ACT as a friend. You must BE the friend you hope to find. While I think this is true, over time I have come to realize that there’s much more embedded in that magnificent command.

“A place where it should be easy to be good.”

THEODORE CHICKERING WILLIAMS (FIRST HEADMASTER)



Cast members performing Shakespeare’s *The Comedy of Errors* in Hackley’s Performing Arts Center.

In my second year at Hackley, I bumped into a new boarding student and asked him how things were going in boarding. “Yeah, good, I’m relieved to say,” he told me.

Why relieved? I asked.

“Well, things didn’t have to be good,” he said. He explained that once he got beyond the structured activities of move-in day and orientation, all of which were great, he expected that once the adults weren’t looking, it would be different. He was worried about the first time he went to breakfast in the dining room all by himself. But, he says, “I got my food and I walked over to a table with these four other boarders sitting at it. I said, ‘Is it okay if I sit here?’ They looked at me like I was nuts. ‘You don’t have to ask,’ they said. ‘You just sit down.’ That’s when I knew it was going to be good.”

The students were, of course, kind in letting him know he could sit at their table. But I also now see that the new student needed to ACCEPT the kindness and friendship offered to him—and that was brave.

I remember another student who came to Hackley, unwillingly, at the insistence of his parents (his sister already attended), when all his friends from middle school were attending the local high school. “There’s nothing wrong with Hackley, Mr. McColl,” he’d say. “The kids here are all incredibly nice. They always include me in the stuff they do. The teachers are great as well. But I just don’t think I can be happy in school knowing my friends are at another school.”

Time passed, and the student joined the basketball team. He softened, opened up to his teammates, and they became his brothers-in-arms. He laughed more, dropped his guard. The first day back from winter break, he poked his head in my office to say, “Hey, Mr. McColl, I wanted to let you know—I’m good now.” I now see that this young man came to Hackley, in part, unready to be a friend—unable at first to accept the friendship and inclusion that was being offered to him.

Why might this be?

Groucho Marx once famously remarked, “I refuse to join any club that would have me as a member.” Our own latent sense of our unworthiness sometimes leads to initial suspicion of those who are kind to us, and we don’t accept the offers to be

included. We don’t take a seat at breakfast. We don’t think we belong in such a good place.

But good places remain patient. They continue to offer and include. We know that those new to our place need time to trust the good in themselves that others know and embrace without doubt or question. Acceptance of others’ belief in us happens on different schedules for different people. Ultimately, it becomes easier to be the friend others see in us. It makes it easier for us to be “good now.” Until that time, though, all a good place can do is keep a friendly hand outstretched and wait.

“*Tuncti iuvamus (United, we help one another)*”

—the second of Hackley’s core values

“*The Trolley Problem*”

—the nineteenth episode of *The Good Place*

By the second season of *The Good Place*, the core characters face the reality that they are each imperfect, but still worthy, and they realize that personal success is not success at all if it comes at the expense or loss of friends. One episode explores the challenges of making ethical decisions, as in the classic “Trolley Problem,” as framed by English philosopher Philippa Foot. If you are the driver of a trolley heading toward a group of four workmen who don’t see the trolley coming, would you remain on course and kill all of them, or switch tracks, where we would still kill a lone switchman working on that fork? How do we negotiate the nuances of the choices involved?

One truth the Trolley Problem seeks to illustrate, I think, is that no matter what decisions we make about our behavior, they will have consequences for those around us. The Trolley Problem asks, “When we choose what we do, how are we thinking of other people?”

A (possibly apocryphal) story about legendary Hackley coach Dave Allison illustrates this question beautifully. According to the story, when Dave coached girls’ soccer, he’d start each season bringing the team into the woods to find a felled tree. He’d instruct them to pick it up and begin walking with it. As they did, he explained that, should any one of them wish,



Right from top: Hackley Varsity Basketball players unite before a game; Hackley swimmers share a moment of celebration.



The Hack-Glee Club, singing the National Anthem at the Fall Sting.

they could stop carrying their weight—literally. They could keep their hand on the trunk but not support it. No one else would know. But, Dave would say, that's not how a team succeeds. A team succeeds because everyone makes choices that contribute to that success.

The Trolley Problem is all about the relative pain our decisions create—some are more destructive than others. Dave Allison's variation on this theme allows for the variability of benefit: if I'm taller and stronger, I can choose to carry more of the log than others. No one will know except me, and I will do it because I know it will make things a little easier for the rest of my team. Dave was teaching his team that being good to one another, living in a good place, means understanding that lifting more or less of the tree doesn't in and of itself make us "better" or "worse." Good choices involve seeing our peers' need of us on a spectrum and appreciating where they and we sit on that spectrum.

Years ago I knew a girl who spent the first half of her year in Grade 8 math earning grades in the 70s and 80s. "Just once," she told me, "I want to get an A." One day in late January, it happened—I found her in the Dining Room jumping up and down, celebrating with her friends. "I got a 92!" she exclaimed as her friends hugged her and yelled.

I knew most of those girls, and I strongly suspect that at least one of them did better on that test. But none of them said so.

Instead, they revelled in—and became a true part of—the girl's success. They understood that accomplishment is relative: a 92 that culminates months of work can be worth more than the 98 that is easily earned. Her friends made the good choice to hide the lifting they had done, so that she could celebrate how far she had raised her side.

I see this affection for and celebration of the individual all over Hackley: the audience hyperbolically cheering on a Coffeehouse performer who falters, the kind acknowledgment of great insights between students on a Middle School panel, the hugs from friends when the nervous Lower School performer nails her line in the Americana play. We are all of us small in ways and big in others, strong here and weak there. But schools, like *The Good Place*, are based on the idea that we all have the capacity to make ourselves better—and the best schools teach us all to take an interest in everyone's capacity, to be curious about the aspirations of others. Seeing growth requires us to see one another's starting points and stages of movement. Outward appreciation of what we see makes it much easier for us to be good—and better.

"Go Forth and Spread Beauty and Light"

—the fourth of Hackley's core values

"Help is Other People"

"Whenever You're Ready"

—the forty-sixth and fifty-second episodes of *The Good Place*

Every person who leaves Hackley is one of our own stories with no ending. We send them off as the ultimate expression of faith. Not faith in them, for we've accepted since we met them that they are good (remember?). We send them as an expression of faith in ourselves—as faith in our communal effect.

In the final season of *The Good Place*, the main characters learn how dangerous it can be to keep all the best people trapped in one place—it actually begins to erode their understanding of what goodness is. Ultimately, they realize they must redesign *The Good Place* itself to allow the best people, when they feel ready, to leave. In a beautiful final image, one of the main characters, as she leaves, causes a tiny drop of light to fall on another main character, ultimately helping him to realize his potential as a good person.

At their best, places like Hackley, by virtue of being good, can lead to some sadness. After all, if we're kind to those we've just met, if we're patient with them until they begin to see how great we think they are, if we take the time to learn about who they want to be, if we restrain our own ambitions occasionally to allow others to fill some of that space, we will form deep powerful relationships. Because of this, when those we care about leave the Hilltop, we feel their loss and know that in some way, our community is diminished if they're not among us.

Schools, fundamentally, are in the business of creating new adults. We're like parents in that respect. In fact, I learned recently that one ancient definition of the word "alumnus" was "foster son." Our own vocabulary suggests that we see graduates as a kind of family. Unlike most parents, however, once students leave our care, we don't have frequent check-ins about their progress—rare are the phone calls, texts or FaceTimes to say how that exam went, whether they nailed that interview, if the lessons of high school helped with that difficult roommate.

Douglas Adams used to tell a story about buying a tin of biscuits to eat while waiting for a train. He sat at a table with a stranger and ate the biscuits while he read his paper. The stranger ate the biscuits too. This infuriated Adams, but in his words, he was "too British" to confront him. Finally the man left. Moments later, Adams stood to board his train...

and saw the biscuits he'd purchased on the floor by his chair. He'd been eating the other man's treats. What Adams loved most about this story was that somewhere in the world was another man with the same story—but no ending.

Every person who leaves Hackley is one of our own stories with no ending. We send them off as the ultimate expression of faith. Not faith in them, for we've accepted since we met them that they are good (remember?). We send them as an expression of faith in ourselves—as faith in our communal effect. We trust that we've done enough, that we have provided enough opportunities for them to gather the beauty and the light they'll need to spread into the world. If we're unwilling to believe in our collective power for good, to appreciate the benefits the heady oxygen at the top of the Hilltop has on us, why should we expect those who arrive new to believe in it or in themselves?

Put another way, if we didn't send our students off to record jazz songs for contests or to teach English in Paris or to write powerful articles for NPR or to pursue PhDs in biology at Harvard or to intern at video game design companies or to produce award-winning podcasts on design and culture, we couldn't sustain the good in our own community. The whole thing would unravel.

Of course, when one has formed one's own deep, powerful relationships, one finds it hard to leave, and I write this article as one preparing to take Hackley's beauty and light with me across the world. Naturally, I'm sad about leaving, and I hope I fully appreciate all that Hackley has done for me and the ways it has helped me grow. It will be difficult to leave this extraordinary place and its incredible community. Still, I know I'm ready for my next chapter, and I know I'm ready because Hackley has worked so hard to make me a better version of myself. So it's all okay.

I'm in a good place.