

**FRANCIS W. PARKER CHARTER ESSENTIAL SCHOOL**  
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**Thoughts on Change**

*“If I am not for myself, who will be for me?*

*If I am only for myself, what am I?*

*If not now, when?”*

~ Hillel the Elder

At their junior retreat last spring, Parker’s Class of 2020 generated the Essential Question that would drive conversation and curriculum for the 2019/2020 year. This year’s Essential Question, “*How Can We Create Change?*” has never been more relevant.

Young people at Parker, as well as young people attending other high schools and colleges, show us that they are change-makers. They are brave. They speak up. They defend each other. They know how to engage with others, and they come armed to discussions not with weapons, but with facts. They read a lot about the world they live in and they are informed about politics, global issues, and science. They are aware of brutal realities and they have heard all the conspiracy theories. They have friends of all nationalities, of all sexual orientations, of all races, and of all genders. They do not mind if someone is of a different religion, or of no religion. These young people, our Gen Z children now nearly grown, focus on substance.

Have you ever heard a high school junior talk about intersectionality? Have you ever witnessed the ferocity of young people unafraid to confront homophobic slurs on social media? Have you ever listened as two students end a friendship but remarkably, still treat each other with unconditional respect? Have you ever heard a person of color describe to a peer how it felt when certain hurtful language was used in jest? I have seen all these things, because challenging conversations and bold actions happen all the time in our school, and among young people everywhere. This generation is filled with change-makers.

What is clear, at the end of a devastating week in America, is that we need change. We need to engage in challenging conversations and take actions that transform. After this week I ask: what happens to our collective mental health when we see a white police officer with his knee on the neck of a black man? Where are we, other than devastated, knowing that the police officer, whose knee was on a black man’s neck, caused death? What happens to our collective mental health when we learn that a woman in Central Park falsely reported to the police that an African American man was threatening her life? What about my nephew, who is black, and who, when reminded by a police officer to turn on his car headlights later turned to his mother and said, “Mom, I thought I was going to be shot.” What of daily racism and the small moments of an unjust society, unseen by the masses and the media, but eroding people’s lives?

I wonder about how we can address mental health under such conditions. Many people of all races feel a continuing flood of emotion – from rage to hopelessness, from fury to sadness. Indeed, groups of people are traumatized. People everywhere are traumatized by the pandemic, yes. But some people of color have shared with me that their trauma is cumulative, the result of years of the same fears and heartbreaks, over and over. Continual worry of being mishandled - or killed - while being placed under arrest, going jogging, wearing a hoodie, or bird watching, creates hypervigilance and anxiety. They describe what I can only think of as a traumatic stress reaction, one that cannot be solved easily. Symptom reduction is never enough. We need to get to the root of the problem.

We must ask what each of us can do to address systemic racism that is a blight on our nation. I ask myself how I can support my friends and family members who are people of color. I am thinking about how I can listen, without going into spaces that are not mine to occupy and hear experiences. I can check my assumptions. What is my next step, as a white person, to be actively anti-racist, and to grapple with unearned privilege? I am thinking about how I can better understand the connection between racism and other forms of injustice, and how I can better understand larger patterns of racism - whether overt or subtle.

How can we - all of us - sow seeds of healing?

Our instincts lead us toward connection and relationship. From our earliest moments as human beings, we seek trust and security. Through connection and by turning toward each other, we have the power to cure some of the ills of the world. The viruses of racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, ableism, classism, religious intolerance, and xenophobia affect all of us. These are pandemics that we can control. Coronavirus will be defeated with a vaccine, but these other ills will be solved by human will. *How can we create change?* For starters, we can move forward unified in our words and actions to value all people. We can treat others with dignity. We can stop contributing to and enabling systems of oppression. We can refuse to be silent.

In the coming days, this year's junior class will arrive upon a new Essential Question for the 2020/2021 school year. Like the classes before them, they will debate and collaborate as they decide on the question that speaks most clearly to them and to our time. We have confidence in their abilities. They are not afraid of change.

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