October 7, 2011

Dear Upper School Families,

I am certain this is not the only, nor will it be the finest letter written this week about Steve Jobs and his untimely passing. The eulogizing has begun, with reports and reflections on Jobs’ accomplishments and achievements streaming in from all over the world. And well we should reflect; Steve Jobs was a substantial person, more than mere entrepreneur, he was an innovator who had the brains to fuel and sustain his ideas, and the courage and stamina to give them life. Jobs was an American icon, a modern man whose mental model of knitting together art and technology reshaped our very notion of connectivity and communication.

In order for Steve Jobs to be the man he ultimately became, he had to be the youngster he once was. In his passing, Jobs is being mentioned in the same sentence as Thomas Edison and Henry Ford, as an original thinker and a visionary. I can’t help but wonder how his teachers in high school and his professors at Reed College described him. Steve Jobs put aside his formal education in order to pursue his life’s work, which at times was nebulous and elusive. He wanted to make “a ding” in the universe, and no one can argue that he accomplished that and maybe more, but Jobs did not distinguish himself as a student.

Sixteen years ago, I mediated a very charged conversation between a parent of a fourteen year old girl and a first-year teacher. The child was both a student and advisee of the young teacher, and they had gotten off to a rocky start to their relationship in class and in advisory. The teacher had begun to tire of the student and her antics and had made a disparaging remark about what the child might offer the world if she continued to be so silly and unfocused. We met in my office on a Wednesday afternoon in October to try to sort things out and reset this relationship. And we did- at least to the extent where agreements were made about how to proceed. It was a difficult conversation, not because of the level of emotion, but because of the power of the parent’s perspective, perfectly phrased and undeniably true. “Even as teachers, you don’t know who it is you’re teaching- you don’t know when you look at fourteen year olds that you’re not looking at the next Marie Curie, or Martin Luther King, Jr., or the person that will discover the cure for AIDS”.

As educators, and as parents I think, it is easy to extend and imagine who our students and children will be based on who they present as today. Sometimes, there is accuracy in those extrapolations. Students whose identities come into sharp focus, whose areas of genius and capacity reveal themselves during their high school years do oftentimes go on to do great things in the arenas we might predict. Just as often, however, wondrous things happen in the passage of time beyond high school, beyond college. Students destined for college majors that seemed a sure thing when they are in 11th grade return with stories of transformation. Pre-med students discover they are actors, artists discover organic farming, and politicians realize they are meant to be teachers.
In truth, as well as we come to know our students through our close relationships with them, we can’t know everything about who they are and who they are becoming, just as we cannot predict how and where their brilliance will emerge, or in what disciplines they will make their mark. I have carried the words of that parent with me, even as they stung deeply at the thin skin of the first-year teacher. We do not know who we’re teaching. That could be the next Steve Jobs sitting there in the classroom—any classroom.

And so we do our best, every day, to craft school as a place where students can discover their intellectual capacity, to expand their thinking, and have experiences that enrich and deepen their sense of the world as they navigate their adolescence. At the same time, we remember that success and achievement in the world is not a one size fits all kind of thing. Some students are fully activated as teenagers, and still others find their passion and the courage to fuel it at other times, and in other ways. We will be hearing clips of interviews of Steve Jobs a lot in the coming days, and undoubtedly, we’ll hear him wonder aloud “what if everyone had to drive a beige car?” His life and vision, and all the work that came from his creative and active mind was an expression of Jobs’ deepest hope and most potent gift.

Think Different.

Here’s to Steve Jobs, and a world in which there is ample space for our children to think different.

Have a wonderful weekend.

Teri Schrader
Head of the Upper School