I would like to begin with a prayer by Wilferd A. Peterson:

“Let me look upward into the branches of the towering oak and know that it grew great and strong because it grew slowly and well. Let us be inspired to send our roots into the soil of life’s enduring values that we may grow towards the stars of our greater destiny.”

Amen.

I am filled with joy and humbled by the privilege that has been bestowed upon me, to lead National Cathedral School and to serve as a Canon of Washington National Cathedral. With gratitude, I cherish the importance each one of you holds in our school community and am inspired by all we can accomplish as we move forward together.

I am moved by the multiple generations of people who have attended, served, and led National Cathedral School through the 120 years since Bishop Satterlee placed the cornerstone for Hearst Hall in 1899. I am honored to follow in the footsteps of past leaders of NCS: Kathleen Jamieson most recently, then Agnes Underwood, and then back eight more Heads of School through the decades. The legacy of these great leaders reverberates across the Close. Just like the towering trees, their visions for NCS still stand tall for us as we value traditions and continue to evolve into the future.

Fall has arrived, leaves are drifting to the ground, and acorns are rolling across the sidewalks. Just as the sower in our Lesson sowed seeds—some of which flourished and others that perished—today I will reflect on the seeds sown in my own life’s journey. Some remained dormant, others became hesitant saplings, and a few reached the comparable level of tall oaks—NCS is definitely in this tall-oak category for me. My sown seeds, otherwise called life lessons, fit together to tell a story that has led me here today, as a proud and deeply dedicated Head of School for National Cathedral School!

When I was 2 years old, I became acutely ill from an autoimmune reaction to a virus. I was in the hospital for a prolonged period of time, and I remember watching other children travel to the playroom daily—something I could not do because of the severity of my illness. Every day, a doctor would come by, hold me in his arms, and walk me around the hospital. I do not remember our exact conversations, but I do remember that he knew how I yearned for adventure. He would point out little things around the hospital that mattered so much to me as a 2-year old. My favorite discovery was a spider weaving a web on a windowpane. I was fascinated, filled with curiosity and wonder. We watched the spider’s progress each day, and each day I grew stronger. This small act of kindness, the sharing of time, and the appreciation of the beauty around us—even in a hospital—embedded
in me a sense of joy and strength in the worst of times.

I fully healed, and the spider and its web faded in my memory. The wonder circled back four decades later, when, amazingly, my mom recognized that very doctor sitting next to her at a concert. She leaned over at intermission and said, “You may not remember me, but I have a daughter who still remembers her walks around the hospital with you when she was very young.” He turned to her and said, “Of course I remember her… We used to walk around and visit the spider weaving its web!” Those moments of wonder in the hospital had impacted both of us, although surely in different ways. I would like to think that, at a very young age, a seed was sown as I experienced the importance of empathy and caring. Each of us has the capacity to truly change a situation for the better, even in difficult times!

In our Reading today, Charlotte the spider spun a special web. But interestingly enough, Dr. Dorian commented, “Nobody pointed out that the web itself is a miracle.” Spiderwebs have intricate designs which look delicate and temporary. However, they are actually very difficult to break apart. They are stronger than they look. The moments in my life when I struggled, just like seedlings enduring harsh winters, helped me to grow stronger. Determination and hard work over time produce more authentic and lasting results. I learned as a wobbly skater who hung onto ice-rink barriers that persistent practice, hundreds of falls, and a resolve to get better resulted in years of enjoyment as a figure skater. Starting in a new school in 9th grade, at an all-girls school similar to NCS, where I needed to make new friends and learn how to best to approach new academic challenges, taught me how to work smart, find my voice, and ask good questions.

Like the spiderweb, my emerging sense of self and stalwart determination were not apparent from the outside. Still, I experienced firsthand how teachers who believed in my potential made the difference. Great teachers created the sparks of inspiration that were then patiently nurtured through my school years and helped me to seek and find excellence in unique and meaningful ways. I remember the teacher who helped me through my first speech, my science teacher who asked mystery questions we needed to solve, and my English teacher who taught me how to write with conviction, as well as many others! They inspired my passion for working with students and helping them to develop their strengths and explore their leadership potential, which foreshadowed my life work.

I entered the education profession as a science teacher around the same time NCS reacquired Hearst Hall from the Cathedral. Through the years, I taught across the grade levels, from summer preschool to Upper School Biomedical Ethics. I could never decide which grade level or course was my favorite. The diversity of topics, ages, and teaching strategies fueled me with a depth of experience that inspired multiple perspectives and ways to help students find success in the classroom.

I served in administrative positions and eventually became Head of School for 18 years at Kent Place School, around the time construction began on the NCS Athletic Center. Working with a strong team of colleagues and dedicated board members is rewarding work, and seeds I had planted decades before emerged as strong shoots and branches as we collaboratively built programs—the
Girls’ Leadership Institute and the Ethics Institute—and buildings—the new Upper School and the Center for Innovation—all around a mission that centered on doing what is best for the education of girls and young women. My daughters attended Kent Place School, and my husband and I rejoiced in seeing the benefits of an all-girls school experience firsthand in our own home.

My family and faith also provided me with strong roots through the years. Mom was my role model. She valued the best in people and nurtured talent in others. She launched our church’s art gallery, which exhibited talented artists as well as undiscovered artists who appreciated the public venue. She seeded the idea for a women’s center at her alma mater, and her vision and tenacity resulted in the flourishing center that exists today. Equally important, Mom wrote notes of encouragement and left them on my desk, which I still cherish. Dad, an architect, had a strong work ethic and taught me to stand up for what I believe in. He spoke to me about the importance of design and how one can make beautiful spaces that best meet the needs of the people ultimately using the buildings. He read Bible stories to me and made stories come alive, sometimes with a surprise visitor, in costume, for the Sunday School classes he taught with Mom. Their deep faith was instilled in me and my two brothers: attending church together and through values which were taught and lived.

I am thrilled that my destiny brought me to National Cathedral School, where I work with courageous and brilliant students, talented and dedicated faculty and staff members, mission-driven Governing Board members, and supportive families and alumnae. I will continue to be guided by the enduring values seeded along my pathway to the Close.

I would like to sow four seeds for thought, as we head into the future together at NCS:

1) Socrates believed that, “Wonder is the beginning of wisdom.” I invite us to allow wonder and curiosity to enter our daily lives. Wonder asks us to question, reflect, connect to what truly matters at our core, and focus on what needs our attention.

2) Remembering the doctor who reached out to me, I urge us to positively affect each other’s lives, even with the smallest of gestures. Empathy requires us to listen, to understand other’s perspectives and experiences, and to take action when needed.

3) Consider the spider’s web. It looks fragile, but its strength endures. Just like the spider needs to constantly rebuild its web, we can always create new pathways to succeed as individuals and as a community. Through determination and hard work, we can achieve great heights.

4) And finally, let’s seed tall oaks together. I look forward to continue working collaboratively with you and to valuing all voices as we focus on our school’s mission: “We believe in the power of young women and educate them to embrace our core values of excellence, service, courage, and conscience.” Bringing out the best in others by working together across departments, divisions, programs, and the entire Close will continue to reinforce our strong and interconnected community. Together, we will accomplish greatness!

Amen!