



The Investiture of Jess Hill as the Seventh Head of School of The Harpeth Hall School
March 29, 2019

Remarks by Lisa Damour, Ph.D. – Keynote Address

I'm honored to be a part of the celebration of Jess Hill's installment as the seventh head of Harpeth Hall School.

And I am grateful for the *ritual* of Investiture as it brings us together so that we reflect upon what this moment means for the entire Harpeth Hall community.

Jess, as you know, is not taking the helm of just any old school, or even of any old distinguished and excellent school. She's the leader of a GIRLS school: an institution charged with the mission of preparing YOUNG WOMEN for their futures.

I don't have to tell you that this is a remarkable time to be, raise, or educate young women. No generation of girls has ever had more opportunities available TO them and WAITING FOR them.

And yet it is also a time when our culture finds itself engaged in complex and often fraught conversations about gender and power – and about equity and access.

Which is to say that there's a lot out there for our girls to discover and sort through - more than we fully understand *even at present* and **far** more than we can possibly anticipate or predict.

So how do we ready girls for that which feels exciting, but also opaque?

First, we educate the heck out of them, and that is something that Harpeth Hall is very good at doing. And we provide them with safe and protected spaces where they can be unsure, take chances, and feel their way toward discovering who they are and what they're all about.

This is something, again, that Harpeth Hall knows just how to do.

To this I would add that there are important qualities that we should help cultivate in girls – qualities that will fortify them for whatever comes their way. Here, in particular, is where Jess comes in.

Jess, as much as any educator I know (and I know a lot of educators) embodies several specific characteristics that **every** girl should aim to develop.

First, Jess is defined by her INTEGRITY. As Ann Teaff, former Harpeth Hall Head of School and longtime colleague and friend of Jess' explained to me, Jess' integrity "plays out in every aspect of her life." Not surprisingly, her fierce determination to do what is right has earned her the

tremendous respect of the Harpeth Hall faculty – thus securing what Ann described as the “sacred partnership” between administration and teachers – a partnership that allows the mission of the school to be brought to life.

So students, and adults, let us aim to have our integrity run marrow-deep, as Jess’ does. Let’s live *honorably* as this school’s mission calls on its students to do. And let’s do this simply because it is right and also because, as Ann aptly noted to me, a person can have many impressive qualities, but if he or she is lacking in integrity, the rest don’t amount to much.

Second, Jess is TOUGH. Her husband Moe shared with me that early in their marriage Jess got what he called a “flimsy little splinter” under her nail. Jess and Moe’s father went off somewhere so that Moe’s father could extract the splinter – a procedure that took nearly an hour. When the job was finally done, he found Moe to declare: “Son, that is one tough woman!”

More recently, Jess broke her leg while hiking in a ravine. Moe let me know that Jess let a few choice words fly when the accident occurred, but then she collected herself. THEN, she scooched up and down inclines, on her bottom, for the two hours it took them to get back to the trailhead. He added that though she was covered in mud as she made this long and unusual journey, she pleasantly greeted every fellow hiker they encountered along the way.

So students: use your time at Harpeth Hall to watch this woman who, under her gentle southern exterior, happens to be tough as nails. And as you work to build up your own toughness – because it takes time for us women to discover just how durable we are – I want you to aim to become tough in the way that Jess is. By this I mean that your toughness should live side-by-side with your tenderness.

I know that the world can seem suggest that you can’t be both tough AND tender.

But you can.

Jess is.

And you will each develop your own way of cultivating these two sides of yourself, as well.

Third, Jess is ALWAYS GROWING. She works constantly on her own learning. Indeed, her professional life has been marked by a refusal to settle into mastery. As soon as she gets good at one job, she finds a way to take on a role that is new – one that will make her stretch.

Even when she’s technically off the clock, Jess commits herself to growing. More than one person I spoke with shared with me that her home is decorated with stacks of books – some on the kitchen counter, some on the family-room coffee table, more beside her bed.

And these are books about girls, and learning, and adolescent development – things she probably already knows as much about as anyone, and yet she is still always seeking to add to her knowledge base.

Students – I want you to be inspired by this, but also comforted by the reminder that you are in a very early leg of what should be a life-long project of building your mind.

I know that, especially for those of you in high school, the college process suggests that you should *soon* be fully formed. I'm sorry that this is what the college process tells you, and I hope that even as you play along with that idea, you don't believe it.

To get good at ANYTHING will take you decades, and you have decades, and it has taken Jess decades to get to this day. And if she's not done growing then neither, certainly, are any of us.

Finally, Jess has incredible FRIENDSHIPS. Everyone I spoke to as I was preparing my remarks eagerly pointed me to ten other people to whom I should also speak about Jess. And I would gladly have called every one of them if we had the time today for me to share one story after another highlighting what Jess means to her friends and what her friends so clearly mean to her.

As Laura Lee Dobie, who has been Jess' friend for thirty years, explained – “Jess is my dear, dear friend, but she's a lot of people's dear, dear friend.” Laura Lee added that Jess maintains friendships with people from every stage of her life.

Here, again, Jess has her priorities straight. As a psychologist I can tell you that my colleagues have taken a close look at the question of what actually makes people happy in their lives – what truly contributes to having an overall sense of well-being.

Here's what they have found:

It turns out that making a lot of money, or enjoying professional success have almost nothing to do with your happiness. Once you are safely above the poverty level, being wealthier or more successful contributes not at all to your joy.

Here's what does matter: doing work that you find meaningful, feeling that you are good at it, and the quality of your RELATIONSHIPS. So, let Jess be your role model as you lovingly tend to your FRIENDSHIPS – because they will support you throughout your life.

And Jess, let me say this to you as you formally assume the Headship of Harpeth Hall School: I am here and will be here, as your friend, to support *you*.

And since I have the mic I'm going to go ahead and commit everyone in this room to supporting you and being your friend in the gigantic, demanding, exhausting and yes – exhilarating – job of running a school.

Students, we really don't know what's ahead for any of you – and that's okay. But I promise you this. If you protect your INTEGRITY, build your TOUGHNESS, remember that you are ALWAYS GROWING, and nurture your FRIENDSHIPS, the rest will work itself out.

I'd like to end with a story shared with me by Margaret Renkl, another one of Jess' dear, dear friends who has known Jess since she was a new mother staying home with Becca.

Soon Morey was born, and Jess was now spending her days caring for two tiny children (because Noni came along a little later). Margaret, awed by this, asked, “Jess, how do you do it?” to which

Jess calmly replied “it used to be that one child took up all my time, and now two children take up all my time.”

Jess, now 698 children will take up all of your time. How very lucky for you. And how very lucky for them.