Senior Speech: Mary Catherine McGranahan ‘19

Opening Sentences from Comedian Amy Poehler:

"It takes years as a woman to unlearn what you have been taught to be sorry for."

A Reading from the Gospel of Matthew:

‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink,* or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?* And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these... Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God* and for righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

‘So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

And a Second Reading from Dr. Seuss:

“You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose."
In October of 2017, after almost two months of training with the boys cross country team, I crossed the finish line at the Mayor’s Cup Cross Country Championships and didn’t stop running. I ran past the finish line, left behind all of my belongings and improbably slipped past the chaos of people taking times and handing out t-shirts, out of the park. A while later, I was officially reported as a missing person. I caused a lot of people a lot of stress. Particularly my parents and my coaches, as my parents frantically called every one of my friends that they could think of and dealt with the police while the coaches were doing everything they could to help while also trying to keep two cross country teams calm. By the time my hunger and exhaustion finally won out five or six hours later, I rang my doorbell and two cops opened my front door. I broke down crying.

I am a middle child with two brothers. The younger of the two, hi ryan, is sitting in the freshman section right now cursing me for breaking my promise not to embarrass him. My older brother, Joe, is fifteen months older than I am. As we grew up, anything Joe did I wanted to do too. My dad started teaching him how to catch a baseball, and soon enough I had my own little pink mit. I remember sliding on Joe’s old cleats for my first soccer games and playing family basketball games in the driveway. Our favorite form of spending time together was competing and those games were not only amiable, but affectionate. Asking to play was a way of saying, “I want to spend time with you and in order for that time to be as much fun as possible, and because I’m not spending time with you half-heartedly, I will do everything in my power to beat you.”

In the world of our house in Virginia, there was no difference between my brother and me. Joe both trained me to be a Jedi by hitting me with a lightsaber one minute and accepted invites to tea parties in my room with Olivia the pig the next. My ignorance to the line between boy and girl resulted in my outrage when one day I realized that Joe was allowed to pee in the woods if we were playing outside, but I had to go all the way back to the house. I protested, screaming “Trees are not potties!!!!” at my confused brother.

We moved to New York City when I was six. As I got older, I began to learn that in athletics being equal to a boy was always the gold standard. But, I was also learning that the world was not my backyard. I went to a lot of co-ed camps, and played on co-ed teams. Co-ed usually meant me and maybe one or two other girls. I became used to getting glared at, or sometimes just blatantly yelled at, by male teammates for every little mistake, or sometimes just decision, I made. I was allowed to play sports, but it didn’t mean these boys were going to take me seriously. I still believed I could do anything a boy could do. I just had to work a little harder to get it noticed. Be a little bolder. Learn to take a joke. If you get hurt during a game, act like you’re fine. NEVER cry.

My desire to prove myself in a masculine environment led to cloudy judgement. When I was eleven, I was at one of those co-ed soccer camps. A bunch of 11-16 year old boys and I were playing a shooting game where you had to go in goal if you missed. I missed my shot, and the coaches told me I didn’t have to go in goal if I didn’t want to. I was small and not very strong and we didn’t even have proper goalie gloves. But, I didn’t have a choice. If I wanted to
maintain any respect with these guys, if I wanted to get passed to in our next game, I had to go
in goal. A shot rocketed off the foot of a sixteen year old. I jumped up to grab it. Pain ripped
through my wrist. I fell to the ground and quickly got back up, choking back tears and assuring
the coaches I was completely fine and could stay in the game. I went home and got it x-rayed. I
had dented my wrist. The bone had bent inward exactly like when you push on the side of an
empty coke can.

In essence, I thought that in order to be a good athlete, I needed to act like a boy. I needed to
toughen up and maybe one day these boys would tell me that I belonged there. The belonging
was important to me, my desire to have them recognize me as an athlete was equal to my
desire that they like me. I simultaneously wanted them to see me as nice and pretty and
everything a girl is supposed to be. These two desires were constantly at war with each other.

I ran my first 4 mile road race when I was ten. I don’t fully remember why that ten year old fell
in love with running but I have a few guesses. It made me feel powerful, it let me get out of the
house, and people told me I was good at it. That's always nice. I was also drawn to the fact it
had clear winners and losers. The winners and losers in running also tended to make sense,
because my parents along with every coach, book, and magazine told me that in running you
got out what you put in. And I wanted to put in everything I had. When I hit middle school, the
boys on my soccer team were always going to think they played better than I did, but no one
could argue with my reservoir time.

I remember feeling ecstatic when I came to Trinity as a freshman and got my girls cross country
uniform. I ran up to my friend and exclaimed, “Look! It’s a girl’s singlet! It fits!” It’s safe to say
she was a bit confused by my enthusiasm. I had never had a girls singlet before, running only on
co-ed teams meant boys gear. I loved girls cross country. It was my first time having a real
close-knit supportive group of girls in my favorite sport. However, by my sophomore year my
running buddy had graduated. I was spending a lot of time trying to put in extra mileage alone.
The girls team was a lot of fun, but I had different goals than my teammates.

I wanted to continue to compete after high school and no one was taking me up on my offer to
do extra 400 reps or extend a five mile day to an eight mile day.

When the coaches suggested that I could train with the boys team, it made sense. We were
trying to create the challenge that I had been yearning for and prevent me from training alone. I
was excited. It felt like going from JV to Varsity. I still bought into the notion that boys sports
were automatically a higher level, if anything it had been reinforced in my time at Trinity.

In name, I had made it. But, in my mind, I hadn’t yet. I went away for a summer full of workouts
motivated by the voice in my head telling me I had to be ready to keep up with the boys that
call. Everyday on the boys cross country team was a hard workout for me. I thought if I fell
behind in any run, someone would question my ability or my right to be there. After being put
with the fastest group for one workout one time, I thought I needed to try to stick with them all
the time. I ignored something that I knew was a fact: every runner needs well defined easy days
and hard days in order to succeed. Proper recovery from grueling workouts is just as important
as the workouts themselves. But my drive got in the way. I went into every practice like I was
going into battle. I was competing everyday, and I still didn’t feel like I was doing enough. Working hard is great. But, never being satisfied with or recognizing your work, is not. I began to run my body into the ground and my mind was fried from fueling that effort.

At meets, I was not setting any new personal bests. This was extremely frustrating. I was working harder than I ever had before, how could I not be getting faster? There must be something wrong with me. I fell into a trap that is sadly all too common with female athletes. I mistakenly began to associate thin with fast. I concluded that I was too heavy for a distance runner. The pressure spread from practice to every single meal. I was torn between the voice of logic in the back of my head that told me I needed to fuel as an athlete and my desperate desire to “look more like a runner”. I limited what I ate. Then I would get light headed after practice or hear my stomach grumble mid workout and be mad at myself for not treating my body properly. I would go home and eat whatever I wanted. Then I would be mad at myself for eating too much.

I would eat more, not because I really wanted too but because I felt out of control and frustrated at the fact that I had clearly ruined everything again. Then the cycle would restart. I began to dread meals because there was no way to win. It began to be about more than just the running. If I was having a bad eating day, I not only didn’t like my body, I didn’t like myself. I was comparing myself to other girls. Now it was about being pretty. Now it was about my self-worth.

And none of it was helping me get faster.

The first thing almost everyone asked me after I ran away was, what was I thinking?

Easy. I wasn’t. I was just listening. With about a mile to go in the race, everything felt wrong. I could feel it in every bone in my body. I was unhappy with what the pace on my watch was telling me. All of a sudden I began to notice every little trail on the side of the main cross country course. Anything that could have maybe been a path, I wanted to take. I simultaneously wanted to stop running and keep running, and cry and disappear.

Crossing the finish line only heightened this feeling. I frowned at my finish time and the voice in my head told me to GO. I tried to take off my spikes and ignore it, but I no longer had control. I was doing the only thing I knew how to do. I just needed to outrun whatever was coming over me. In a haze in which my only goal was continuous motion, I grabbed my spikes off the ground and ran out of Van Cortlandt Park. I ended up on a mission, looking for this waterfall an upperclassmen had shown the team on a fun run in Central Park three years ago. I found the waterfall, but it didn’t look right. I convinced myself it was the wrong waterfall, and continued wandering. I wanted to get lost, because if I lost myself I lost this feeling. Eventually I was tired, it was getting dark, and I was hungry. I actually wanted food, the last thing I had eaten was toast that morning. I made my way to the east river where I picked up speed and ran home the same route I used to run with my dad as a kid. I wandered the blocks near my house for another hour until I had finally outrun the feeling. Or in a sense, become tired and hungry enough to shut it up. I made my way upstairs to the doorbell, the cops, and the tears.
Running away was not the best solution. I do not recommend it to any of you.

I had become so isolated in a pressurized headspace that there was nowhere I felt comfortable, so I tried to run from my discomfort. The better solution would have been to seek out a coach, my parents, or a teammate, but I was too embarrassed to explain that I felt myself on the edge of breaking down and I didn’t understand what was happening. I had been trying to hide any weakness, any imperfection, for so long that I was unable to seek help or realize that I was in trouble. And I hurt myself and others because of it.

I want to both to thank my teammates on both teams, my coaches, especially Mrs. Mckee, my amazing parents and family, Coach Krieger, Dr. Kolman, Mr. Bolster, and anyone else who I caused stress that day. I especially want to thank you for believing me when I said that running wasn’t the problem. When asked if maybe I needed to take a break from the sport, I knew immediately that the answer was no and I’m lucky that I had people behind me who still believed me. When I was in those woods, I was looking for other trails not because I wanted to stop running, but because I wanted to go back to it. I started running because it brought me joy, fresh air, and a feeling of freedom. Yes there was competition, but racing was a thrill that made me feel powerful. When my lungs burned in challenging workouts it made me feel alive. Long runs were a chance to gossip and joke around with my running buddies. Runs on my own were a chance to enjoy my surroundings and think. I didn’t recognize the girl who was on the course that day because at that point I wasn’t racing for the thrill. I wasn’t feeling the air in my lungs and the power in my legs. I was tired. I fell apart because I was attaching my identity to my stats: my times, my weight, and how many boys I kept up with in a workout, not because of the sport.

The most surprising thing about running away was that the world didn’t end when I woke up the next morning. The night before it had felt like my world was in pieces, so stepping into school that day felt surreal. Things just seemed so... normal. I returned to training with the boys team, no one took away my spot, because I hadn’t somehow lost the right to have it. After making an apology to both teams, the only indication that anything had ever gone wrong was the fact that I was wearing two watches to practice. One was purely so the coaches could check my heart rate. I could no longer lie to the coaches or myself about what felt easy. I gradually started learning to put perfectionism and competitiveness aside in order hang back when I needed to. Eventually, I ran a new personal best.

I had been so caught up in the constant struggle of needing to prove myself that I had been ignoring the love that was all around me. Coming into the season, I had already been expecting my presence on the boys team to be bothersome. The boys seemed to take pride in being Trinity Men’s Cross Country, an Ivy Championship winning legacy. Their achievements had always been held up to me as something to be strived for. I didn’t want to mess up their team culture, or make their runs less fun because they thought they had to censor themselves around me. Little things were constant reminders that I did not belong there, including the one time where the bathrooms at Van Cortlandt were closed. Luckily by now I have learned that I am totally allowed to pee in the woods. In the words of Georgia’s speech, I spent everyday trying to be the ultimate “chill” girl. I had been honored to be given a spot in this world, as was
reinforced when people told me how, “strong” or “cool” it was that I was training with the boys. I felt equally alienated from the girls team. I loved that team, and was afraid that they saw me as the captain who left them behind. As I began to worry about my weight and appearance as a girl, I was also worried that I was losing touch with my female friendships.

After I ran away, Mrs. McKee told me that the boys had wanted to get off the bus to look for me in the woods of Van Cortlandt Park. Not to get too sappy, but my heart melted. Members of boys team were also the first people that made me laugh about running away. I mean, I’ve been sent this [Switch picture to meme] more times than I can count. Laughter was my first step to talking about and acknowledging what had happened. I had been so worried about being in the way, I had failed to see the signs that they weren’t asking me to compete everyday. I had failed to see all the times they nudged me along and the memories I had been a part of. I also learned to appreciate the things that made the girls team so great. I had missed circle time like crazy. For those of you who don’t know, circle time is a girls cross country tradition in which a question is asked at the beginning of every practice and everyone in the circle including the coaches has to give an answer. Some questions in my four seasons of cross country have been describe the person next to you’s life in ten years, what is your most embarrassing moment, what is your dream first date, and on a scale of 1-10 how much of a tree are you today (I was a 5 because I couldn’t stand still but also loved being outside). It is seemingly without purpose. It may make us seem like a “less serious” team as it goes against all those rules of not being vulnerable that I thought you had to follow to be a strong athlete. It is beautiful. My senior year, I went back to training with the girls team, with the occasional workout with the boys. I was able to enjoy my time on the girls team without constantly stressing myself out about whether I was getting enough hard training in and everytime I did a workout with the boys team it felt like coming home. While all of my junior year I felt alienated from two teams, my senior year I felt equally at home in both because I was able to let go of outside expectations.

I began to accept this in other parts of my life too. I didn’t have to pick sides. I spent so much time stressing that I wasn’t upholding standards of femininity properly. I talked too much or was bad at picking out clothes and putting on makeup and was constantly worried that I was going to lose my female friendships because of it. Yet, I also constantly worried that I wasn’t meant to be there when I was in groups of boys. I would worry that my ratio of female friends to male friends wasn’t right. At the end of the day, my people are my people. I like them, they like me (I hope), we support each other, and that’s all that matters. Even today, I still have days where I’m too hard on myself and days where my food anxiety is really bad, but my two teams, and all of my people, get me through it. I’m not alone.

Leaving the boys team was the most girl power thing I have ever done. Despite everything that had happened the year before, when the coaches suggested it my heart dropped. I could still hear the little voice in my head telling me that running with the boys WAS the accomplishment. It had always been. Leaving was taking the path that was right for me, despite the fact that the other one made me seem more “impressive.” I highlight for me because I want to emphasize the fact that there are plenty of girls who run with boys teams and love it, it works out really well for them, and we should never use one girl to represent an entire gender. Part of the reason I put so much pressure on myself while on that team was because when it started to get
tough, I thought I had to suck it up so I wouldn’t give girls a bad rep. I thought my failure would make people think that girls just weren’t ready for the challenge. I hope Trinity has another girl who trains with the boys in future years because they’re awesome, and my time on the team was not a failure, I learned and developed a lot. I had huge PRs, once I had learned to start taking better care of myself.

I was trying to meet a standard of perfection that was proving myself to be worthy to be in the presence of a boys sports team. This came from growing up constantly having to fight to show that a girl can be just as much of an athlete as a boy can. Along the way I got caught up in other common female pressures, such as standards of appearance and the need to be chill. Every girl fights everyday to live up to some type of perfection, which can make us feel like we will be judged for our mistakes more than our successes. I see this at Trinity when girls make comments in the classroom. There is a pressure to be perfect with every word. This pressure has often been noted as a reason why some girls hands stay down even when they have something to say. Boys are struggling to reach their own standards of perfection too, standards of masculinity. I have gone through life as a girl, with all the struggles that brings. However, I spent two hours every day trying to be an ideal Trinity bro and I lasted two months. Seriously, how do you do this? Its insane. At Trinity I have noticed that everyone is trying to prove they belong here. Whether it is through a gendered lense, or the common lense of needing to prove that we’re smart enough for Trinity. Trinity students are often complimented for their drive, their determination, their passion, all great things, but all things that created my perfect storm when put in the right situation. I’m here to tell you that my quest to prove I belonged was never ending and pointless.

The only one who could convince me I was good enough, that I belonged anywhere, was me. I needed to define my own goals that did not rely on other people’s recognition. I needed to realize that meeting those goals meant having some easy days or just plain failures along the way. I needed to stop worrying whether other people believed I was as good as a boy and start living my life. Everyone sitting in this chapel right now deserves to be at Trinity. Whether you showed a certain aptitude for setting up blocks in kindergarten, or clawed your way through the high school process in ninth grade, or your life brought you here anywhere in between. You have a place here. Don’t spend every second you are here trying to prove it.