



**CATE SCHOOL**  
commitment | companionship | scholarship | service

March 16, 2020

Dear {data:informal\_salutation\_per},

I've had a number of memorable weeks at Cate over the years, most of them made so by extraordinary moments: a brilliant student address, athletic contests that go our way (and a few that don't), remarkable artistic performances, celebrations of service and accomplishment, even the somber but inspiring memorials we offer to those whose lives have been devoted to our School.

The week we just lived is also one most of us will never forget, but sadly not for any of the reasons above. Last week was an exercise in trying to know the yet unknowable, to plan for the previously unthinkable, to be ready for the worst while imagining and hoping for the very best. After preparing extensively for the anticipated return of our students from Spring Break this past weekend, we notified our families on Wednesday, March 11, that we would extend the break for an additional week so that our faculty can prepare to deliver our curriculum online to the remote destinations of the world where our students find themselves. We intend to deliver our program digitally for as long as is necessary. For up-to-date information about Cate's response to the COVID-19, we have [established a website](#) where all our communications, updates, and FAQs will be stored.

Student safety drove this decision, though we were not thinking simply about our community's susceptibility to infection from COVID-19. We have learned over the years, and particularly through our experience with the Thomas Fire and the subsequent mudslides, that the best crisis management involves preemptive action before we actually face a crisis. Although the immediate threat of infection in our community was low at the time we made the decision to forego our return plans (there was one documented case of infection in Ventura County and none in Santa Barbara County – there are more now), our consultations with individuals in the County Health Department made it clear that the threat of infection would grow significantly and that we could face a mandated closure or isolation if the virus took hold in our community. Neither are tenable eventualities, so we opted to allow our students to stay home, avoid travel and the attendant health risks, and wait out this storm. We hope it won't be a long wait, but we are ready if it is.

Our faculty have been busily working on digital delivery systems for our classes, systems that will benefit us greatly even beyond this immediate disruption. As luck would have it, Mr. Newsome and I teach our class on The Language of Lincoln this trimester, so this old dog is going to have to learn some new technology tricks. I don't believe any form of instruction can hold a candle to face-to-face

meetings, but I am curious to learn about online ways to complement traditional instruction. This trimester is likely to be a great education for all of us, faculty and students.

It is easy to look at the national or world news or these disruptions we are all feeling in our lives and bemoan our fate. I know our seniors in particular are hugely disappointed that their last trimester on the Mesa is at best abbreviated, that athletic seasons are likely over, that our spring musical *Fiddler on the Roof* may or may not reach the stage, that all of those interactions and celebrations we and they anticipated with such excitement are suddenly at risk. It is an awful feeling, truly.

It is hard to know what to say to them or their peers, except perhaps to agree. This is not how it was supposed to go. But how often does it really go the way it is supposed to? I remember Mr. Cate's wisdom at the end of *School Days in California*, "75 years have proved to me the fallibility of man's judgment, and have made me humble." Life can have that effect, especially when we confront moments like the one we are in.

But that's where our own agency matters. Cate is built on the premise that we all have something vital and powerful to offer the world. That doesn't become less true when we face a pandemic or a fire or anything else. Agility – cognitive and otherwise – is one of the intentions of our pedagogy on the Mesa. It will be especially useful in the coming weeks.

So work continues here, though in a somewhat adapted manner. We are still pressing forward with Booth Commons, which remains on budget. Provided circumstances allow, our new Student Center and Dining Hall as well as the Ballard Recording Studio and Wiegand Performing Arts Center will be filled with students and faculty soon.

Our newest students received their admittance letters on Tuesday, March 10, and are already letting us know of their plans to come to Cate. In every area, our work proceeds, altered perhaps, but with no less resolve, and mindful of those epic lines from William Shepard Biddle Class of 1918, "High above the curving coast of the blue Pacific, flanked by the canyons and sheltered by the mountains we knew well, our School remains: a steadfast light in a troubled world."

May it always be so and the world soon be far less troubled.

*Servons,*

Ben Williams  
Headmaster



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