

The Light We Leave Behind

The stars have always been my guide. I've looked up at the night sky and marveled at their beauty, their constancy, and their power to tell stories. I have taken astronomy courses and I am captivated the most at the life cycle of a star. Over the past four years, I have come to realize that just like the universe follows a grand design, so has my journey through high school. My time at John Adams Academy has been shaped by lessons that have transformed me. These are lessons I've found in literature, in experiences, and in the vast expanse of the cosmos.

In astronomy, the very beginnings of a star are called stellar nebula—chaotic, giant clouds of gas and dust. Freshman year was my stellar nebula stage, where everything was in chaos and I was always afraid. Afraid of failing, of fitting in, of making relationships. However, reading about Atticus Finch in *To Kill A Mockingbird* taught me how to get through the fear. Courage. Atticus said, "Real courage is when you know you're licked before you begin, but you begin anyway and see it through no matter what." Gas and dust in stellar nebulae seem small and burdensome, just like my worries of entering high school. However, just as gravity pulls gas and dust inward to create a star, facing my fears up front was the start of my transformation into something greater. The courage I was trying to build led me to step outside of my comfort zone. I joined the scholar government and the National Honor Society, wanting to make a difference in my school community.

My sophomore year, I read *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a novel that forced me to reconsider my own definition of happiness. The book tells the story of Dorian Gray, a man who stays young forever while his portrait ages and bears the marks of his sins. He chases after pleasures without caring about the moral consequences of his decisions, which eventually leads

to his destruction. When I first read it, I was disgusted at Dorian and his hedonistic lifestyle. However, as we discussed him and his motives more in Humanities, I realized how much I related to him. Just like Dorian's single-minded pursuit of beauty and validation, I chased being the best. The best at school, in sports, in music, and even in relationships. Dorian taught me that true happiness doesn't come from fleeting pleasures but from a life rooted in faith, family, and meaningful relationships. That year, I began to see that stars do not shine for themselves; they illuminate the universe around them. My efforts in school and service were not just about the title—they were about contributing to something bigger than myself, about finding fulfillment in the light I could bring to others.

Junior year was my supernova—the final stage of a massive star, a moment of intense energy and transformation. The weight of expectations, academic pressures, and the looming questions about my future all collapsed inward just like a star's core. The decisions I made felt heavy, mostly because I knew they could alter the course of my life forever.

In the midst of this pressure, reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* reminded me that God is in the details of my life just like it was in Uncle Tom's. I found peace remembering that even in moments of intense struggle, I could look to Christ for direction.

Junior year was filled with relationships—both with my family and with new friends who helped me loosen up and laugh at the brain rot trends they shared with me. Much like a supernova, everything seemed to explode all at once. Yet from that burst came something new—an understanding of myself and a stronger sense of purpose.

After a massive star goes supernova, it casts off its outer layers into space and leaves behind a core that forms another nebula, a planetary one. The glowing gas of the explosion forms

the foundation for new stars and planets. Senior year was my planetary nebula—a place where everything came full circle, where the lessons of the past collided with the uncertainty of the future. The pressure was still intense, but this time it wasn't just about surviving—it was about pushing through and trusting the process. The big deadlines, the difficult classes, the constant hustle—they were all part of the cosmic storm of our final year. But in that chaos, there was beauty.

It was this year that I read *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl, a book that changed my perspective on agency. Frankl's memoir of surviving the Holocaust taught me that even in the worst circumstances, we still have a choice. "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." We cannot always control what happens to us, but we can control how we respond. This lesson resonated with me, as I reflected on my high school journey. Like a nebula, we were filled with potential—swirling with the energy of growth, expansion, and transformation. Like the universe, high school holds both chaos and beauty. How we rise from it, what we learn from our experiences there, defines who we become.

Time is the great sculptor of the universe. Stars take millions of years to form, to burn, to collapse, and to be reborn. And just as time shapes the universe, it shapes us. I entered John Adams as scattered dust and gas and over four years, I was tested, challenged, and refined. Now, as we stand on the edge of the future, we must remember that our past is just as important as what lies ahead. The lessons we have learned—about courage, happiness, choices, and meaning—will continue to brighten our path forward.

Through my time at John Adams, I have realized that education is not just about knowledge—it is about learning to think, to question, and to grow for one's self. The greatest ideas of history have shaped me, molding the way I see the world and my place in it. I've pondered the balance between virtue and vice, the struggle for justice, the pursuit of truth, and the weight of fate and free will. I have seen how democracy, government, and law shape civilizations, how courage and prudence guide leaders, and how revolution can either free people or chain them. I have studied art, mathematics, science, and philosophy, each revealing a different way to see and understand the world.

I have grappled with the duality of good and evil, the permanence of the soul, the paradox of labor and wealth, and the question of what makes a citizen honorable. I have traced the timeline of history through war and peace, through tyranny and liberty. I have seen that love, family, and faith are the anchors that hold us firm when the winds of change threaten to sweep us away. These ideas have not just educated me—they have formed me. They have taught me to think for myself, to see the patterns that connect all things, to understand that we are part of something far greater than ourselves.

As I begin my new journey, I must remember that we are not just individuals drifting through space. John Adams has taught me that a key part of our cultivation is the role of mentors in our lives. I am grateful for my mentors who truly wanted me to understand the concepts in class. They have taught me that it is not about absorbing knowledge but finding ways to apply it in my life. My classmates too have helped me see the world through different lenses by questioning my points. Arguments about the trolley problem, if lying is always a sin, and Hamlet's sanity challenged me to be smarter and to not take everything at face value. On the other hand, arguments about the best rapper, food addictions, dating strategies will unfortunately

forever be engraved in my memories. All of us are part of a constellation. We are connected to each other and push each other to improve and become better versions of ourselves.

I've spent these years becoming stars—formed through struggle, tested by pressure, and ultimately burning with purpose. But as I step beyond the walls of this academy, I think maybe John Adams calls me to be something more. Not just a star fixed in the sky, but a shooting star—a brilliant streak of light that cuts through the darkness and sparks wonder and hope in others. No matter where I go, I will always carry the light of these four years, the lessons I have learned, and the bonds I have formed. It's these lessons and bonds that I believe will launch me forward into the world, ready to make an impact. Shooting stars are remembered. They leave a trail of light. "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. Because of John Adams, I want to choose to be that flash of hope to someone else. I can inspire others by how I live, love, and lead. Because in the end, it's not just about the light I carry—it's about the light I leave behind.

I want to leave a trail worth following.