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“TEST YOURSELF”

Good morning!

Thank you, President Baenninger, for your introduction.

I'd like to welcome our returning students back to campus. But I particularly want to welcome our first year students. You're beginning a part of your life today that will go very fast, but will have a significant impact on your personal development. I hope the journey is stimulating, enriching, and goes beyond your expectations. |

When I first learned that I would be making this presentation I'll admit I was at a bit of a loss. What could I say to our students that might possibly inspire, motivate, or at the very least, intrigue them? What would a young woman starting college be thinking about, or be curious about, as she begins classes and the rest of her college experience?

I tried to talk to a number of different people, including tapping into a resource I had close at hand – someone I was hoping might have some sense of what an 18 year old starting college might be thinking – I talked to my 16 year old daughter. After all, she was beginning the process of looking into colleges, and she might have some insights into what kinds of information or advice might be useful.

So, as we were sitting on our porch early this summer, and I said, “Katie, I’d like your help on that speech I’m giving in the fall at St. Ben’s”

Katie asked, “Who are you giving this speech to?”

I said, “Most of the first year students will be there, and many of the returning students. Some faculty and staff will be there too.”

Then Katie asked me, “You mean this isn’t in your classroom?”

“No, it will be in the BAC auditorium.”

“So this isn’t even a class?” Katie asked.

(PAUSE). “WHY are they having **you** speak?!”

With that boost to my confidence, I was ready to start writing this speech. Katie was mostly kidding – at least that’s the spin I’m putting on it. In the end, it turns out that Katie actually did give me some ideas about what I might talk about today. Over the course of the summer we talked about school and class work, majors and careers, passions and interests.

But what inspired me were actually some conversations we had about the game of soccer. Now, how does soccer fit here?

Well, first of all, Katie and her sister and I enjoyed watching some of the women’s World Cup soccer tournament this

summer on television. Of course, we were a little disappointed in the result of the championship game when the U.S. lost to Japan. My daughters and I talked about the kind of practice and training those young women must have gone through to get to that game.

I also started thinking about coaching soccer, and how players develop their skills. I've had the opportunity to coach soccer at different levels over the last 20 years or so. As you're likely aware, a coach spends much more time interacting with players during practice than during games. Practice, of course, is critical - to the development - of any skill set, whether you're talking about sports, playing a musical instrument, or using your academic skills – such as writing.

What I've noticed is that no matter what their skill set, many people are afraid to try new things. For soccer players, it might be a new offensive move with the ball. But they are often afraid to move out of their comfort zone - even in practice – no matter how much a coach might encourage them to do so.

I was thinking about a player I coached for about four years – Hannah. Hannah was a terrific soccer player. She was fast, she was strong, and she was fearless - well except for one thing - Hannah was afraid of kicking the ball with her left foot. Hannah would do what I've seen a hundred young soccer players do.

Even though the ball was better positioned to be kicked with her left foot, Hannah would reposition her body to kick it with her right foot.

Hannah and I had a very good relationship, and I knew I could tease her without it being taken personally. So when on rare occasions she actually DID use her left foot, I would express astonishment, or comment with wonder that she did, in fact, have a left foot. The inevitable reaction was a large grin, partly at the joke, and partly in self-satisfaction that she was trying something that was uncomfortable for her, with some success.

Commented [Rw4]: I believe the soccer example is much too long and needs to be ruthlessly cut so that you arrive at your advice to college students more quickly.

Now, as you might guess, Hannah is right footed, and I suspect most of you can empathize with Hannah, thinking about how difficult it is to use your non-dominant hand or foot. Using that non-dominant hand or foot is UNCOMFORTABLE. Think about what it might be like to write with your opposite hand. . . You remember what handwriting is - it's that behavior where you actually shape the letters yourself instead of pushing a key on a keypad.

There are all kinds of occasions when we are asked to do something that pulls us out of our comfort zone. *I'm in one right now!* People assume that when you stand in front of a classroom speaking for a living, public speaking comes easily – that it's comfortable. But that's not necessarily the case – at

least it's not for ME. In fact, numerous surveys confirm that one of the top things many people worry or "stress out" about is public speaking. Yet it's a necessary element in so many of things we do in life, whether it's speaking at a professional meeting, or making a class presentation, or making a wedding toast - and we learn to do it – hopefully to an appreciative audience - or at least we get through it without major trauma.

But how does one learn to do a good job of public speaking? Or how does one learn to kick a soccer ball with their non-dominant foot? How does one learn to write better? How does one learn to do a difficult math problem?

Well, the first step is to try. Test yourself. See how you do. Put yourself in that situation and give it a shot. Who knows? You might hit the back of the net with that left-footed shot on the first try! BUT the truth is its more likely you'll fail on that first try. Then you learn from your mistakes, and you practice, and hopefully you do better the next time. But without trying it – without testing yourself – you'll never know, and you'll never know what to practice or what you do that needs improvement. That's the critical nature of learning: try it – see what you can do – then learn from the feedback you get from trying. The feedback may come from a coach, a teacher, a friend, or your own observations.

This summer I finally got around to reading a book that a couple of friends had recommended, called ***The Talent Code***. The author, Daniel Coyle, a journalist, discusses the neurological and environmental circumstances under which talent, or skills, develop in a wide variety of domains. For example, he discusses playing soccer (of course!), but he also discusses piano & violin playing, mathematical ability, singing, piloting a fighter plane, and believe it or not, robbing banks.

Now, Tom and Steve – the friends who recommended the book - are very good friends, and I've known them both for nearly forty years. Still, I admit that I was reluctant to read the book at first

The reason that I was reluctant was, well, both Tom and Steve are lawyers they're also my golf partners. In fact, they are among a very small and select group who are willing to spend time on a golf course with me. It's a testament to their friendship that they're willing to put up with both my poor play and my bad jokes. Furthermore, since they are willing to play golf with me, I suspected they might not be all that knowledgeable when it comes to talent.

Despite my reservations I enjoyed reading ***The Talent Code***, though I think Coyle is pushing it when he calls his approach the "holy grail of acquiring skill." But he does a nice job of

Commented [Rw5]: I believe the speeches are published so eventually you might want to edit for technical issues.

research and presenting evidence on the subject, including interviews with psychologists and neuroscientists, as well as the students and teachers in each of the “talent” areas.

Coyle argues that it is a specific part of a nerve cell that is responsible for the development of human skill, the insulating material called myelin, which speeds up neural processing by allowing the nerve signal to “jump” down the axon. (Coyle at one point refers to its “magical-seeming effects” – that’s the journalist coming out in him.)

Coyle further argues, [quote] “The more time and energy you put into the right kind of practice . . . the more skill you get, or, to put it a slightly different way, the more myelin you earn.”

I want to focus on the first part of that sentence: “The more time and energy you put into the right kind of practice. . . . the more skill you get.” Because Coyle claims that what is required is what he calls “deep practice.”

Now, it’s no secret that practice is the key to developing a set of skills. Everyone in this auditorium knew that before I started speaking today. But Coyle suggests that in deep practice one is [QUOTE] “struggling in a targeted way . . . operating on the edges of your ability . . . [where] mistakes make you smarter . . . where you’re forced to slow down, make errors, and correct them . . .” [QUOTE] It’s a very similar notion to what the

Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsy called a child's "zone of proximal development." There is a range of skill you're able to achieve at any one point in your maturation or development.

But how and when you develop, or IF you develop, depends on pushing those boundaries – operating on the edges of your ability – hopefully with the help or guidance of a parent, a coach, a teacher, or a mentor. You can't develop that skill set without testing yourself, challenging yourself, moving out of your comfort zone.

There are many things a college education is going to do for you. First, of course, you're going to gain a body of knowledge that you didn't have before, or that hadn't quite come together the first time you encountered it. You'll learn to write better, you'll learn to speak better, and you'll learn to think better. These skills are part of what we're trying to provide at a liberal arts college. College is going to provide you with a number of opportunities to test yourself in all areas of your life.

My plea to you is to take those opportunities and do just that – TEST YOURSELF. Take that tough class. Try out for that team, that choir, that play. Speak up in class; participate in the classroom discussion. Go see your professor about a question or issue that interests you. Go on a study abroad program or an alternative spring break trip. Try volunteering, or service learning, or doing an internship. Do an honors thesis or some

Commented [Rw6]: Is this word used too often?

kind of creative project. Don't be afraid to challenge ideas and beliefs – particularly your own.

Now you want to do all of this thoughtfully. Choose your opportunities. Be planful. Leaving your comfort zone can be challenging, but it can also be immensely satisfying. It will help you grow, and it will help you discover, or rediscover your talents. But once again, you'll never find those talents or develop those skills unless you try. Remember this is a kind of struggling in a targeted way, of operating on the edges of your ability. But you can't be afraid to make mistakes. In fact, that's the way we learn.

But none of it happens if you don't test yourself. Take a chance and try to take a shot at the goal with your non-dominant foot. Who knows – maybe you'll score.

Thank you. Have a great fall semester.

Commented [Rw8]: I think the conclusion and advice to students comes a bit too quickly and I would like to see more time on this.