

Lowell Speech February 26, 2012: Remember the Future

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“SEX!”

“That will get their attention,” said my grandfather after I asked him how to start a speech for my college peers. So as **you now know**, my grandfather, or Pop-pop, has always given me good advice.

I’ve learned a lot about Pop-pop over the years. He is naughty: while growing up with 12 siblings during the Depression, he would soap the trolley tracks in town so that the trolley would skid past its station stop. He is valiant: when he was shot down over France in World War II and injured, he refused the Purple Heart saying that his crewmate who lost a limb in the crash deserved it more. And he gives advice. In particular, he told me to always do my best.

Or perhaps it wasn’t a conversation, but a wave of sentiments; a force built up over time. It wasn’t given as a command, but I believed it. And I also worried about it, because I couldn’t figure out what doing my best really means.

I had a vision that doing my best meant never wasting anything—time, effort, a chance to eat healthier food—yielding a dull world of perfectionism in which everything became a challenge, a temptation **to waste**. I would imagine little men with sticks, running around my head, and brow beating me to go faster, to fly through my readings—and so I did, and everything flew right on by.

Or perhaps I could do my best by following the right moral principles. And so I constructed a courtroom of judges, each embodying a code or expectation, some from my parents, a teacher I admired, a friend I saw as somehow more moral...or who had her life more... “together.” So I was always in the dock, the judges probing my conscience for misdeeds or bad intentions.

And then at some point the judges were replaced by the salesmen! Yes, all college students should have a secondary in social calculus. We know how to package ourselves for fellowship committees, medical applications, friends with strong beliefs—everyone. Of course this skill may be natural, but I became aware that I was going too far when a close friend of mine embarrassingly pointed out, “Ryan, you sure look at yourself in the mirror a lot.” The problem arose when I

asked myself what I really wanted. Those practiced salesmen turned around, with their convincing pictures of who I was, and gave me a million competing arguments, with no way to tell which was really mine.

And every one of these visions of the “best” led to failure – especially when I compared myself to others. There was always someone more efficient, more principled, or more attractively packaged than I was.

Reality brought me back: Pop-pop has dementia, and it’s scary, even of him.

When I see him, he may not remember what I’ve said or why I’m there. It does not matter so much whether I drove myself to rack-up enough accomplishments, or upheld some moral code, or gave the right impression. Instead, it matters more and more that I’m there, present in that moment; that he can look into my love-engrained face and perhaps not know my name but recognize me as a “good person” who’s there for him.

I only see Pop-pop a few times a year, but I visit dementia residents in a nursing home here every Sunday. And it often surprises me that these accomplished

people, now long only for simple, sincere conversation—that's what achievement is for them.

What I find beautiful about visiting my buddy in the nursing home—a wonderful woman named Sophia-- is that I get to learn, by what little hints she may still give me, about her past—to pay homage to an almost forgotten, rich history full of events, loves, disappointments, and beauties ... complicated and yes it is rife with waste—stick-men, imperfect judges, and not the “best” by any of your standards salesmen, but alive and precious between us now. She tells me about a beautiful opera house that she used to frequent in her childhood and it stays with her, perhaps for no scientific reason, but I'd like to think that it's because she really took the time to be truly present in its space. And so we've entered a kind of contract with each other, to be as present as we can for each other every week, her with her limited memory and me with these three phantoms of “the best” still running around my head, distracting me from what's right in front of my eyes.

So maybe it's not about the realm of what I can do—the stick-bearers—should do—the judges—or maybe not even what I want to do—the salesmen, but rather it's about the moments we shared. Because in those moments, there was an

unspoken confidence that drowns out the skeptics. When he told me to do my best, it wasn't a command or an expression of concern, but expression of confidence, knowing that he had taken the time to teach me to work hard, and that I would not disappoint. Knowing that he had set the example, by forsaking a metal because of the solidarity he found with a crewmate. While dementia is irreversible, it matters that Pop-pop and I keep coming back to see each other because I still believe in what he might see in those moments of lucidness, because we believe that his advice paid off, because we believe that our mutual confidence helps us to overcome phantoms and anxieties today, because I want to be as present for him now as he has always been for me.