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Is Ignorance Bliss?

For most of my childhood, I grew up in New York suburbia. I went to high school with pretty much the same people I had gone to elementary school with. Our backgrounds were in major respects the same, the well of knowledge from which we drew similar.

And then I came to college. I was an overeager freshman, an easily excitable freshman, slap all the typical labels you want on me, but really there was a good reason for my exuberance. All of a sudden I was surrounded by these *brilliant* peers, teachers, mentors, who all came from amazingly diverse backgrounds, who were *each* a deep well of knowledge in their own way, often about topics of which I was completely ignorant.

I dove in. I sat in the dining hall and chatted with a friend about the physics of time travel. I set up informational interviews with alumni who told me about the business world and the way companies worked. I went to event after event and soaked up all the advice I could get from startup founders, award-winning writers, and renowned economists.

I could almost *feel* my mind expanding, every day.

But opening up my mind also had its dangers. In sophomore year, I took a Moral Reasoning class that taught me about nihilism and made me think about how we are each really, really *tiny*; in the grand scheme of things, if one of us were gone, the world would be barely disturbed. Yes, those who were close to us would feel profound loss, but they are also just small, small cogs in a gigantic entity.

And then I took an Astronomy class, which made me only even more aware that even if a human could pervasively affect the Earth, the Earth itself was smaller than a speck in an entire universe that is itself still expanding.

And then I started to realize from speaking to people at all the events I had been going to, that *luck* played a role bringing almost all of them to where they were, and that even if I dreamed big dreams, luck will play an undeniable role in where I end up. And really that was very scary to me, because I realized that even if I worked hard, things might still not go my way; because for every Madame Curie or Bill Gates in the world, there were hundreds, thousands, maybe millions of people who might have worked just as hard as they did, been just as determined as they were, and still never rose to success or fame because the stars had simply not aligned.

So in a relatively short period of time, I had come to realize not only how insignificant I was at the cosmic level, but that even at the human level, I exercised very little control over how my life would develop.

What was the point of goals, if you couldn't necessarily reach them? What was the point of life, if you were likely to fade away into obscurity, if not during your lifetime then almost certainly after it? If the answer was to pursue happiness, then what is happiness and how do you know you have it?

I struggled with these questions for countless hours over the next two years. I began to debate them with friends. Some looked at me funny and said they never thought about that sort of stuff. One told me that it's actually *liberating* to be so insignificant, since that means we can do whatever we want and it doesn't really matter. Another told me that simply the chance of being the next Bill Gates or Madame Curie was enough, that that tiny little statistical chance was what should motivate us. But although these discussions gave me some additional insight, and those philosophies worked for them, they just didn't stick with me. In my heart, I wanted my actions to matter, and I couldn't be motivated by just a 0.00001% chance of becoming someone important. I still felt lost.

I began to reminisce about my freshman year with envy and longing. How exciting and brilliant the world had looked in my days of innocence, how eager I had been for life when I had thought I was powerful enough to shape it as I wanted.

Then, recently, I discussed these very same questions, yet again, with a new friend. And he shared *his* perspective with me. Rather than fearing the unpredictability of the future, he said, *why not accept and embrace it?* If we never know what might happen, that means we also never know if something *good* might happen, if we put ourselves out there enough and keep our mind, eyes, and ears open. Yes, we are constrained by the cards we are dealt, but isn't there something exciting about making the most out of them, about overcoming the obstacles we uniquely face? Big things only happen if little things happen – a city is only built because of each brick or steel bar that is laid down – and so even just our little ripples might in fact be contributing a big movements.

I let his argument sink in. And, strangely, something seemed to shift inside of me. *This* approach, this view of the future, was finally one that resonated with *me*, it was one that made me feel important and yet realistic. And it was different from my freshman year outlook. It showed me that I hadn't been degenerating into cynicism, but simply evolving.

I wish I could now launch into describing how this new perspective revolutionized the way I approached life, how I changed the way I went through my days or the people I decided to speak with. Truthfully, that didn't really happen. Nothing really changed, except I better understood myself and my place in the world and the way I should continue to move forward.

But this philosophical exploration is still one of the most important things I will take away from college, this place that has opened my mind irrevocably, that has made me a better questioner, a deeper thinker, maybe a more interesting dinner conversationalist. I hope this speech also inspires you to do two things. The first is to take even greater advantage of the kaleidoscope of perspectives we have around us at this astounding institution. The second is to think a little about what drives you personally. Every person's definition of fulfillment is different, and maybe articulating yours will lead you to better understand yourself as it did for me.

Thank you for listening.