

Chris Stock

Lowell speech: “Dreaming Big”

3 March 2013

Thank you, Dorothy, and thank you to the *many* others who have helped me prepare this speech.

I am a cross-country skier and have been my whole life, and some of you have never heard of cross-country skiing before, so let me tell you some facts. The Harvard varsity ski team has entered eighteen meets in the last three years. We have placed ninth every time. There are ten schools in the league. “Another ninth for Harvard Skiing,” is what the *Crimson* would say back when it took the trouble to report our results.

In my family, you have no choice but to ski. This was certainly the case with my mother, who had no idea what she was getting into when her boyfriend – my dad, who had picked up racing in college – invited her to go skiing. My mom expected a date, not so much the heart-pounding workout that ensued. She stuck with it, though, and soon enough it was my turn to learn to ski. One day in February my parents strapped me in and walked me down the driveway. I was eighteen months old. Some of my earliest memories are of waking up before dawn, squeezing into the back seat of the car with ski bags at my head and Stoned Wheat Thins at my feet, and trying as hard as I could not to overheat in my thick black snowsuit. Now, twenty years later, I have chosen to make skiing the central organizing element of my life.

In the words of Rob, my high school coach who once skied for Harvard himself, cross-country skiing isn’t a sport; it’s a lifestyle. Picture my best friend Isaac and me, growing up side by side as both training partners and racing adversaries, trading places on the results sheet every weekend to this day. Picture my family planning vacations around everyone being able to go out for a ski together, even now that the kids have gone off to college. Picture my teammates driving seven hours with me to a World Cup competition in Quebec City, to cheer on my sister Corey in the biggest races of her life. Picture me pulling over a couple hours into a late-season ski to take in the trees, terrain, sun and bluebird skies; and feeling fit and strong *and* able to eat several pounds of pasta in one sitting.

Then there's racing. I remember the first championship race of my ski career, when I was twelve. There was a fast downhill in the field with a sharp left-hand turn at the bottom. I had seen other people take that corner too fast and fall. Heedless, I dive-bombed the hill, lost my balance, and fell less than three minutes into the race. Getting up, I set my sights on the guy in front of me and put my head down for the big climbs in the woods ahead. You don't forget that feeling of gritting your teeth and going hard.

I'll admit that this sport of mine – strapping equipment to your feet and timing yourself on a loop in the woods – is kind of absurd. It's artificial. But the skills and the joys of skiing are real. At Harvard, it can sometimes seem as though pre-fabricated expectations set the standard for success. We have to be the winners that *someone* expects us to be. In skiing, the one who sets expectations is you. Don't think I'm dismissing the value of achievement. No! I find it liberating to be able to identify the outcome that matters to me, promise myself I'll attain it, and then figure out how to keep that promise. To set and pursue a goal well requires self-motivation *and* team spirit; focus and positive attitude. Skiing is by far the most practical thing I do.

This season, after eighty miles of racing, I fell just a few seconds shy of my goal to qualify for NCAA championships. It was a bitter defeat. But when I set that goal a year ago I made a training plan to go with it. Week by week, workout by workout, I followed through. I focused. I visualized. I documented everything so that next year I can intelligently adjust my plan. I became the skier I promised myself I would be – and I'm really proud of that.

So next time you hear that Harvard skiing placed ninth, consider the following. We have big dreams and we pursue them wholeheartedly, and when we're with friends striding in the forest under falling snow, there is nowhere in the world we'd rather be. You might not know it from reading the paper, but the Harvard ski team is achieving great things. Thank you.