

Commencement Address
Dr. Leon Botstein
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What you've gained here in St. Andrew's will last you the rest of your lives. Life is not filled always with good results; and the fact remains that all of us, and all of you, will encounter not only success and happiness but unhappiness and failure, difficulty – unexpected and expected. It comes with the cycle of life which your colleague talked about, it comes with things that cannot even be predicted and how we deal with the difficulty of being alive and of growing older, having families breaking up, meeting death, illness, disappointment, being fired, not getting the job, not getting the grade...how we deal with all the bad things in life is really a measure of who one is. If one says, "It's not my fault; it's a result of forces beyond myself," we face a very difficult future; because this country, and the world, is depending on people taking responsibility for themselves. So focus on what you are capable of, because the worst thing that a school can do – and I think St. Andrew's hasn't done this – is permit you to underestimate your own abilities.

And don't be ambivalent about excellence. This is an odd piece of advice. We always talk about excellence, but we live in a country which is actually ambivalent about it. We love to read in the newspaper not about how people have succeeded but how they failed. We love to look at people who have become famous and rich, and we're not so much interested in whether they're famous, rich and wise but we're interested what's under the rug. We're more interested in our candidates' sex lives than in their politics, in the hopes that that there's something about their sex lives that we can complain about or can envy, hypocritically. We're more interested, actually, in people's

shortcomings than we are in their achievements. We are ambivalent about success...and we're not certain that we would like it.

Therefore I would encourage you to cultivate jealousy as a virtue. I know this is a Christian college and, therefore, the idea of jealousy seems to be at odds with humility – but, I'm not a Christian, so I can get away with this. I want to make a distinction here between jealousy and envy. Envy is destructive. Envy means you don't like what the other person can do, and you're envious in a way that allows you to stick your proverbial foot out so that she or he trips in the race so they don't win. Envy I do not advise you to cultivate; it's destructive inside and destructive in society. But jealousy, in the Greek sense – the ancient Greek sense – is emulation: looking at someone else who is really excellent and saying, "That's terrific. Why can't I do that? Not at his or her expense, but let me imitate them." As opposed to hoping something unseen, look at something that is out there that you can really admire in the past or present and say, "Well, I'd like to do that"

You're going to go to college. You're going to see people who run faster, think faster, write faster, do things better than you; and instead of saying, "I wish they didn't exist," and "Maybe I can poison their achievement," or become angry that they're doing well, I might say, "That's terrific. Why can't I do that?"

There is an ancient Chinese philosopher of the Third Century who made a comparison between a lame turtle and a thoroughbred horse. I don't want to say that you are lame turtles, but his point is that a thoroughbred horse that doesn't know what direction it's going in won't get as far as a lame turtle who knows where it's going. The point being that in college and in life, success is not measured by rapidity or by inherent ability but, in fact, by persistence and consistency. The famous quote of Ralph Waldo Emerson about "99% perspiration, 1%

inspiration” is often misunderstood. Most people say it’s saying “Look it’s hard work”, but the truth is, ladies and gentlemen, that your hard work in the wrong place is useless. If you dig a hole in the wrong spot, you’re not going to find water, no matter how much 99% perspiration you expire. You need that 1% inspiration to know where to dig. The two go together; that is to say, you need to look at the inspiration which is only 1% and the 99% will work in tandem.

So you need to be somewhat of a lame turtle in life – keep going, no matter that there are these thoroughbreds around that seem to be moving very rapidly and very well. Don’t envy them. Follow your own path.

The second piece of advice I would give you is reject conventional wisdom, even my own. That is to say, think for yourself. Don’t think in cliché’s. Don’t think in packages that are per-set. Now that sounds like easy advice – it’s very hard. It’s *very* hard. People love to repeat themselves, and some of what people repeat is worth hearing; but, in fact, you have to think it through for yourself. And in the emulation of other people, you have to adapt it. No imitation is entirely exact. So if you see a model in the world – some excellence you want to anticipate or appreciate or approximate – make sure you make it your own.

In order to do that, you have to do something which people don’t like to do in this country and that’s spend time alone. Most evidence shows that real excellence is based on the ability to have real peace in solitude. I’m not talking about loneliness. We’re so frightened of loneliness we never approach solitude. Solitude is the time you can spend by yourself, whether it’s reading, practicing an instrument, playing a sport. It’s very important that in college and in your entire life you reserve enough time by yourself, with yourself. It’s the only

way you will find your own way to reject simply being the object or the product of conventional wisdom around you.

I would also resist popular culture and journalism. There's nothing that the absence of reading a newspaper won't cure. There's nothing that the shutting of a television set off won't cure as well. You're missing nothing. If something really momentous happens, you'll hear about it. And if you read the newspaper, read it as skeptically as you can – with such skepticism that possibly you even have to look out the window to verify the weather report. What I'm suggesting is that it is not easy to; in fact, resist the imprint of the media and of the conventional analysis of events, people and issues. Learn how to find out the answer yourself. You in the 21st Century will have a much easier time than we did. You have something called the Web, the Internet. You can actually break the back of the monopoly of information with which we have grown up.

Cultivate curiosity. In college don't worry about what you're going to major in. Major in something, because it doesn't make much of a difference. I'm sorry if you hear this publicly, and your parents will probably be very worried whether your major is practical. You cannot predict whether your major is practical or not. One of your speakers, Mr. Hargrove, said that algebra is not practical. I'm afraid it is. More than you realize, it is immensely practical. The primary issue is that as you cultivate your curiosity and study in college, focus on what you love to learn. There is no separation between the head and the heart...