Chapel Talk
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Of Work, Play and Practice

Not long ago a parent and good friend described to me a phone call she had received from the Director of Admissions at a well-regarded private school. As part of the admissions process for Kindergarten (a German word that means "children's garden"), her four year old had visited the school, interviewed with some teachers, and joined in with a group of students for a few hours. The mother – and the child, I was told – had thought the visit had gone well; but when the Director of Admissions called, the news was not what they had expected. As much as they liked the little boy, the Director said, the school might not be a good food fit for him, because, as he said, the little boy seemed "more interested in play than in academics." Not knowing what "academics" looks like for a four-year old or how interest in such a thing might be assessed, I was shocked when this story was related to me. But not entirely surprised for it reveals some fairly common, if often unstated, assumptions about our attitudes, particularly adult attitudes, towards school. We tend to think of "academics" – what we do in school – as something different from what this person called "play." According to this view, "academics" is serious, its hard-work the very opposite of "play" - certainly no romp in the kinder garden.

As common as this view is, I think it is mistaken, and I want to take a few minutes this evening to reflect on the relationship between play and academics, learning and work, creativity and rigor.

Let me begin with the idea of "work," for this is the word we most often associate with school. Our attitudes toward school are, in fact, inseparable from the metaphor of learning as a kind of work. Our mission statement speaks of our hope that your St. Andrew's education will provide you with authentic opportunities "to do the work of scholars, artists and scientists." We assign you "homework," and we speak of your "work ethic." I regularly ask my students and advisees if they are working hard enough – just as

my parents often asked me. In my case, it was a devastating and effective question since the answer, for the entirety of my elementary and middle school years, was invariably no.

Moreover, there is an emerging consensus among those who write about education that today's students are not working hard enough. It has become common to compare the work ethic of American students with their harder working peers in other nations who go to school for more days, put in more hours and generally work harder. Thomas Friedman, the Pulitzer-prize winning columnist for *The New York Times*, in an essay I just today asked one of my classes to read, has argued that America is beset by an "ambition gap." "Compared with young, energetic Indians and Chinese," Friedman writes, "too many Americans have gotten lazy." "The National Survey of Student Engagement," an annual survey that investigates how hard American students are working in college, supports Friedman's view that American college students are, on the whole, lazy and entitled: almost half spend 10 or less hours a week studying outside of class; very few spend the 40 hours that, many argue, is necessary for success. That 40 hour threshold is not random; the implication is that college students should work just as hard and as long as those holding down full-time jobs, putting in 8 hours a day, five days a week.

If you are expecting me to make an argument against work and working hard, I am afraid you will be disappointed. I believe in work - for reasons I will explain in a moment. Work is, in any case, unavoidable. There are very few things that I know of worth acquiring – and certainly no skill or craft or art – that does not come without tremendous investments of time, energy and hard-work. Talk to your teachers, your parents, or your friends – anyone who is good at something that they love doing - and ask them how they learned to do it. I assure you that hard-work, perhaps years of intense focus and application, played a part in this. Almost everything we know about learning confirms this. Friedman, in the essay I just mentioned, suggests that it takes 15 years to train a good engineer. Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner, one of the most respected voices in education today, argues that what he calls "discipline" – the ability to make something useful or beautiful; the ability to think like a scholar, scientist or professional - takes a

minimum of 10 years to acquire. The sociologist Richard Sennet, in a wonderful new book called *The Craftsman*, cites research suggesting that it takes 10,000 hours to master a skilled field. By my calculations – and I checked them with Theo just to be sure - that's 40 hours a week for almost five years. So, whether it takes five, ten or fifteen years to learn something of value you should not be afraid of work – at least if you want to be good at it. You should embrace it.

But I will also confess that I have never been completely comfortable with thinking about what we do in school as "work." I call what I do work, but I certainly don't experience the teaching of history and literature as a form of labor. I love doing it. That I get paid for it is a happy accident. And I want my students, as well, to experience a similar joy in their studies. We all know that schools that see their students simply as "workers" can be miserable places. The psychologist Michael Thompson, who the seniors may remember from this fall, made exactly this point during one of his earlier visits to St. Andrew's. To research his book *The Pressured Child*, Thompson spent a year traveling around American classrooms. He saw some very good schools and some inspiring teaching, but admitted that most of what he saw was dreary, dull and tedious. He ended his days feeling exhausted, unsurprised that most students had developed elaborate coping mechanisms to survive. He described American high school as a kind of "boot-camp for the upper-middle" class, producing efficient but uninspired grinds. Denise Pope, an educational researcher at Stanford, said something similar in a book whose title says it all: *Doing School: How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed Out, Materialistic and Miseducated Students*. She argues that drudgery has replaced authentic learning and the sense of wonder and play that should be an intrinsic part of it. The well-known education writer Alfie Kohn recently argued that most forms of homework, especially in elementary and middle school, should be abolished entirely, because most of it is useless busy work.

So, it might be said that your efforts - or lack of efforts, depending on who you read - are the subject of a fierce national debate. For some, you just simply aren't working hard enough. Lacking resiliency and discipline, you are unprepared to compete in a new more

competitive global economy. These critics say, in effect, suck it up and work harder.

To others, you are being worked too hard, with the result that you are stressed, anxious, and narrowly strategic in your aspirations. You graduate from high school and college knowing little of the excitement that genuine learning offers.

So which is it? Are you working too hard or not enough? Should school be a place of work or of play?

My own view is that it must be both, and I reject – completely – this opposition between work and play. At its best, at its most inspiring, school is both a place where learning helps you develop discipline, focus and resiliency - qualities we associate with a strong work ethic - and a place of creativity, freedom and wonder, a place where work and play are brought into a harmonious balance.

The word, the concept that best captures what I have in mind is “practice.” It’s a word we almost automatically associate with sports. If we “work” at school and “play” at the “arts” we” practice” sports.   I have always thought that the best teams – and certainly the ones I most enjoy coaching – are not necessarily the teams with the best records; they are the teams that know how to practice, teams that have perfected the art of practice. That they were also outstanding – competitive, resilient, spirited - should not surprise us, for there is an important relationship between excellence and practice.

The value of practice - what Ted Sizer calls “disciplined, self-conscious trial and error” - cannot be underestimated. When you embrace an ethic of practice a number of amazing things happen: the first is that no matter how hard the task you may have set for yourself the feeling of it being difficult, of it being work at all, eventually disappears when you practice it, replaced by a profound feeling of satisfaction and pleasure.

I have experienced this over and over again in the course of my life, first in athletics with soccer, skateboarding, surfing - yes, I know its hard to believe I did those things - and

then later in school. In large part the story of my life is about how I came to feel the same way about reading, writing, learning, scholarship and teaching as I did about athletics. I sometimes feel that I learned to read as a result of having learned to skateboard and play soccer. That may seem like a truly bizarre claim, but it was there, in the skate parks (to be specific, "Barney's Concrete Curl") and on the soccer fields of my youth, that the powers of practice were first revealed to me.

Some of my most vivid memories are of kicking a soccer ball, not during games but in front of a wall, on a public tennis court, during the heat of summer, driving the ball repeatedly with my left foot, my off foot, again and again against that wall, harder, lower and with less and less spin. I did not find it easy at first; I found it awkward and unnatural and at times I despaired if I was improving at all, but after doing it – thousands and thousands of times – what seemed difficult became second nature. At such moments I was totally absorbed in what I was doing: the heat of the day, the tiredness of my muscles, the sense of time passing disappeared and I was lost in the doing. I was happy to learn recently that research psychologists have coined a term to describe this feeling of absorption that comes with practice; they call it " flow" – a form of heightened engagement of the sort experienced by athletes, artists and other skilled professionals performing at their best.

I had a similar experience as I learned to read. I am not simply talking about reading for comprehension; that's easy. I am talking about learning to read with understanding, pleasure and absorption; with attention and sensitivity. When I first started to read literature, I experienced it the way a monkey experiences Sanscrit: it made no sense at all. It gave me no pleasure. I found its difficulties - all that tortured syntax and needless metaphor – to be an intentionally obnoxious contrivance; little games, tricks even, that writers liked to play to confuse and puzzle and make me miserable. I resented being asked to read the stuff at all. But slowly, with practice, with more and more reading, and the encouragement and coaching of a few great teachers, a whole new universe of feeling, understanding and thinking opened up and the deeper, learned pleasures of great literature and philosophy and history became available to me. I learned to love what was

at first difficult, frustrating, puzzling, seemingly impossible. These are the deeper loves that come with practice. They are the same kind of pleasures experienced by the scholar, the artist, the musician, the athlete; the kind of learned pleasures that will last you a lifetime. Practice, therefore, is not a form of work; it is your passport to delight.

It is also one of the few ways that I know of to develop an authentic sense of confidence – not the kind of confidence that comes with false praise and that is easily deflated, but an inner sense of confidence that comes with having done something well. We talk a lot about resiliency. I heard it said recently that resiliency cannot be taught. Perhaps. But it can be learned, and one way to learn it is through practice, developing in your self and for yourself an ethic of practice. What happens when you begin to practice something? What happens the first time you try to kick a soccer ball with your left foot? Well, the answer is that you don't do it very well, certainly not as well as you want or expect; in a certain sense, you fail. Practice, you might say, is an education in failure – of learning how to do something by repeatedly not doing it well enough. But it is also an education in failure overcome. Think for a moment of the thousand of mistakes that go into learning the craft of dramatic performance, painting, photography or the mistakes that must be suffered if you are to learn to speak another language with fluency and ease. They are literally uncountable. By practicing something, we learn to embrace failure as an essential part of our educations; to see our own mistakes with patience and perspective; and to move forward with faith in the process of learning. We become acquainted with failure and habituated to overcoming it. Practice, quite simply, makes us stronger, more confident, more resilient - not simply in body but in mind and imagination.

If practice helps you develop a toughness that will enable you to meet future challenges with strength and purpose, it also teaches you how to learn, and this – the ability to learn how to learn – may be the most important skill you ever acquire. When you practice something you learn how to experiment, to make small adjustments, to reflect on what you are doing, to teach yourself. You sharpen your own powers of self-correction and you become a more thoughtful student of your own efforts. Consider the practice of writing. I am sure that you been asked to conceive of your own writing as a process in

which you continually revise what you want to say. You write something and you revise it over and over again. But what is revision? Revision is a form of practice - the practice of critical judgment, the practice of learning to critique and assess your own efforts - to recognize a bad sentence for what it is, to distinguish a good sentence from a better one; it is rewriting. Learning the art of practicing something, therefore, is not simply a way to learn something; it's the very thing that makes learning possible, a kind of competition you enter with yourself in which you are constantly assessing, measuring, taking stock of your own imperfect efforts against an imagined ideal.

There is one final thing about practice I feel compelled to mention, and it has to do with its relationship to creativity and imagination, something I learned from my own mother, a women who embodies the virtues of practice as perfectly as anyone I know. My mother is, among other things, a gifted artist who enjoyed a successful career in New York as a designer, but she was not, as the phase goes, born an artist. She discovered a talent and passion within herself and tirelessly practiced it. Her genius – though she wouldn't call it this – her creativity, was born of practice. My point is this: creativity is not the possession of the gifted few; it is a potential, hidden within each of us, to be discovered. Practice can kindle and spark creative powers you didn't even know you possessed. As you practice something you don't simply become more creative, you discover unknown, untapped potentials within yourself.

I could multiply my examples to support what I believe to be the educational value of practice. I could cite more research. I have a whole talk about skateboarding I'm dying to give. And there are a number of things I have not had the time to talk about. I have not spoken with the care I would like of the role that a teacher, parent, coach, mentor or even a friend can play in helping you develop an ethic of practice. I have not spoken of how hostile modern life is - with its distractions, its emphasis on immediate gratification, and simulated experience - to those who seek to cultivate this ethic of practice; nor have I spoken of the dangers and temptations of spectatorship. And I have not told you what to practice, though I should say that there are some things more worthy of your time and practice than others. Learning the difference between what is worthy of your time and

talent and what is not, is ultimately something you will have to do. Indeed, finding work that is also play, that affords you satisfaction, joy, and meaning; work that delights, excites, and nourishes; work that serves a purpose larger than yourself but which is also profoundly and personally satisfying - that may be one of the greatest challenges you will face as you move into adulthood.

But I have gone on much too long. Study hall is about to begin. So let me end, lest you have any doubt at all on where I stand on the issue, with … a homework assignment. Since I don't want you to take my word for anything I have said this evening, I would ask that, in the interests of science and in the spirit of a liberal arts education, you go out and test what I have said. Conduct the following experiment. Find out what you love doing. Make sure it is worth doing. Then commit yourself to practicing it. Feel free to cheat. Seek out other people who are good at it and who love doing it and talk with them, work with them, play with them, learn from them. When you are done come and find me – or better, write me a letter; please no emails - and tell me what you have discovered. Start tonight. I'll give you ten years.