

Chapel Talk
Eric Finch
September 24, 2008

Given the caliber of speakers I have watched in this pulpit over the last year, I was understandably hesitant and humbled when Rev. Walton offered me the opportunity to address you this evening. In an attempt to make myself more comfortable, I will be relying on the symbols of my discipline, along with a bit of technology, to present the “Top Five Things I Wish I Knew in High School.” I’d like to begin by asking you to spend a few minutes quietly reflecting on the role these five universal truths have played in your own life.

5. $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$

4. $\tan \theta = \frac{\sin \theta}{\cos \theta}$

3. $1 + 1 = 2$

2. $e^{i\pi} + 1 = 0$

1. $f'(x) = \lim_{h \rightarrow 0} \frac{f(x+h) - f(x)}{h}$

Just kidding. Even though that last one is pretty good, I’ve come to realize that some things are even more important.

Number 5: “Find and follow people you respect.”

Though I greatly appreciate the beautiful front lawn, inspiring architecture, Noxontown Pond, and all 2,000 acres of St. Andrew’s magnificent campus, those attributes pale in comparison to the people of St. Andrew’s. Please take a few seconds and look at the people around you. Finding someone to respect in this community is the easy part. For example, Mrs. Klecan’s devotion to her students amazes me. When she isn’t busy writing detailed feedback on a student’s homework, she’s interrupting my reading of the

Pittsburgh sports pages to discuss new strategies to help her students. Though that can, at times, annoy me, it mostly inspires me.

I also try to follow the example of Liz Wolinski. Out of carelessness, I did something last year that had the potential to embarrass a few individuals. Liz recognized my error and brought it to my attention. Though she did it very politely, she clearly let me know that she didn't agree with me...and she was absolutely right. I admire Liz's courage and poise in pointing out a faculty member's error. I believe that it's a blessing to live in a community where compassionate people are willing to point out our mistakes so that we can grow.

And just a few weeks ago while Mrs. Finch and I were at an evening meeting, Catherine Geewax and many others exhibited "grace under pressure" when they got our children out of the house, comforted them, and tucked them back into bed following an unexpected fire alarm on corridor. Like I said, finding folks to respect is easy in this place. It's *following* their lead that's the hard part. *That* is the crucial task we all face. I hope you've appreciated my examples, but please work hard to find and follow your own.

Number 4: "Ask questions."

Emma Van Wagenberg, Ford Van Fossan, and Katie Craddock are three more people I respect, and whose names come to mind when I consider the importance of asking questions. They understand that learning is much more important than ego. As a result, they are not afraid to admit when they need help.

All through my academic career I often worked harder to *seem* smart than to actually *be* smart. It worked in the sense that my teachers gave me A's and the College Board named me a National Merit Scholar. But the sad truth is that in eight years of high school and college I *never* asked a sincere question. The only questions I asked were designed to show how smart I was by asking such good questions. I either didn't actually care about the answer or already knew it. My fear of admitting I didn't know something trumped my need to know it.

I eventually paid a price for my pride. My innate abilities finally hit a brick wall in Chapel Hill, NC. The pace and rigor of my graduate school classes quickly proved to be more than I expected, and yet while everyone else formed study groups (thereby admitting their need for help), I went to the library by myself. During my first week of exams in October, I found myself so completely lost that I literally ran home to my mother. I was 26 years old, and I ran away from school. I missed all of my exams because I was afraid of failing them.

Thankfully, this episode was a humbling wake-up call rather than the end of my graduate school career. I returned to campus, begged for a second chance, swallowed my pride, joined a study group, and started asking some real questions. The good news is that I became the only person in my class to never fail a qualifying exam. But despite that, many of my classmates are now doctors of economics while I am not. Though there may be good reasons for my lack of a PhD, I am certainly not proud of the contribution made by my own pride and fear.

So Emma, Ford, and Katie...thank *you* for being role models for *me*.

Number 3: "Live your own life."

Spend your life the way *you* want to, and not necessarily the way *we* want you to. I may want you to major in econ and get a PhD.....because I never did. Your best friend may want you to follow them to the same college.....because they're afraid to make new friends. Your parents may want you to be pre-medso you won't be another 27-year old English major still living at home. Your country may want you to work 70 hours a week and still spend more money than you make..... just to keep our economy rolling along. It's easy to wake up one day and realize you never chose the life you're leading.

Because I did well on my SAT's I was expected to go to college.....because I did well at William & Mary I was expected to keep studying.....because I was accepted to a top tier law school I was expected to become an attorney.....but that's when I decided to stop living someone else's life and find my own. Instead of law school I took a 34-hour bus ride (complete with three gentlemen from LA chanting (and I quote) "kill the bus man")

for a few hours before the Kansas State Troopers escorted them off the Greyhound). My trip ended in Vail, Colorado, where I hoped to find a job for the season, despite the fact that I'd never skied before in my life. Thanks to my outstanding academic record I was offered a job in the Children's Ski School where my stature as a National Merit Scholar enabled me to earn \$6 an hour, serve macaroni and cheese to 3-year olds, stand in the snow putting mittens on 4 year-olds, escort puking 5 year-old victims of altitude sickness down the gondola, and watch the Little Mermaid 200 times. I also got to meet the most amazing and adventurous people, read 300 pages a day, shake Bill Clinton's hand on the day he was elected president, and, more importantly, discover what I wanted to do with my life. Thanks to that year in Colorado and my time in the ski school, I became a teacher. I can't tell you how happy I am to be giving a chapel talk today, and not a closing argument. It is *your* responsibility to work hard to find your *own* passion and pursue it with every ounce of your being.

Number 2: "You can have anything you want, but you can't have everything you want."

I originally discovered this quote while I was spending eight hours a day in the Vail library during a brief spell of homelessness. It has stuck with me ever since. Any economics student will recognize it as a layman's definition of opportunity cost.

I'd like to illustrate it with an example. Would Derin Akintilo and Mark Wieland please step into the aisle for a moment? I truly believe that both of these young men could one day play college football. The only difference is the level of sacrifice they would each have to make. For Derin, he may just need to stay healthy and show up at try-outs. For Mark, he may need to drop most of his classes, spend twenty hours working out with Al every week, hire Mr. Hoopes as a personal coach, make a habit of eating seven omelets each day at breakfast, attend a dozen football camps this summer, etc. But if playing football was his heart's desire, I believe Mark could make it happen. He would just have to sacrifice more.

But despite what the advertising world would have you believe, you *can't* have everything. Though our wants in life are too often infinite, the time and energy we are given to pursue them are not. You must choose carefully and accept the required sacrifices. An attorney's salary and prestige would be great, for example, but to be an

attorney would ignore my heart's desire on so many fronts as to make that career choice untenable. As an attorney, I could not indulge my passion for mathematics and economic theory. As an attorney, I could not enjoy summers off with my sons and my wife. As an attorney, I could not go for a run in the cornfields at 3:30 in the afternoon. As an attorney, I could not spend my days being inspired by energetic, curious, intelligent, and passionate teenagers. Does teaching give me *everything* I want? No. But it gives me *my* heart's desire, and I happily embrace the choices I have made.

I have a few visual aids for number 1. Here's a picture from my prom.



Here's a close-up of my date.

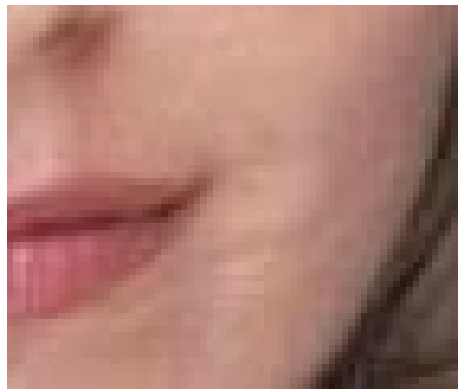


A few years ago you may have seen her in this issue of People.



Number 1: “Date one of People Magazine’s 50 Most Beautiful People.”

I’m kidding again. That’s not really number 1. Number 1 has to do with this.



If you look closely, you can see the scar on Tina’s left cheek. In preparing for this talk, I discovered that there are actual web sites, as in more than one, that are dedicated to the quote “mystery of Tina Fey’s scar.” Though I could reveal the secret behind it, today I feel it’s more important to address its effect on me as an 18-year-old. Given the proximity of our last names, Tina and I sat next to each other in homeroom for seven years. We had nearly every class together, even 7th grade metal shop. We had multiple common interests. She really did make me laugh. To put it simply, she was great. *But.....*she did have that disfiguring scar. To be honest, when Tina invited me to our senior prom, I wasn’t terribly excited. I had been working up the courage to ask Brenn Connor, *she* was 5’11” and scar free. My adolescent preoccupation with physical beauty blinded me from recognizing the fact that Tina’s wit, sincerity, honesty, intelligence, and kindness are what made her truly beautiful. To be honest, I haven’t even spoken with

Tina since she joined Saturday Night Live, partly because I know I wasn't fair to her in high school and would be a bit ashamed to see her now.

Number 1: "Look beyond the surface."

Though my little list has great meaning for me, it may not resonate with you in the least. Nothing on my list hasn't been acknowledged by millions of people before me. I'm sure these very maxims, and others that I still don't understand, were presented to me often as a teenager. But they were meaningless platitudes until my ignorance of them caused me some measure of suffering. For though we are all here to help you, at the end of the day, you must discern your own "top five" by embracing the beautiful messiness of life. I'll be anxious to hear about *your* list when you show up at my lunch table this year.