

Chapel Talk
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From the time I was very little, I've always been up for a challenge. My dad would say things like, "Hey Sharon, I'll give you a dollar if you can carry that full water cooler back to the campsite." Undeterred by the massive size and weight of the jug in contrast to my skinny sinewy eight-year-old self, I'd find a way to lift and drag it along. Despite the immense value of a dollar to someone that young, it wasn't money that motivated me but the opportunity to accomplish the unexpected and impress my dad and other skeptics. Over time, the challenges became progressively more complicated or more time-consuming, sometimes even more rigorous and painful, but I accepted them with determination and giddy anticipation.

Don't get me wrong "up for the challenge" isn't always a good thing—especially when it sounds like, "Hey Sharon, you think your way is faster than mine" when a car is involved. I can't pretend not to have participated in such dangerous dares and learned that stupid is simply stupid in some cases, and that some challenges are absolutely not worth the risks involved. Whatever it was that made me competitive one day made me foolish the next, but thankfully, I learned that lesson at no great cost and over time, became a bit more thoughtful. Years later, when my friend Ginger, a woman with whom I worked at Taft, said to me one afternoon, "Hey Sharon, want to do a triathlon?" I said sure first and then started to ask questions. At the time, I didn't own a bike—had never even thought about buying a bike, and probably hadn't swum a lap in at least 10 years, but without thinking much about it, I agreed and dealt with the logistics and the hours of training later.

On the night before that initial triathlon, in a state of utter panic, I first met my friend Dana who had come to campus to help us put race tags on our bikes and helmets, make sure we had all our necessary nutritional supplements, and advise us about how to transition from swimming to biking and then biking to running in as little time as

possible. All were absolutely necessary in order to compete, but didn't disguise our amateur status amongst the hard bodies and over-trained athletes who appeared in that transition area that next day.

Dana became a good friend in the years after, and supported me through many subsequent road races and triathlons. She herself had dedicated years to competing in Ironman, but she encouraged and taught those among her with considerable less experience and talent without any condescension. She was ever-present to answer my questions and even invited me to bike and run with her despite the fact that she'd have to loop back time and again because of my inability to keep her pace. It was after one of these training rides that I asked her how to improve my speed, and without giving much thought, almost in passing, she said, "you just need to be more comfortable being out of breath." It was a life changing and life affirming observation.

"YOU JUST NEED TO BE MORE COMFORTABLE BEING OUT OF BREATH."

The thought was counterintuitive. Being out of breath is uncomfortable—it's certainly more uncomfortable than the muscular and joint pain of excessive use. Out of breath-- it is our body's immediate reaction to distress, to being over-worked, pushed to the brink of panic. People spend years practicing the act of breathing, and use breathing itself as a way to stay calm, assuage tension, and reduce stress. Dana was obviously telling me something different.

Her use of the word "just" struck me, as if comfort with discomfort is not only something anyone can experience, but also something that anyone who wants to improve or be great at anything—must. Initially, I was a little embarrassed by her observation; she thought I was perpetually playing it safe. It had been on her mind; she responded to my question without thinking. Of course, I had played sports always and had pushed through pain and discomfort in order to get into shape and to improve. Academically, I had survived countless ends of semesters writing multiple papers and taking exams. Personally, I had travelled to places that made me question my world and myself. Hadn't these things all been uncomfortable?

With Dana's advice in mind and feeling the burden of my own shame, I began to run harder, push myself purposefully, and in doing so, I took minutes off my miles. But, not only did I improve in the way I had hoped, I began to live my life differently. Her advice became a mantra and compelled me to not only train harder but also critically examine other aspects of my life in search of the ways I had become used to playing it safe and slowing down for the sake of mere comfort. I rejected that tendency and no longer wanted to be complacent.

Moving abroad and living in China was the most difficult thing I've done. After six years at Taft, I felt comfortable; I had friends, taught hard working students, and lived relatively close to home. But Dana was right. I had become a little bit bored and relied heavily on summer months and outside endeavors to keep me stimulated and satisfied. After realizing that I had ceased being challenged both personally and professionally, I applied to teach in Spain with School Year Abroad. After just a couple phone conversations, Nelson Chase, my contact at SYA asked, have you considered China? You can guess what I said.

By the time I arrived in Beijing, I was eager and excited for hard learning, but actually had no idea what I had gotten myself into. Beyond being able to count to ten, say I was tired, happy, hungry; describe myself as tall, short, fat, or smart, I couldn't ask for help or communicate with anyone. Believe me, there is no shared sign language between China and the US. On my first morning in Beijing, it took me two hours to step off of the curb in front of my apartment, petrified that I would never find my way back. When I finally stopped walking in circles around the block I couldn't figure out how to hail a cab, and after I had, My map was only in English. Poor planning, for sure.

Before beginning to study Chinese, I spent my days looking for everything from a grocery store and a subway stop, —neither of which, believe it or not, are obvious to the untrained, American eye—to Tian'anmen Square, the Summer Palace, and all other tourist attractions. I sought out running routes and figured out how to get back and forth

to my school weeks before anyone from SYA called to check in on me. All of these things I did in heavy silence, unable to speak and certainly unable to understand anything Chinese. Despite my perpetual stumbling, I was instantly exhilarated by the incessant activity of the city, by the sidewalks where people ate together and played games, and the streets where people on bikes, in rickshaws, and on foot somehow escaped the speeding and chaotic tangled mess of cars. While my days were filled with perpetual discovery, in **my** Beijing, far away from the ex-pat communities in Chao Yang, I was constantly watched and the object of interest or irritation. As I was always acutely aware of other white people—I could spot them up to three cars down in a crowded subway—I knew people were always acutely aware of me.

I'll resist the temptation to tell you story after story about my days in China—even there, the desire for comfort and the danger to become complacent threatened my experience, but both the responsibility to home and the immense boldness and bravery of my students made me more determined in my breathlessness. In looking through my journals, it's more clear than even my memory will admit, that I had to recommit regularly to diligent study, travel, exploration, and teaching—I broke the time into measurable, manageable parts. “One month”, “until winter break”, “through Chinese New Year”, I would tell myself, but when time passed, I would somehow convince myself that, I could keep it up, I could keep doing all of these things simultaneously. Of course, I was eager to learn for my own sake, but I was also perpetually inspired by my students' courage and youthful endurance. All had left friends and family and made a commitment to learning enough to want to live in home stays and amidst the chaos of Beijing. Their education and my own that year extended well beyond the classroom into the streets and markets of our neighborhoods, onto overnight trains and sleeper busses, into villages and city hutongs.

In all honesty, I went to China with uncertain opinions about international education and studying abroad, and I returned to the US believing it to be one of the most valuable and underutilized experiences for high school students. Sadly, it took my own experience living in Beijing and working with Americans studying abroad to truly see the strength and courage of international students in the US. While I cannot speak for individual

students at St. Andrew's, I do know that all have chosen to risk leaving the comfort of home and embrace an unfathomable level of discomfort for the sake of improving their own lives, the lives of their families, and for some, the lives of others in their communities. If their experiences are anything like my own they are completely divided in their existence--, while they live here, they simultaneously miss out on a life at home, peopled with parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, nephews, nieces, and friends. I listen to their English with envy and am inspired by them in my own study of Chinese.

While China offered me the opportunity to re-affirm my commitment to life's challenges, as living in the US might do for some of our international students, I know for sure that life at St. Andrew's and at home presents us all with the opportunity to practice discomfort, build endurance, and take meaningful risks: taking a dance class, playing a new sport, participating in the SDLC conference, attending a GSA meeting, going to Andrew's place, listening to each other with an open heart. All of these experiences illustrate our rejection of what's simply safe and easy and give us the opportunity to build courage and practice being out of breath. Having spent that year away, I'm more aware of the importance for all of us to recommit regularly to the intensity of our own investment in our jobs, our classes, our relationships, our lives. We need to be watchful and willingly inspired by others who sustain passion and effort even as they experience hardship and failure.

I think about Dana's advice often, "You just need to be more comfortable being out of breath". I believe we all have the capacity to endure discomfort for longer than we think, and have the responsibility to do so now whenever a meaningful or important challenge comes our way. Perhaps the things that make us most uncomfortable always will—pushing ourselves, being different, voicing dissent from a group, aligning ourselves with others who are being mistreated—perhaps our goal should never be to become comfortable with things that rightly unsettle us, but to be able to sustain discomfort long enough to do something, to change circumstances, or simply to support others who need it.

Living in China was the most out of breath I had ever been. Even after I had become used to the stares and more confident in my ability to communicate with people, able to pause and devise a response to a comment or question instead of staring blankly in a moment of panic and paralysis, every day was both exhilarating and exhausting; I was simultaneously satisfied with a life in Beijing and burdened by my separation from home. In the midst of making decisions about whether to stay in Asia or return to the US, my dad said to me, “Hey Sharon, want to hike with me in Patagonia next winter?” I said sure immediately and then thought about what that meant. Although most people I know would want to go to Patagonia, it wasn’t that that motivated me, but the opportunity to spend time in that place with my dad. I wondered if he knew his question would bring me home from China, and started to plan for my return.

After four full days of hiking, my dad’s body was tiring while his pride was relentless and demanding. I worried in my wakefulness on the night before the fifth morning after having heard the details of the four-six hour steep ascent ahead. At the outset, I stood closely in front of him and took command of the trail—knowing I could find a way to lift and drag us to the top. Feeling his apprehension about the strength of his own body, but also fearing his annoyance at my audacity, I looked ahead and began to move slowly forward. He followed closely. Without any ground to warm us up, the mountain rose in front of us, and as I listened to his quick breath, I quieted my own and knew for the first time the real value of those miles under my feet. Although we climbed slower, his breathing became deep and loud, and I held mine hard, not sure how to help and afraid. As I saw him drink his water quickly, I determined to drink none of mine knowing he would need it, and I feared actually that all of this was a terrible risk, more reckless and irresponsible than anything I had done. We sat when he needed and waited for time to pass, for his body to calm, and refuel, and as we neared camp, I think I felt more thankful than I ever have in life. We made it to the top together, I had guided him there, but I felt more confident that in knowing ME, he had guided me home.