

At exactly this time in May many years ago when I was a junior in high school, I decided that after going out with Tad Roach for about six months, it was time for me to break up with him. When I told Tad that I thought we should “just be friends” (you all know that familiar line), he responded: “I really do want to stay friends. I hope that we can see each other over the summer. And if you still want help running your tennis clinic, I would be happy to help you.” I had heard similar responses about remaining friends before only to be disappointed within days with name calling and cold stares, but this time, I believed Tad; he spoke sincerely, kindly, maturely. I remember being immediately struck by his manner and his words—and I knew I had made a mistake. This moment was different than the other “break up” moments I had experienced. Tad was not only mature and sincere; he made me suddenly see myself very differently.

At that particular time in my life, I was very self-absorbed. I had become friends with a group of musicians who were very “cool”; I had a lead role in the spring play; I was number one on the tennis team. I felt that my life was in control, that I knew myself very well. But Tad made me see things differently. What I saw and admired in him was what I was not. I began to think a lot more about myself—not in a self-absorbed and narcissistic way as I had been doing—but in a more encompassing way. I started to evaluate myself, and I did not really like what I saw. I wanted to have Tad’s sense of self which allowed him to act maturely. Because he felt comfortable with himself, he did not have to engage in all the games which usually followed a break up. Because he knew himself, he could move beyond his ego. And by looking more closely at him, I saw and understood myself more clearly.

High school and especially college are the years when we are trying to understand ourselves. We change physically, emotionally, intellectually, and often these changes force a kind of self-absorption. To combat self-absorption, we need to move outside of ourselves.

Consider what Shakespeare explores in *Hamlet*. Hamlet spends most of the play completely focused on himself—and it appears that he has good reason to do so. After all, his father has died, his mother has married his uncle, his girlfriend and his good friends have betrayed him. Because of these tragedies in his life, he becomes disillusioned. He wants explanations; he wants to understand this world which now disgusts him. But it is not until he looks outside of himself that he is able to understand himself. The turning point in the play occurs in Act III, iv when Old Hamlet forces Hamlet to look at his mother, at her grief:

*But look, amazement on thy mother sits!
O, step between her and her fighting soul!
Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works.
Speak to her, Hamlet.*

When Hamlet looks to his mother, he begins to understand himself and his own grief more clearly. It is still a difficult process for him, but Shakespeare suggests that self-absorption only leads to a kind of paralysis which prevents understanding, which prevents

fulfillment of our self-potential. We can only know ourselves if we look outside of ourselves. If we constantly examine our own feelings, taking our own pulse all the time (Am I happy? What do I need? How am I doing? Why am I unhappy?) without a larger perspective, without a larger context, we will stunt ourselves; we will miss understanding ourselves. We run the danger of an egotism which leads to blindness and distortion rather than clarity.

At the same time, to move outside ourselves can be just as debilitating. We must be careful not to surrender too much of ourselves. Both extremes of egotism and sacrifice can be dangerous; both extremes can result in a loss of self, a loss of identity.

In George Eliot's Middlemarch, the heroine, Dorothea Brooke, indulges in the extreme of self-sacrifice. Her husband, in a desperate effort to control and manipulate and maim her, has made her promise to do what he desires even after his death. In the following quotation, Dorothea contemplates this temptation:

When Dorothea was out on the gravel walks, she lingered among the near clumps of trees, hesitating, as she had done once before, though from a different cause. Then she had feared lest her effort at fellowship should be unwelcome; now she dreaded going to the spot where she foresaw that she must bind herself to a fellowship from which she shrank. Neither law nor the world's opinion compelled her to this—only her husband's nature and her own compassion, only the ideal and not the real yoke of marriage. She saw clearly enough the whole situation, yet she was fettered: she could not smite the stricken soul that entreated hers. (p. 353)

Dorothea knows intuitively that her decision to give in to her husband's wishes is suicidal, but her desire to surrender herself, to be charitable, to be Christian is too tempting. In the end, Eliot does save her character from this complete surrender to others, from this spiritual suicide and allows her to maintain her identity by having her husband die. As with Hamlet, the process of finding herself is not an easy one.

Seniors, college is a mecca for self-absorption. You will have new freedoms which you all, I am sure, cannot wait to experience. It is a wonderful place to indulge yourself completely in your own desires—and you should do that but do so in a productive way. That is, indulge your interests: take advantage of the intellectual opportunities, enrich your minds; take advantage of the cultural opportunities; take advantage of the athletic and social opportunities. Find your interests, your strengths, “find yourself”—but do not wrap yourself up too completely in yourself.

At the same time, do not absorb yourself too completely in others. There will be many times when you will be tempted to surrender yourself, and it may not be an obvious moment of sacrifice. It may be a relationship which makes you sacrifice your identity. Too often, I have seen high school, college, and even adult relationships result in this kind of immersion of one individual into another individual—and it may be in the guise of loving. But this is not a mutual relationship; it is not two individuals challenging each other to become better people. Instead, it is one individual surrendering to another. The most dangerous relationships occur when one person is selfless and the other is selfish. Often,

although not always, women take on the role of sacrifice; we are all taught early on that selflessness is admirable, and sometimes that selflessness can be translated into a loss of self in a relationship. You can all probably think of an example of a friend who seemed to diminish when he/she started going out with someone. It is often a gradual, imperceptible process, but somewhere in the relationship one individual becomes dominant and the other simply shadows that person. In a healthy relationship, two individuals make sure that they push each other to grow.

It did not take me long before I got together again with Tad. He helped me move beyond that time of self-absorption; he helped me understand myself better by the kind of person he was. I often find myself falling back into moments of self-absorption; it is not necessarily something you do once and then never again. It is important to be aware how easily we can live a narcissistic existence. Teaching and parenting help me fight this temptation. By definition, teaching and parenting require me to move outside of myself. At the same time, there remains a fine line between moving beyond yourself and surrendering yourself completely to others. It is easy to convince myself that I am a great person because I give everything to my children. So this danger of self-sacrifice is trickier because while it is easy to recognize that egotism is wrong, it is just as easy to convince yourself that sacrifice is right.

Even though Tad helped me see myself more clearly and made me want to imitate him in certain ways, I needed to be careful not to become absorbed in his identity. I have had to fight that temptation for many years because it would be so easy to yield to it. I have had to make sure that I maintain my sense of self—it makes me a better person, a better wife, a better teacher, and a better mother if I can do so because then I have a chance of growth, of change, of nearing my potential as an individual.

This time of year often takes me back to that moment in my junior year when I thought I knew myself so well, and as I began thinking about this chapel talk, I imagined myself where most of you are now—at the end of high school or at the end of another year in high school. Each year of high school is defining in its own way. It is a time to evaluate yourself and your year (or your career as a high school student), to look back and see what you have learned, how you have grown, how you are different from the beginning of that year. It is a time of celebration and reflection. I am always struck when I look at the yearbook and see pictures of the senior class now and the senior class as freshmen because when I look at the seniors now, I cannot really see any immediate changes or differences from their freshmen year—they still look the same. But when I see the freshmen picture, I suddenly can recall how young they once were, how much they have changed—not just physically but intellectually and emotionally as well. As you graduate, you can begin to reflect on these changes; you can look at yourself in the context of this school, of your teachers and your friends; you can look at how you have defined yourself in this context; you can try to understand who you are. Underformers should engage in the same process at the end of the year. And as you all reflect, think about the people, the activities, the moments that have defined you. Usually these moments have made you grow in some way, have made you understand yourself better, and usually these moments are not about yourself only or about others only but rather about some kind of balance between self and other.

At the end of Middlemarch the heroine, Dorothea Brooke, discovers such a balance

between her desire to live as an independent woman and her desire to serve humanity. Notice George Eliot's emphasis on the wideness of the world and our own responsibility to live effectively in it:

It had taken long for her to come to that question, and there was light piercing into the room. She opened her curtains, and looked out towards the bit of road that lay in view, with fields beyond, outside the entrance-gates. On the road there was a man with a bundle on his back and a woman carrying her baby; in the field she could see figures moving—perhaps the shepherd with his dog. Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light; and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labour and endurance. She was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining.