

Chapel Talk
September 23, 2009
Candy Schuller

“Living Life to the Fullest”

How many of us have been told to make the most of every second? To live life to the fullest? Perhaps as your parents dropped you off three weeks ago, they said, “Take full advantage of every opportunity.” These are daunting expectations, aren’t they? As I began my sabbatical last June the same messages swirled in my head: “This is a once in a lifetime opportunity.” “Make the most of every day, as it all goes by too soon.” Simultaneously the words from Tim McGraw’s 2004 hit resonated in our house.

“And he said, Someday I hope you get the chance to live like you were dyin’ ”
“I went skydiving
I went rocky mountain climbing
I went two point seven seconds on a bull named Fu Men Chu
And I loved deeper
And I spoke sweeter
And I gave forgiveness I’d been denying”

As many of you know, a month before the start of my sabbatical my husband, Mr. Schuller, received the overwhelming diagnosis from his doctor that he had cancer and that life was now at a premium. Time became even more precious.

I asked him, “What do you want to do with our time during this sabbatical?” “What is on your wish list?” I thought I knew what I would do under the circumstances. Many of us would pack our bags, head to a tropical island and live on the beach. We would put enjoyment first and work second.

After many nights sitting and talking about what makes him happiest, Mike was clear that living life as if he isn’t dying was far more important than the reverse.

He concluded that he was totally content and happy just as things were. Yes, he wanted more time with our kids and focusing on family time, but he loved being here, feeling useful and knowing he was contributing to something bigger than himself.

We did compile a joint wish list of how we would like to make the most of our travels and incorporated them in the upcoming year. The first stop was number one on Mike's life list: we went to the Grand Canyon. Mike has seen many beautiful places; he grew up overseas and as a result he has travelled pretty extensively. Yet, from the look on his face when he watched the sun rise over the Canyon it was obvious that this was a life altering moment. We also went to four other national parks including Zion, Bryce and Arches National Park and truly appreciated how stunning the landscape of America is. The second major stop on our travels was in Holland. I chose this destination with Casey's input. I wanted to feel like I was living in another culture and, since this leg of our travels would include Christmas, Casey asked that we choose a location that had unique holiday traditions. We visited the Christmas Markets in Brugge, were inspired by the lights along the canals of Leiden, and put wooden shoes under a little artificial tree made of twisted wire on Christmas morning. We happily agreed that this was a year about experiences, time together, not about material things.

The third leg of our travels was for Casey. She wanted to attend the Winter Term program in Switzerland. I think a few others of you have done this as well. Winter Term is a twelve-week educational program in Lenk, Switzerland in the Oberland section of the Alps comprised of about 35 students from around the globe. Casey lived in a small farmhouse and attended classes each day in a chalet adjacent to the slopes. She went to school until 2:00 p.m. each day and then had ski instruction for the afternoon with some of the most dedicated instructors in Switzerland. Once a week the group took a field trip to experience Swiss culture. The best part for me was that they too have "Parent's Weekend". Thus in February I joined her in Lenk for 4 days and got a small glimpse of the utopia she had found. This was the first time that I skied the Alps, and I was truly grateful to have Casey giving me instruction all the way down.

Just in case you are wondering what happened to the idea of running away to white beaches and turquoise water, Mr. Schuller and I celebrated our 36th wedding anniversary in June in Bermuda. All in all, a perfect sabbatical.

Did we take advantage of every opportunity and make the most of every second of the sabbatical year? I don't think that is truly possible, just the same way I hate the expectations of New Year's Eve. The best of life comes at us in bits and pieces; these small moments can't all be scheduled. The side aching laughter we had over dinner in Leiden, fireworks over the Eiffel Tower on New Year's, experiencing first hand the genius of a Van Gogh painting, having an "ah-ha" moment during my home schooling experience with Casey, a sail on a crystal clear, blue sky day in Maine, sharing our daughter Amy's surprise over her engagement in Maine this summer-- these are the moments that we remember and that make us feel like we are living life to the fullest.

Why do we put pressure on ourselves that any one moment or year is the most important? I can't tell you how many times I have heard a junior at St. Andrew's say "this is the most important year. I feel such pressure." My response as a College Counselor is that the junior year need not be looked at any differently than any other year at St. Andrew's. Your parents' hope that you take advantage of the many opportunities before you for all 3 or 4 years here, not just one. If you are engaged in your classes, enjoying your activities, connecting with faculty and friends, and making as many days as you can special, then you are having a great freshman, sophomore, junior or senior year. Not every day will be perfect, not every assignment will be what you hoped, but when strung together you will be painting some amazing memories.

Perhaps many of you have seen the 2008 film "The Bucket List" with Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman. In this film two terminally ill cancer patients escape from a hospital ward to fulfill their "bucket lists". Their exploits include traveling to the Serengeti, living the high-life in Monaco, sky diving—they saw the world together. Despite having the opportunity to see many of the wonders of the world, they ultimately determine that the connections they made between themselves and other people are what really mattered.

I think each of us has to seek what inspires us, what drives us, what motivates us to get up each morning. For those of you who can't quite understand why Mr. Schuller didn't head for Hawaii or the Caribbean or some other fabulous place, I refer you to a line from the film: Carter Chambers, the family man says to Edward Cole, the billionaire, "You measure life by the people who measure themselves by you." Think about that: "You measure life by the people who measure themselves by you."

In other words, ideally people will measure their life success by how they positively impact others; hoping that they are leaving lasting impressions on those they encounter. St. Andrew's faculty tries to practice this every day. We don't want students to measure themselves against some artificial standard; rather, we hope that you as students learn something that will make your lives more grounded. Richard Light, a Harvard professor, in his important book *Making the Most of College* asks college students about what makes an effective class and what makes good mentoring and advising. Light writes: "A great college education depends on human relationships. I share with them the single most important advice I can possibly give to new advisees: your job, he writes, is to go get to know one faculty member reasonably well this semester and also to have that faculty member get to know you reasonably well." That is the beautiful thing about St. Andrew's. You can probably say you already know many faculty reasonably well. Speaking for my fellow faculty members, we certainly feel that a good day is a day when we have connected with you and made a difference in some way. These impressions happen in small ways and build over time. They may begin through a conversation in the car as we drive one of you to town, through advice your coach gives you after a practice, or through a comment on a paper.

In this same vein, as a parent I know that I place the highest value on how my life impacts my children's'. Those of you who are seniors now serve as role models to the underformers. We have so often heard from alumni that as third formers they looked up to their seniors in such a significant way that when their turn came to be a senior leader that they could not imagine being as significant in the new students' lives. In some sense you measure your effectiveness by those who measure themselves by you.

This sabbatical was a blessing through which many of life's lessons were clarified as our family traveled and reflected on how precious time is. We are trying to live in the here and now, and appreciate what we are doing each day rather than focusing on some prize at the end. We are remembering to free ourselves from the pressure of hoping for perfection. I tell Casey each morning to strive for one good, deep laugh each day, to contribute to at least one good discussion in class, and to hopefully pause in the early evening to notice the light over the Pond. If you figure that that means you as students have had even just 3 good moments in a day then in the course of a school year you've had over 500 special experiences. That is pretty wonderful. You don't have to go skydiving over the Serengeti to be living life to the fullest: it is the extraordinary moments in our ordinary days that make life rich, meaningful and worth living.