

## **The Art of Living**

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### **For “The Last Lecture” at Muhlenberg College, May 15, 2008**

Good Evening everyone, the Class of 2008!

Dr. Richmond is one hard act to follow. I was over there taking notes. . .for life! Kate, I am very pleased to have you as my colleague and honored to share the floor with you tonight.

I will tell you all, I was stunned last month when Julie Howell informed me that I had been selected to speak with you tonight. I was stunned, and delighted, because there are so many exceptional teachers at Muhlenberg—so many colleagues whose teaching I profoundly admire—teachers who, I know, have opened your minds and changed your lives. With all these master teachers on campus, I am deeply touched that you have selected me. And I was selected by *you*, my students, who have already sat through entire semesters with me. And you still want *more*? How lucky am I? You have given me the deepest honor that a teacher can receive. Thank you for this deepest honor.

So. . .I have one more shot, one last lecture to share with you before you leave this great college. What would I say to seniors if I only had one last shot? What could I say to really help you make your way in the world? No sooner had I asked those questions, than the answer was clear: I would speak from the heart about some of my most recent thinking, about some important things that I have finally learned. I would talk to you about the *art of living*—the art of living in a way that is happy and fulfilling.

I will tell you that, for me, this pairing of “art” and “living” is no empty poetic gesture: you know what I mean, “sounds good, but fluffy as air.” No, I have come to see that this pairing of “art” and “living” is literally true, even desperately true, and that our joyful well-being in the world depends upon our ability to understand and embrace this fact.

To help you see what I have in mind, I want to talk first with you about one of the deepest conflicts in modern life. I am *not* talking about the conflict between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. (That conflict will soon be over.) And I am not talking about the larger conflict between democrats and republicans, or about political, military, or religious conflicts around the world. Those conflicts are real and need our attention, but even more so does the basic conflict I want to discuss. It is a conflict with which I know that every one of you graduating seniors is intimately aware. It is the deeply human conflict between following your passions (on one hand) and meeting the demands of reality (on the other).

Let me spell this out a bit. If we have done our job at Muhlenberg, then you have all discovered something that you really love. It might be writing fiction or writing non-fiction. It might be playing basketball or running track. It might be playing the piano, running science experiments, or working with children who really need your help. It might be developing a business, studying great works of philosophy or literature, or performing on the stage. Whatever it is for *you*, these are the things that get you up in the morning; they fill your dreams; they are the pursuits in which you feel most at home and alive in the world. I call them “passion projects.” Everyone. . .take just a moment to

think about your own passion projects. Write them down if you want, but that is just for you. College is over! There can't be a test on this later!!

So there are our passion projects, on one hand, those things that make us most enthusiastic, excited, and alive. On the other hand, there is the fact that reality makes incessant demands upon us. “You want to do what? Get real.” Or “you are so idealistic!” Or “it is time to wake up; this is *the real world*.” Ouch! It doesn't take long before we start to bury our passion projects—hiding them away from the world, perhaps even feeling a little embarrassed by them. But even when our passions are hiding, the real world comes to find them. I am sure you remember this one: “So. . . dear. . . what *are* you going to do with your major in English [or philosophy, or communications, or biology, take your pick].” What is being said here is: “how are you going to make any money doing what you love?” Because “now you have bills to pay; this is the *real world*.”

Already I can see you sinking in your seats out there—I can feel the energy just drain out of the tent. I think it is extremely important to recognize that this is what happens when we hear those voices and forces of reality—they drain our energy, they flatten our affect, they take the wind out of our sails. The technical term for what they cause is “depression.” Indeed, what is at stake in this conflict between our passionate pursuits and those reality demands is nothing less than our disposition toward the world. Will we be energized, joyful, affirmational? Will we be at home in the world, making love, making life, and opening new possibilities? Or rather will we be flat, going through the motions, dispirited, and cynical.

Of course, for most people it is not all or nothing—never all bubbling over or all entirely flat. Life is a spectrum between those extremes, and we move back and forth to some extent. That is natural; there will be good days and bad days. Yet as I look around at how people live, as I study the “program” of modern life—a program that typically measures success in terms of dollars and material possessions—I observe that many adults settle for too many *bad* days. I observe that too many adults put up with work that they dislike or even hate. Perhaps you know some of those people? I certainly do. I know too many people looking forward to retirement. I know too many people who make that strange deal with the capital machine: “I will work like a slave all week doing relatively unimportant things so I can live large on the weekend.” And do they in fact live large? Quite honestly, not the people I know: they may have expensive toys and take fancy trips now and then, but Saturdays fly right by and already on Sunday the blues are setting in. The blues are setting in because tomorrow the grind continues. No wonder we are “Prozac Nation.”

But you might say: Larry, what can we do about it! (You can call me ‘Larry’ now; you are about to graduate.) “Larry, what can we do? This is just society! This is just *how it is*.” I understand this initial objection—I have heard it many times. But please notice that in raising this objection you are channeling a claim that comes direct from reality: “*just how it is*.” Notice: reality is saying that we have to make this deal and put up with the consequences. Of course reality would! It always does! But you know what? At this point in my life, I can tell you that reality is simply wrong about this. You do not have to make that depressing deal. You do not have to put up with more bad days than good ones. You do not have to bury your passion projects. On the contrary, each

and every one of you has the ability to pursue your passion projects, to make your truest living by doing what you really love in the world.

How do I know this? Because I know so many people who have done it! You will have to take my word on that, but perhaps if you can suspend the reality voice for a minute you will start noticing all the people around you who have done it: your teachers at Muhlenberg, for example, our staff members and administrative leaders too. I will tell you, Muhlenberg is a *great* place to see people who are guided by their passions. Or perhaps it is your father or mother, or a sibling, or some friend who has cracked the reality code. They pursue work that is play—they work not in the grudging spirit of “I have to,” but in the joyful spirit of “*I get to*.” I will tell you, this is the goal: “I can’t wait to *get to* my work.” Or “I feel so lucky *I get to* do this work!” As the philosopher Alan Watts has said: “Sensible people get paid for playing; that is the secret of life.”

Now, I am sure that during your senior year you have felt and heard a lot of pressing reality, so you may not believe me. All this may just sound like empty words. (“He is so idealistic!”) You may not believe it is possible. (“Larry, get real!”) You may have already steeled yourself for the grind. (“This is just how it is!”) But in the last minutes that I have with you, I want to say some things to give you heart and hope. First of all, I encourage you to spend some *good* time with those joyful people you know who “get paid for playing.” It will be refreshing. You won’t hear much “have to” reality talk from them. Instead, you are likely to find yourself having a great time, feeling buoyant and energized. Passion is contagious. Many of you know that I am a performing magician as well as a philosophy professor, so I get to spend a lot of time with professional artists. I am sure you have heard all the reality blather about “starving

artists,” but that sure isn’t what *I* see. On the contrary, I see inspired people who know how to play in the world; they make their living by playing—and usually a truly excellent living at that. Indeed, here is another truth that the “program” of modern life doesn’t want you to hear either: “money follows your passion.” I invite you to repeat this like a mantra, because it is a deep truth that will set you free: “money follows your passion” and not the reverse.

So the first step toward more good days, toward “getting to” rather than “having to,” is finding your passion—identifying the activity that gets you buzzing, that makes you feel alive. As I said before, I suspect that most of you already have found that during your time at Muhlenberg—it probably relates to your major, or to some primary activity you have pursued outside of your coursework. The good thing about our passions is that they are “already there,” just waiting to be fully acknowledged and then embraced.

The second step is having the courage to keep pursuing those passions in the face of all the reality demands. The pressure to bury our passions is profound, and sometimes the most pressure comes from people we love who find subtle and not-so-subtle ways to suggest it is time to grow up, wake up, get real, and get along. It takes courage at this point, because it sometimes feels like we have to choose between the people we love and the things that make us feel most alive. But take heart; this is a false dilemma: the people who are worth loving—the people who are with you for the long haul—will want your joyful well-being, and they will *enable* your passion projects rather than force you to choose.

The third step is in some ways the hardest and in some ways the easiest. Because inspired by passion and empowered by courage, you are now in a position to creatively

imagine and then realize the life *you* want to lead. This does not happen overnight. That is what makes it hard. And you may have to spend time working in some trenches while you are working toward your goals. That makes it hard too. But if you keep your passion projects at the front of your mind—which is by nature a pleasure—if you make time every single day to imaginatively create ways to make them real in the world, then it will not be long before the world around you will reflect back your passion projects rather than confound them.

Passion, courage, imagination, and creativity. Here we are at the end of my last lecture—my final and deepest wish for you. Here we are, now able to understand why living well is an *art*. These four qualities—passion, courage, imagination, and creativity—are the genius of artists in the world: writers, poets, filmmakers, visual artists, dancers, actors, directors, musicians, yes. . .magicians, and many others. I will tell you that the professional artists I know and the countless young artists I have taught at Muhlenberg feel fully at home in these capacities: passion, courage, imagination, and creativity. Please don't worry if your particular projects have nothing to do with art; that is not important. What is essential is to follow your passions, to invent and create ways to make them real in the world—that is for you to be an artist in life, even if not in materials.

So how do I know it is possible? I know it is possible because I am standing here in front of you tonight. When I was 21 years old—your age—in 1981, I had already dropped out of college *twice* and was working as a bank teller in Berkeley California cashing checks. Can you say “depression?” And conceivably I could be there still. But I am not. Having gone on to get my bachelor's degree, M.A., and Ph.D., having spent 18

years here at Muhlenberg as a philosopher and more recently as a magician, I am here with you tonight receiving this deepest honor that a teacher can receive. How did I do it? Well, I have worked hard and have received many blessings along the way. But the absolute core of it was what I have been trying to convey to you tonight: passion, courage, imagination, and creativity. For every single one of you—members of the Class of 2008—may you find an abundance of these capacities in your days beyond Muhlenberg. May you remember that money and fulfillment follow passion, not the reverse. And may you all become wonder-workers at the art of living. Thank you for having me as your teacher one last time.

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