

The Last Lecture: The Road to Resilience
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Thank you, Katherine, for such a beautiful introduction. Wow – it is such a privilege to be here addressing you all, the graduating class of 2008. When I realized that I was nominated for this, I was speechless, and for those who know me, it is a rare occasion that I would have no comment about a situation. But, as I suspect Dr. Hass would agree, I think there is no greater honor as a professor than to know that you have somehow inspired a student. So, Katherine, I sincerely thank you for your comments; I thank those who nominated me, and I would like to thank you all for this opportunity to talk to you.

I realize that for most of you, this is our first introduction. As Katherine mentioned, I am an assistant professor in the psychology department, and I am also a graduate of Muhlenberg College. Yes, it is true. Only eight years ago, I sat exactly where you all sit today on the brink of graduation. And, I all too well remember the many emotions and thoughts that I experienced during my Senior Week.

Erik Erikson, a famous psychologist, who studied human development, once explained that “the self in transition is vulnerable” - that there appears to be an “unraveling” and “a loss of center.” But, nevertheless, the experience of the self as “disrupted,” though considerably anxiety provoking, is at the core of successful transformation.

So, according to Erikson, you are all under-going a transformation – sorta speak. And, it is true that we all have our ways of dealing with transitions, and the anxiety associated with them. And,

judging by the amount of alcohol that is being consumed this week, my sense is that many of you are all relying on one specific coping mechanism to deal with this current transition in your life.

But, I digress.

So, getting back to my introduction to you all.... Katherine had many wonderful things to say about me, and by all accounts, the facts were pretty accurate. But, there are several things -- between the lines -- sorta things - that are missing. You see, when I was asked to give the last lecture, my guess is that several students nominated me, on some level, because of these accomplishments. But, these things are only one part of my journey. And, since I am standing up here behind the lure of a podium, and behind the title “professor” and you are all sitting there with transition on your mind, I thought it would be fair to be really honest with you all. Because, a lot of my journey was not always so organized and noteworthy:

For example, though it is true that I have worked internationally on the behalf of women in domestic violence situations, what Katherine didn't tell you is that when I traveled abroad to Peru, I only had 75.00 in my bank account. For those of you who have never traveled to Peru, you should know that you have to pay a country tax to get out of the country. And, that tax must be paid in cash – not by credit. And, it just so happens that the Peruvian tax, at that time, was \$105.00. So, for the math majors, Scott you included, you guess it right - I didn't have enough money to pay the country tax, and I almost did not catch my plane. Yes – that certainly was not a pretty picture – me – speaking in broken Spanish, holding back tears, trying to convince native Peruvians, who I would likely never see again - to spot me \$30.00! So, as for my first piece of advice, make sure you have money to pay the country tax when traveling to and from Peru.

I guess I tell you all of this because I genuinely believe that when you enter your 20s, there is perhaps no greater resource than resiliency. As a clinician, I use this word frequently. Resiliency - the capacity to endure stress and bounce back. I realize that this might sound quite trite, but I would like to suggest, that some of the most obviously important realities of our lives are the things most difficult to talk about. Because when I reflect on the time between my graduation and now, my mind often turns to some of the more difficult events that occurred during that time: a time when a deeply close friendship ended for me; a time when I lost a relative to cancer, and a time, when I was at the very beginning of my training as a clinician, learning how to diagnose and treat trauma, September 11th happened.

And, certainly, sitting at my graduation, I had no idea that these events would occur and, therefore, I was not contemplating how I might deal with these things. And, by no means am I suggesting that in order to develop resiliency, you should ruminate about all that might go wrong in the next few years. I actually have a better plan; a plan that has already been placed into motion for you.

But, before I share this plan, I want to tell you another -- between-the-lines -- sorta thing. When I was a freshman at Muhlenberg, I seriously considered transferring to a state school. Initially, I was not happy here. In retrospect, it was most likely due to the fact that I was raised in a working class family, and I was the first to attend a traditional four year college. To give you perspective on what that means, prior to coming to Muhlenberg, I thought the GAP was a store where only really wealthy people shopped. I truly was a fish out of water, and I was overwhelmed.

Patrice DiQuinzio and Linda Bips, who some of you may know, advised me to stay. Dr. Bips would say things like “Kate, there is a place for you here,” and Dr. DiQuinzio would say things like “even if there is not a place for you, make one, because this school could use you.” If you know them, I think I have captured their essence.

I really listened to them, my mentors, and I started to believe them. I believed them because both of them spent countless hours talking to me – about psychology, about women’s studies, about pursuing a PhD, about dealing with the stress of Muhlenberg. They invested in me, and I, in return was invested in me too. And, it was in a completely new way....

But, this story becomes a little more complicated. Because as I bought more into higher education and became more “academically successful,” the more distance was placed between myself and my family – particularly my father. Let me try to explain my father to you. My father is a Philadelphia police officer. He has spent most of his life committed to the fraternal order of police and believes deeply in issues of justice. He was also raised in a working-class house, where he lived with his mother and father and Irish immigrant grandparents. So, family is incredibly important to him.

Well, you can imagine the exchanges that ensued when I returned from Muhlenberg College, with my newly enlightened and over-intellectualized self, to discuss all the ways in which systems of hierarchal oppression could explain my father’s work. And, that the police, with their untamed authority, contributed to the social unrest in Philadelphia. And, my father listened, occasionally argued, but mostly kept a distance from me.

So, as life continued, and I pursued my doctoral degree in Florida, my financial status improved. I bought fancy clothes. I rented a condo on the beach. I sipped Cosmopolitans and discussed Carl Rogers with my graduate school friends. Life felt pretty damn good for a time. I could pass, and I was doing it well.

And, then I went home. The first time I returned to Philadelphia, my father picked me up in a beat-up Buick with rust over the entire top of the car. My dad called his “pimp mobile.” (He called it that because the neighborhood kids had sent pictures of this car to the popular MTV show, “Pimp My Ride).” When I got in the car, and I do not kid you, he had a dollar store candle lit on the dash board. I looked at it – rolled my eyes – and said, “What is this, dad?” “It’s for ambiance, Kate”. I looked at him, and in a slightly condescending voice, said “you know dad, that’s pretty ghetto”.

He fell silent. And, then said – “so tell me, Kate, how is that doctoral program going”? And, on I went, in my usual way – about prelims, and clients, and fellowship applications. And – me – *Ms. Multicultural Psychologist* completely missed what happened. I had disconnected and judged him. And, I did it very hurtful.

So, I mentioned a plan that is already set into motion for you. Well, here it is. Your best resource in developing resilience is your social support. And, my sense is that you all can sit here and identify those who do support you. But, here is the tricky part. Relationships are not static. They rarely stay the same because we, as people, change. And, our needs change over time. So, it is

not possible for any one person to give us all that we will need in our lives. Let me repeat that again: You should not rely on one person for all of your social support.

You have to continually reassess and reach out to new resources in an intentional way. So, in order to do this, two things need to happen: (1) you need to know what your needs are and (2) you need to know who can provide them.

Let me take these two things separately because they are very essential to developing resilience. In order to know your needs, you need to know yourself. Self-awareness is critical to developing resilience.

And, here again, the plan has been set in motion for you. Because, as a graduate of a liberal arts education, you should know something about self-reflection. Continue to develop this skill. A process of self-reflection should be engaged all the time and should be both idealistic and realistic. Set your standards high, but be flexible and very honest with yourself. I can honestly say, that through self-reflection, it has been easier for me to accept and own who I am – with all my accomplishments and all the in-between-the-lines things too.

And for the second part: You need to know who can provide support for your needs. If we can be honest about who we are, then we also have to let the people in our lives be honest about who they are. And, again here - the same principles apply to the people in our lives: be both idealistic and realistic about who they are. This will not only strengthen the relationship, but it will also help you to know who to rely on and when.

Getting back to the Peruvian airport, in that moment, no one in my typical social network could have helped me in the twenty minutes that I had before my flight was going to leave. I couldn't call my family or friends because, in that moment, all they could give me was emotional support and, let's be honest, I really *just* needed cash. So, I started asking people in line and eventually, a Peruvian man gave me the \$30.00. We made a deal that I would send him the money when I returned to Miami. I used problem-solving skills and communicated with the social support around me. And, this kind man responded – in the way that most people do when you are honest about yourself.

And, when I was contemplating leaving Muhlenberg, Dr. Bips and Dr. DiQuinzio were the perfect mentors. They were in a position to help me develop myself as an academic. Unlike my parents who had always told me I was smart, it wasn't until Dr. Bips and Dr. DiQuinzio reached out and reinforced that – yes – Kate – you belong in an academic environment too, that I really believed it. I needed their support at that time for that reason.

And, the truth is – Freud is pretty right on when it comes to me – I really seek my parent's support and approval. And, I didn't realize how much until very recently.

When I won the Henry award, I casually told my parents about it. A week later, I received a card in the mail. It was addressed to Dr. Kate, and it had neon smiley face stickers all over it. When I open it, there was a card, the type of cards that you get for free when you make a donation to a charity and in it was scratched “Congrats. Love, Dad.” And, included was a ten dollar gift

certificate to star bucks. I started to cry because Starbucks, with all its capitalism and that card, with all its humanity perfectly captured my relationship with my father. And, it was hilarious. Because as amazing as a Henry award or a doctorate degree is, between the lines – our ability to honestly appreciate each other for who we are, in that moment, so obviously is the support that I needed. And, with that, there is nothing in the world I can't handle.

So, notice the people in your life, for who they are. And, work toward fostering an honest relationship with them. Because, without them, the road toward resilience will be rather bumpy, and there is no alcohol in the world that can help you with that! Thank you.