



OFFICE OF THE HEAD OF SCHOOL

Developing Passions

Peter H. Quimby

Opening Chapel Talk

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I love scuba diving. I love everything about it. I love the gear. I love care that goes into checking equipment before each dive. I love the technical aspects of tracking how much time can be spent safely underwater at what depths. And most of all, I love being a weightless visitor to the undersea world of brilliant coral, vibrantly colored fish, and sometimes unnervingly large sharks. Scuba diving is my new hobby. I would even go so far as to say that I've discovered my passion.

Now, I'm sure that some of you are thinking: "Why on earth should I care that you love to scuba dive? You do you, DQ. I want to grab a bagel in the dining hall before A block." But bear with me for a minute, because I actually think there are some important lessons here for us all to think about as we set sail on the adventure that is a new school year.

First, let me ask you this: Do you have a passion? Is there something in life that excites and energizes you? Something you never get tired of doing, even if you aren't very good at it? Students, you may find that you get this advice often in the coming years. "Go out and find your passion and then pursue it with single-minded focus." Keep in mind that your passion doesn't have to be your job. If it is, that's great. And I suspect that there are many teachers who would say that they are passionate about teaching. If you asked them to define an ideal day, they would talk about being in the classroom working with students, or helping the field hockey team improve their corners, or hanging out with students in the dormitory at night. Being a teacher at a place like Govs is much more than a job; it's a way of life. So it wouldn't surprise me if some of our teachers would say that teaching is both their job and their passion. But for most people, their job isn't their passion. An amateur musician or photographer might love making art, but they might not see making art as something that could be their full time job. Mr. Robertson plays in our jazz band and orchestra. And as anyone who has been in his English class knows, the hallways are often alive with the sound of Robbie's music. Am I correct in assuming that music is one of your passions, Mr. Robertson? Mrs. Robinson is the book store manager by day, but when she has moments to herself, she creates beautiful works of

art. Is it fair to say that creating works of art is one of your passions, Mrs. Robinson? Mr. Wann, at his core, is a thespian, and being in the theater is an important part of what adds meaning to his life. Would you agree with that, Mr. Wann? You may know Mrs. McLain as an outstanding teacher, coach, and dorm parent, but did you know that she competed at a very high level internationally in kayaking and still loves anything that involves paddling? Would you describe kayaking as a passion, Mrs. McLain? For most people, their job is something that they really like, and is also very likely something that they're good at. But it may not be the pursuit they're most excited to engage in when they have the freedom to choose what to do.

Psychologists say that people can have two very different views of where passions come from. According to one view, your passion somehow already exists out there and is just sitting around waiting for you to discover it. From another perspective, you will develop your passion only through active engagement with the world around you. According to these two viewpoints, my passion for scuba diving was either something that was there all along and it just took me 50 years to find it, or I developed the passion over the course of many years of snorkeling, thinking about the undersea world, and wanting to have the experience of remaining under water for extended periods of time. This is an important distinction because how a person answers the question of where passions come from says something about how they approach life.

We could think about any skill in the same way we think about passions. If passions or skills are something inherent within you, something that you're born with, then we might think that Mr. Wann was destined to be a talented actor. We might believe that he was just naturally good at it and it came easily to him. But if we believe that passions and skills can be developed, then we see all kinds of possibilities. Mr. Wann might not have been very good at acting at all at the beginning, but his desire to succeed might have driven him to work at it until he could earn roles on the stage. You can quickly see how these two different mindsets might impact your lives on a daily basis—not just in identifying a passion, but in figuring out how to make sense of the world.

If you have a fixed mindset and you do poorly on a French text, you might think that it's because you aren't good at learning foreign languages. And if that's your view, then where's the incentive to work hard for improvement if, in the end, speaking French just is not one of your talents. Seen from a different angle, suppose you've always been really good at French, and then you struggle for a quarter. If you have a fixed mindset, you might conclude that your assumption about being good at French was actually incorrect, and again, then why should you bother to work to improve? It's just not in your DNA. But if, on the other hand, you have what the psychologist Carol Dweck calls a "growth mindset,"¹ the world looks quite different. To a person with a growth mindset, getting cut from varsity doesn't mean that you're no good at soccer. It means that this year your skills weren't at the level of those who made the team and you now have an opportunity to develop those skills and try to make the team again next year. And if you're on the varsity and lose your starting spot, you don't conclude that you weren't really very good in the first place. You work as hard as you can earn your spot back.

¹ Mindset: The New Psychology of Success, Ballantine Books, New York, 2016

So how do you see the world? Are you a person who says “I can’t do math,” or are you a person who encounters a challenge and says “I’m going to figure this out?” Do you see yourself as being good at one thing and limiting yourself to that? Or do you believe that you can be good at one thing and still explore other potential areas of interest as well? Maybe you want to try ceramics for the first time, or learn to play hockey, or learn more about computer programming. This is the perfect time in your lives to explore new possibilities.

Now, I didn’t go my entire life without being passionate about anything. When I was a student at Gova, I loved playing hockey. I wasn’t very good at it, but it was definitely a passion. And so was singing. Many years later, Dr. Laurie and I spent as much time as we could every summer hiking in the Adirondacks. But as the circumstances of our lives change, so do the opportunities that we have for engaging fully with the world around us. That’s the key, I think: to see the world as full of possibilities and to explore that world with eagerness.

As we begin a new academic year, I hope that you’ll make a conscious effort to see the world through a growth mindset. When that test doesn’t go well, commit yourself to the challenge of figuring it out. Set goals for the year that are ambitious and then do your best to achieve them no matter what obstacles come your way. And keep in mind that this room is full of people who care about you and are invested in helping you succeed.

For years I said I’d never try scuba diving. I can be a bit claustrophobic and I worried that I’d feel trapped under water and panic. When I finally mustered the courage to try it, I found that I didn’t feel panicky at all. So go out and try something new. Push your limits. Challenge your comfort zone. Who knows, maybe in the end you’ll discover the immortal wisdom of Sebastian the crab in the Little Mermaid:

We got no troubles,
Life is the bubbles,
Under the sea.

Exit music—Under the Sea from The Little Mermaid