

St. Andrews University
Opening Convocation
August 27, 2019, 11:00am

Good morning. As we are gathered here together at the start of the new academic year, my guess is that many of you—both new students and returners—spent at least some time over the summer listening to parents or family members give you advice on how to get the most out of your college experience. Am I right about that?

I suspect you got practical advice, maybe even mundane advice. Advice along these lines: go to class; study hard; budget your time and meager allowance; try to stay in shape; do your laundry more than once a semester; and by all means don't "waste" so much time playing Fortnite, listening to Spotify, or sharing videos on Instagram. Important, but not very inspirational advice don't you agree. I read recently that the poet and Pulitzer Prize winning author, Mary Oliver, offered up real inspiration in her instructions for going to college and living a life when she wrote:

Pay Attention, Be Astonished, Talk about it!

Not bad advice if you ask me! Well whatever the advice you received, if you are like I was when I left home to attend St. Andrews way back in 1973, you probably nodded to your parents that you understood, quickly changed the conversation, and said confidently to yourself—I've got this covered! I know exactly what I need to do. As many times over the years as I've welcomed students to St. Andrews, I've sworn to myself not to pile on and give advice. But this year, I ask you to indulge me and let me give some slightly different advice based on 30 years of working in higher education with most of those years here at St. Andrews.

I hope I can stir your imagination with the following three pieces of advice:
Explore boldly; Commit passionately; Share widely

Explore boldly

Now, I learned an important lesson in bold exploration during the first semester of my sophomore year when my roommate and I were hanging out in our suite lounge in Granville Dorm one Saturday morning. Another student we knew, but not well, stuck his head in the door and said he and some friends were going over to the Laurinburg-Maxton airport to take skydiving lessons, which included 5 jumps during the course of the day—the last two without being tethered to the automatic parachute opener—a free fall. Without a moment's hesitation, my roommate was up, putting on his shoes and headed out the door to go jump out of an airplane with classmates he didn't really know—completely jazzed up to have this new experience. I on the other hand was not even tempted. I didn't know these guys or even where the airport was. And who knew, there might be something interesting happening on campus later that day. I really didn't give it a second thought.

When the group returned, they had had an incredibly exhilarating experience. They also bonded together in new ways that comes from a shared experience. Upon hearing all about the jumps, I immediately was regretful, but I learned a valuable lesson. From that day forward, I opened myself up to saying “YES” more often when presented with new or different opportunities on and off campus. I took the lead from my own curiosity and even became adept at inviting others to explore with me, which resulted in an ever wider and more diverse circle of friends. I stopped thinking all the time that I was too busy, or not really interested, or

didn't know what a particular opportunity was really about, or didn't want to even bother to find out.

Your time at St. Andrews is a perfect opportunity to explore both the exterior world around you AND your inner world. A time to have new experiences, become actively involved in this community, study new areas of interest, and wrestle with new ideas and beliefs about who you are and what you care about. In these days, there is so much talk and action around building walls to separate us from one another, to keep us from exploring new ways of thinking about the world; walls that divide us by culture, class, race and origin. With all these walls, the greatest challenge to exploration is getting past these barriers. This includes those we create for ourselves—sometimes you have to push back against limitations from your past, the expectations of others, and even at times well-regarded conventional wisdom. Your time at St. Andrews will be enriched if you will open yourself up to other ways of thinking and doing and better ways of organizing your time so you can take a few risks and explore boldly.

For example, let me encourage you:

- When you see a flyer, or a friend or acquaintance tells you, about tryouts for the choir or a theater production, or chance to participate in a student club activity, Give them a shot, try something that may be new or different and stretches you beyond your comfort level.
- When you hear about some of the new majors and pre-professional programs that we'll be offering this year and next year, check them out; see if they strike an interest in you that you might not have thought about before;
- Explore opportunities for work and service in the local community—find out about internship and volunteer opportunities in Laurinburg at

local businesses or human services agencies, or attend a Sunday morning worship service in town; Venture off campus; learn more about the local community right outside your door; and

- When you hear about an opportunity to travel off campus for a weekend ski trip in the mountains, or an alternative fall break to work rehabbing houses in a hurricane damaged town in eastern NC, or a Saturday hang out with new friends on one of our NC beaches,--Just say YES, get in the car and go!

To be clear, I'm not suggesting in any way that you take risks or try new things that are dangerous or unhealthy, but I am suggesting that to get the most out of your St. Andrews experience, be curious about what your fellow classmates, faculty and staff are doing and thinking. Look for opportunities to explore with them something that you've thought in the past might be of interest but you simply never had the time or inclination to pursue. Some things may prove to be difficult and a little uncomfortable for you. But, try them anyway. It is through experiences outside our comfort zone that we often learn the most about ourselves, what we enjoy, what we care about, what enlightens and enriches our lives.

Staff writer for *The Atlantic Magazine*, James Fallows goes so far as to write that "being afflicted with the poverty of experience is the worst poverty; and lack of experience of the larger world, is poverty on steroids." Don't let yourself be impoverished by limiting your experiences at St. Andrews.

Commit passionately

Exploration without commitment is superficial at best, and downright boring at its worst. In the course of your bold explorations, be on watch to

find those things that motivate you to a deeper engagement and then commit with some passion to them. While it is essential to a good college experience that you devote considerable energy and hard work to academics, there's a great deal more to each one of you than just your major, a sport you may play, or a host of those things that are comfortable and familiar to you from your earlier life. Discover and commit yourselves with energy and passion to some new things that give you joy, those things that motivate you and that you come to care deeply about. You're likely to find that these commitments will take you outside the walls of your own self-interest and help you escape the limitations created by what one writer calls the "comfort and curse of self-centeredness."

Committing passionately is not passive. It requires you to actively "lean in" to the experience, in short putting more of yourself into those activities and concerns than other self-serving commitments. For those of you who are athletes you'll know that, "Leaning in" has a long history in sports to mean putting your weight forward toward someone or something."

This concept was popularized recently by Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sanberg in her book by the same title. Sanberg was writing to encourage women in particular to embrace challenge and take risks; to push past insecurities and fears. She encourages readers to be bold in the workplace about those things that really matter—the quality of their work, their leadership, their integrity, their place on the team. In short, make your commitments with passion and energy and that will take you a long way toward getting the most out of your St. Andrews experience.

A couple of years ago, St. Andrews entered into a partnership with Caldwell Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, NC to provide summer internships for St. Andrews students to work in an urban environment with a congregation on issues around poverty, homelessness and lack of affordable healthcare. The minister, John Cleghorn, worked for many years as the VP for Communications at Bank of America and was a member of the senior management team for the bank worldwide—at the time the largest bank in the U.S. But in his late 40s he realized just how passionately he felt about the work of the church and thought that his personal and professional experiences and talents could be put to use for something much larger and more important than himself and the bank.

While still working, he started attending Union Theological Seminary's ministry program in Charlotte and at the end of that course of study he was ordained, left the bank and took on the leadership of a small, struggling urban church. Yes, he took a huge cut in salary; yes, he took a great deal of personal and professional risks to make this change; and yes, some of his friends and family thought he had absolutely lost his mind. But in the last ten years, John has transformed the church, grown its membership considerably and the congregation under his leadership is having a profound impact on the lives of poor and dispossessed people in Charlotte. John would tell you today that he is passionate about his work in ways and a depth greater than any work he's ever done and it's required more of him than his top banking job ever did. It has required self-sacrifice, risk and tireless work but its rewards have been the most meaningful in his life.

The novelist, Fredrik Bachman says it best, “Passion is worth something, not for what it gives us, but for what it demands we risk—our dignity, the puzzlement of others and (at times even) their condescending, shaking heads!” So, use your time wisely at St. Andrews to discover those things that bring you joy and serve interests larger you’re your own self-interest, and then Lean In to them with commitment, energy and passion.

Okay, you may be thinking. This all sounds good. I’m going to explore the world around me boldly. I’m going to commit myself with passion to those things that capture my imagination and that I find hard to resist getting involved. But the real questions you may be asking yourself are: What am I going to do when I graduate? How will all this help me find a job? What do I do then?

Share widely

Well my friends, if job preparation is your only concern when you leave here, then we will have done only part of what we are committed to do. At the heart of the St. Andrews experience has always been, and will continue to be, a commitment to delivering a high quality liberal arts and sciences education in which you are taught to think critically, communicate effectively, and learn to solve problems productively by working with others who have different talents, perspectives and ideas. You will be better prepared for the world of work than many of your generation who will enter the work force at the same time you do. But with all that said, we’ve made another commitment to you that is equally important to preparing you to make a living. We’re committed to helping prepare you to make a meaningful, purposeful life for yourself. But this part is not easy and not without risks and at times disappointment.

Anthropologist Charles King in his new book *Gods of the Upper Air*, notes that in the human experience “Getting over [oneself] is bound to be hard, but the payoff is getting smarter about the world, about humanity, about the many possible ways of living a meaningful life.”

That purposeful life will require you to share your many experiences and commitments widely in the small and large communities within which you live, work, and play. Without that, the work you do day in, day out can become a meaningless drudgery and leave you deeply unfulfilled.

Figuring out during your college years what you firmly believe, what values define your character, what you are passionate about and deeply committed to, all leads to sharing your gifts and talents with others.

In your first job interview, your experiences, your commitments and your passion are the kinds of things, along with strong academic performance, that are going to differentiate you from everyone else applying for that job.

A recent St. Andrews graduate told me that he mentioned on his resume that he had never been out of the US before college, but decided to go on a study abroad trip to India sponsored by St. Andrews and led by one of our most beloved professors. He went on to say that the part of the job under consideration that fascinated him the most was the opportunity to work from time to time outside the United States. It turned out that the interviewer had lived in India for a short period of time in a prior corporate job. The two ended up spending most of the interview talking about the challenges and risks of encountering another culture as different as India is from life in the United States. Exploration, Commitment, Shared Experiences and Passion! These are the qualities that will separate you from the pack and lead you to a more meaningful, purposeful life. Oh yeah, the recent grad, he definitely Leaned In; he got the job!

Conclusion

My advice this morning is intended to be for your head, your heart and your feet! You can do this if you're willing to explore boldly, commit passionately and share your many gifts, talents and interests widely in community with others. And at each step along the way, you have to "Lean In," not in that half-hearted way that's easy, but in a way that challenges and transforms you and will serve you well for the rest of your life in every job and relationship and experience that you will have.

You can start all of that right now, right here on this small campus and in this very supportive local community. There are countless opportunities if you're willing to look for them; a great need in this world for men and women like you to commit yourselves with determination and passion to something larger than yourselves; and a hunger I suspect in you and certainly in the communities where you will be living for you to share your many gifts and talents with others. So my friends, 'LEAN IN' like your future depends on it because it does.....You'll be glad you did!