

Living with Enthusiasm: How to Find the Right Path Without Knowing It
Bradley Potts, 24 February 2019

Thank you, Dr. Reynolds, and thank you to all the family, friends, and faculty for coming today, but most importantly, congratulations to you all for joining this esteemed society! After years of hard work and perseverance, each and every one of you is worthy of the highest praise.

With our acceptance into Phi Beta Kappa, we join 243 years of tradition and thousands of the nation's highest achievers, as well as an elite group of some of the most successful and impactful citizens. We join famous politicians and Presidents such as John Quincy Adams, Daniel Webster, and Condoleezza Rice; theorists and jurists such as John Marshall, W.E.B Du Bois, and Ruth Bader Ginsburg; writers and artists like Nathaniel Hawthorne, Robert Frost, and Kerry Washington; and over 140 Nobel-prize winning scholars like Roger Tsien who won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 2008.

We are truly in great company! But I remember reviewing this list when I was inducted a year ago and thinking: "how can I possibly join a list of such monumental people? How can I, a guy who still plays video games for fun, possibly make an impact on the world anywhere close to these people?" Not really knowing how my life will pan out, this was an overwhelming thought, and it may be for many of you as well—how can I accomplish my goals? Or better yet, will I even be able to?

But a calming thought came to me, and I still think about it often; it is that each of those people that I listed off, yet to embark on their world changing journeys, were also inducted into Phi Beta Kappa as just Juniors and Seniors in college. Perhaps like us, they too were uncertain of their future and, though ambitious and idealistic, unclear about how they could impact society. It is here that I like to imagine somebody like Theodore Roosevelt, who was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa in 1880 at 22 years old, playing sports, going hunting, doing whatever the 1880 equivalent of bingeing Netflix shows is, but also being terrified at what life had in store for him. I mean, at 22 years old, did he imagine his face on Mount Rushmore? Probably not.

Or, I imagine Condoleezza Rice, inducted into Phi Beta Kappa in 1974 at age 20, anxiously waiting to see the new Godfather Part II in theaters or listening to the hottest new songs like "Jungle Boogie" or "Bennie and the Jets." Then I wonder if she ever just sat in her dorm and thought, "You know what, I'm going to fight terrorism in the Middle East as Secretary of State." Maybe she did have that goal set—but probably not!

Maybe some of these exceptional people had the perfect idea of what they were going to do and who they were going to become—but they are certainly in the minority. It is easy to think of world changers as always being world changers, but that is just not the case. Possibly like some of us, they were uncertain of their paths but knew they wanted to make a difference in the world—and they did.

So instead of being overwhelmed and anxious over joining Phi Beta Kappa's esteemed ranks, I think it's more important to understand what enabled these people to achieve their goals, create positive change, or become great leaders in their fields. Speaking to the graduating class at

Stanford University, Steve Jobs emphasized that “you can’t connect the dots going forward; you can only connect them looking backward.” While this may seem obvious, Jobs is saying that you can’t worry yourself with following a clear, self-defined path—you can only see how you got to a place once you’re there. And though this is an important message, I think it’s necessary to go a step further and think, “well, how do you get the dots in the first place?” How can I create the opportunities if I don’t know the right path?

Though I’ve yet to do anything as special as the people I mentioned, my political science and public policy studies allowed me to learn about and assess the qualities of great leaders, thinkers, and world changers. Though accomplished persons of course have their own unique characteristics and idiosyncrasies, I believe there is something fundamental and common to political, artistic, scientific, business, and all leaders alike. Each have a profound enthusiasm for what they do, for their beliefs, for learning, for action, and whatever they put their minds to, which is what I want to talk about today—the importance of living with enthusiasm.

To quote Ralph Waldo Emerson, yet another great member of Phi Beta Kappa, “Enthusiasm is one of the most powerful engines of success. When you do a thing, do it with all your might. Put your whole soul into it. Stamp it with your own personality. Be active, be energetic, be enthusiastic and faithful, and you will accomplish your object. Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm.”

Throughout my college experience, these words have served as my daily inspiration. To be enthusiastic about learning, hard work, understanding, and action has been my constant ambition, and since having this state of mind, I believe that I have lived a much more purposeful, enjoyable, and impactful life. So as we go into our lives beyond SMU, or perhaps as you go into your senior year, we must remain enthusiastic about what we do, for enthusiasm turns the ordinary into the extraordinary, it provides the thrill and energy to persevere through difficulties, and it generates the opportunities towards the right path even if you don’t know what the right path is. But, what does it mean to be enthusiastic?

I can begin by saying what I believe enthusiasm is not. It is not being simply interested in something or excited about an activity. It is not about jumping up and down, raising your voice, or just doing things more quickly. Instead, enthusiasm, as I understand it, is a state of mind that involves a feeling of passion, eagerness, and desire—a desire to do something, say something, change something, or learn something for the purpose of some greater objective. It is a feeling of warmth and energy that stimulates the mind and motivates the body to act, that pushes yourself to go beyond the average. Enthusiasm is the urge to put in the extra hour of energy towards a project; the eagerness to solve an impending scientific or social problem; it is the energy that you feel when you create something unique, make a discovery, or make a great friend.

The opposite of enthusiasm is apathy, feelings of indifference and passivity, being neutral to or disinterested in an objective or the outcomes of an action. In my life, I try to remain enthusiastic in whatever I devote effort to, but it is extremely difficult to remain emotionally committed to everything and everyone in your life. In many instances, overwhelmed with stressed or frustrated by challenges, I’ve lost this enthusiasm even for things I truly care about, leaving myself

disappointed and anxious, wondering if I have failed or if my objectives are out of reach, which leads to the question of, “can enthusiasm for something be learned or acquired?”

Through personal experience, I believe it can be. Enthusiasm can be both a natural phenomenon or an acquired state of mind. At times, enthusiasm for even our most fundamental objectives or treasured relationships can be lost, and it is at those times when we must remind ourselves of “why”—why we set an objective, why we are in a relationship, why something is worth doing. Whether it is for personal, moral, religious, social, cultural, economic, or academic reasons, there is always a “why” that can sometimes be forgotten—but should never be lost.

Particularly, I believe there are four areas or components of life that necessitate consistent enthusiasm. Whether you want to work in academia, in the arts, in business, in healthcare, or possibly join the list of great Phi Beta Kappa members, it is crucial to remain enthusiastic—in the pursuit of whatever your aspirations may be—for learning, for understanding, for relationships, and for action.

Starting with an enthusiasm for learning, it is first important to understand what it means “to learn.” Did you know, that 10% of the world’s population is left handed, it would take a sloth one month to travel one mile, honey never spoils, avocados are poisonous to birds, or that an average of 700,000 people are flying in the air at any given time? Holding the world’s information in our pockets, we are truly living in the information age, where information is all around us and often times, like these facts, extremely interesting or possibly valuable. But although information can be useful, were you learning by taking in those facts? I don’t think so. From Pulitzer Prize winning author David McCullough, “if information were learning, you could memorize the World Almanac and call yourself educated. But if you memorized the World Almanac, you wouldn’t be educated. You’d just be weird!”

Learning is a step further than absorbing facts, it requires active engagement with information to gain insights, generate conclusions, or create something new. It is not a passive or apathetic activity. Abigail Adams wrote that “learning is not attained by chance. It must be sought with ardor and attended with diligence.” For this reason, a lifelong commitment to learning and the liberal arts requires a unique enthusiasm to move past being a mere consumer of information.

But, why is this enthusiasm needed? First, learning is simply good for the soul. To discover something new, create something unique, and enjoy the variety of the human experience is self-enriching and fulfilling. The second reason is to become more effective problem solvers and people of good character. A commitment to lifelong learning is a commitment to lifelong self-improvement, where learning across the liberal arts provides us with a sense of context, sharpens our reasoning capabilities, and refines our moral principles.

For these reasons, an enthusiasm for learning serves as a precondition for other important aspects of our journey through life by making us more relatable, rationale, caring, and capable, which is why the Phi Beta Kappa motto, “love of learning is the guide of life,” is so critical. Sitting in this room, we have all exhibited an enthusiasm for learning to some degree, but it is now our duty to remain diligent and dedicated to the promotion of learning throughout our lives.

The second area of thought that necessitates enthusiasm is the understanding of other people and ideas. Too often, modern political and social conflict is the result of people's apathy towards understanding contrary opinions or different people. Entrenched in their own assumptions, people refuse to understand conflicting viewpoints, which leads to intolerance, which breeds contempt. Today, a prime example in something that I have deeply studied is modern partisan politics. Across the entire political spectrum, there is a peculiar unwillingness to learn about, understand, and assess adverse policies and differently minded people. Though policy and ideology should be a rational decision based on evidence and research, people cling to their political affiliation as a part of their identities, reducing or losing the sense of empathy and respect that is necessary for sound political deliberation and compromise.

As a solution, an enthusiasm for understanding serves as the nemesis to this sort of intolerance and fanaticism. Here, learning is a precondition. The first step towards understanding is learning—learning about other people, other cultures, and other ideas, including the historical and contemporary contexts that influence a person's identity, a culture's intricacies, or an idea's complexities. The next step is facing the uncomfortable or foreign, which is the component of understanding that requires consistent enthusiasm—or perhaps even courage.

Indeed, it is difficult to confront uncomfortable realities or encounter contrary opinion—nobody wants to be told that they are wrong or misguided. Out of convenience, stubbornness, or perhaps fear, it is easy to remain comfortable in our views, values, and beliefs. But I believe it should be our ambition to remain enthusiastic about understanding—to embrace the uncomfortable and overcome the convenience of complacency. Towards this end, we are aided by our liberal arts education, which taught us how to understand the unknown and evaluate diverse perspectives. In our lives, a greater understanding of other people, cultures, and ideas will encourage greater tolerance and compassion.

The third necessary element of enthusiasm is for relationships. Just as Emerson said that “nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm,” nothing great was equally achieved without the help and support of other people, and for that reason, we must make a conscious effort to remain enthusiastic about our relationships with friends, family, and peers. Recognizing its importance in the pursuit of knowledge and human understanding, “friendship” is represented as one of the three stars on the Phi Beta Kappa key, along with “literature” and “morality.” Additionally, from Phi Beta Kappa's official historian, the society was formed “with friendship as its basis and benevolence and literature as its pillars.”

But, focused on work or other objectives, relationships can become secondary or abandoned. We only have so much energy to expend, and when stressed or anxious, effort devoted to relationships can take a back seat to other tasks. Alternatively, relationships with others can be taken for granted, but relationships are not one-sided ventures; they require mutual care, respect, and energy. In either case, enthusiasm is an important part of maintaining relationships. Relationships decay or are lost as a result of apathy or indifference. Caring for others and cultivating long-lasting relationships is a function of taking the time and energy to learn about, as well as learn from, others. Enthusiasm for relationships can prioritize and energize our actions and thoughts towards other people.

The final area that I see enthusiasm as a necessity is for action. Though it's important to remain engaged and dedicated to learning and the pursuit of understanding, it is equally important for scholars, artists, or scientists to remain enthusiastic about action and acting on their ideas. Here again, learning ought to serve as a precursor to action, where action should naturally follow from thought and reason. In a speech actually at a Phi Beta Kappa induction in 1837 titled "The American Scholar," Ralph Waldo Emerson noted that "action is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential... Without it, thought can never ripen into truth."

For the scholar then, I believe the significance of action is twofold. For one, in failure and success, action serves as a learning experience, with Emerson claiming, "only so much do I know, as I have lived." The second reason then is the outcomes of action. In our research, conclusions, and creations, we have an obligation to improve our communities, solve individuals' problems, and share our writing and art for the betterment or enjoyment of others. Whereas action seeks to make positive change, inaction gives credence to the untruthful, unjust, and immoral. An enthusiasm for action, or what I like to call "anti-procrastination," is thus a method of learning and an essential step towards creating your own opportunities and impacting society.

Altogether, I believe it's through enthusiasm in these four areas—for learning, understanding, relationships, and action—that we can generate the necessary opportunities, or "dots" as Steve Jobs called them, to achieve our goals and hopefully become impactful leaders. Though learning should inform the other areas, each are equally important towards creating the "dots" that we may one day connect. And so, even if we don't know the right path towards our desired futures, enthusiasm for what we do can help get us there. Through learning, we may enjoy the human experience and improve our character in the process; through understanding, we may fight intolerance and promote compassion; through friendship, we may feel the love and support to persevere; and through action, we may learn and create positive change for others.

While I've highlighted the areas where I believe enthusiasm is crucial, it should be our ultimate goal to live with enthusiasm, and trust ourselves, in whatever we do. Life is simply too short to be apathetic or worry about the "right" path when we don't know how the dots will connect. But guided by learning and enthusiasm, we can hope to one day look back without regrets and connect the dots that tell our stories.

And, it is now that I say again, with the utmost enthusiasm, Congratulations! And, Thank you!