

Convocation Address
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Irvine Memorial Chapel

For the past 22 years, I have walked down the aisle of this chapel greeted by smiling faces of families and students, eyes full of anticipation. How odd it is speaking to you from an empty chapel, yet still eager to see what this unique year holds in store for us: to see how we craft it, to witness how each of us applies our unique creative spirits, to navigate this challenge. I believe that when faced with struggle, if we use our innate gifts, the artists within us will guide us to persevere.

Some things come easy to us. They seem like second nature—a way of looking at the world, a way of doing some simple everyday task, performing an action with ease. We don't think much of it because it's so natural. But those things that seem most natural to you, that you do with ease and pleasure instinctively, may be the unique gifts that make you *you*; those simple natural things may be where your inner artist waits to be called on and to grow.

When I was a little girl, I attended a progressive school in New York City. I was learning how to play the violin and therefore was part of the whole school orchestra made up of students from third to 12th grade. Out of 25 violins, I was the *fourth* fourth violin. I would take my violin home at night and I would practice. I could hear all the squeaks and squawks and, try as I might, I couldn't produce that beautiful smooth, mellifluous sound as I drew my bow across the strings. I just wasn't very good... yet. We were preparing for a concert and I knew that my little squeaks would ruin it for everybody. I didn't want to embarrass myself or my family or ruin the concert for everyone. I didn't know what to do. Then I had an idea—I don't know where the idea came from and I didn't tell anybody about it, but come the night of the concert, I was up on the stage, holding my violin in perfect form with my bow poised to glide over the strings and, lo and behold, when I moved the bow there were no squeaks and squawks. After the concert was over my parents congratulated me, but what they didn't know was as I moved the bow it never touched the strings. I think now that was my first real performance as an actor. I had a problem that I urgently needed to solve and I found a solution—I pretended. It was 1963 I had never heard of the phrase “fake it till you make it.” I'm not sure if it even existed yet.

I was also a little girl who had a lot of struggles in school. It was very difficult for me to read. When I saw letters, I couldn't sound out the words because I would see three consonants together that I couldn't figure out how to pronounce. What I didn't know was that I reversed letters: they would turn upside down, switch places within the word: they just looked like gobbledygook to me. There wasn't a consensus definition of dyslexia until 1968. The first major research book on dyslexia wasn't published until 1972, the year I started college. My parents tried to support me, but there wasn't enough understanding of what I was experiencing to really be supportive. So I retreated into myself; I thought I was just dumb. But when I went to dance class at the 92nd Street Y, I was free—I could fly. In my “home art studio” I could express my feelings and connect to my creative self.

But I couldn't draw or paint realistically—I was more of a Jackson Pollock painter. I compared myself to my classmates and saw myself as lacking. So when discovering that I could embody my imagination, it opened a door: a door to the theater, to performance, to stepping into another person's shoes and seeing the world from their perspective: to a place of collaboration and experimentation and risk taking, to a community of like-minded souls with whom to commune and collaborate.

Of course that little 9-year-old dyslexic girl didn't actually realize that that door had opened. But she did notice there was a shift, a small internal shift that allowed for new possibilities. And that inspired persistence. It wasn't a fully conscious moment of enlightenment, but looking back almost 60 years I can trace that moment with the violin as the beginning of a different way of being in myself.

Can you look back to any moments when you experienced a shift, a moment of revelation, an experience that led you down a slightly different path?

I think we are all born with different levels of ability to persevere in times of challenge. But I also believe that our life experience can change that strength. If I don't work out I'm not gonna build the muscles I need to do all the things I would like to do in my life. The kind of workout that I choose will target certain abilities, build certain muscles. Our abilities to be self-aware and to be persistent are also muscles that can be built. We can choose how we build those muscles. We can be purposeful about it. Certainly there are things we have no control over—like the fact that we are in a pandemic. But how we choose to respond—that we do have choice in.

There have been many moments in my life when things were thrown at me and I was knocked down. The hand that reached out to help lift me up sometimes came from totally unexpected places. If it wasn't for my ninth- and 10th-grade English teacher I'm not sure when I would've actually known that my struggle with reading and math—as it turned out—was because of the way my brain interpreted letters and numbers. Mr. Moore was very interested in computers. There was a big IBM plant across the road from our school and they donated a trunk-line and a computer set up for him to investigate learning processes in grammar and vocabulary. Mr. Moore was also a stickler for spelling. So at the end of rubric for a graded paper you would see your grade and then 10 points taken off for each misspelled word. Most of the time, my 90s and 80s ended up becoming failing grades. That was very disheartening. I became one of the first people he chose to be a test subject for his computer experiments. He developed a spelling program just for me. Mr. Moore noticed some patterns: all the letters would be in the word but not in the right order, or a B was a P or D—that was the beginning of my understanding about my struggle with reading and interpreting symbols.

Now, understanding the problem didn't take it away, but it gave me a context for it and I was able to start to get some tools to cope with it. Most of those tools I figured out on my own; there weren't the kind of support structures that dyslexic kids have today. I realized no matter

how many times I looked a word up in the dictionary, I couldn't trust that I was seeing words correctly or that I would transfer what I saw correctly to my paper. But I had a roommate and classmates who lived in my dorm who could read over my papers and spot mistakes which I couldn't see. When I got to college, I had to summon up the courage to ask a new friend if they'd be willing to read over my papers. That seemed to work; but in 1976 during my first year of teaching at a boarding school outside of Baltimore, I had to write my first set of comments on a form in triplicate. I remember being called into the head of school's office, who, as kindly as he could, explained to me that he could not send my comments home. Not because of their content, but because of the numerous mistakes in spelling. Once I got through the embarrassment, I realized I hadn't set up any kind of support system to help me. I explained my situation to him and we worked together to create a support network. By the time I went to graduate school, I understood what I needed to do in a new community. And then, as luck would have it, I ended up falling in love with and marrying a journalist, a writer, an editor, an English teacher, who even though he is now retired from teaching here at Mercersburg, still reads every progress report, every set of comments, and any document I write that others will read. He has done that for me for 37 years.

Over the years, I have come to see my dyslexia as a gift. I discovered it was easier to read dialogue than it was to read narrative descriptive passages. I came to this realization about the same time as my violin concert. So I gravitated to activities where I could use my imagination, where reading was not a large stumbling block, where all the kids were playing with purpose toward one goal, not in competition with each other but as a united group.

I took modern dance classes, was in school plays, spent summers at camp in the Art Barn. By high school I was attending an arts summer school, then pre-college theatre programs. I didn't know I was going to be a theatre major when I arrived at the bucolic Wisconsin campus of Beloit College; but they did—enrolling me in a freshman theatre seminar taught by the department chair. By the summer before my senior year, I was an Equity intern in the professional summer theatre company housed on campus, opening a new theatre complex with *Our Town* in which I played Rebecca opposite a young Ray Liotta—who is probably best known for his role in *Goodfellas*.

The rehearsal process I fell in love with is about digging in: to understand characters who have needs, who face obstacles and struggle. It's about making a choice and seeing where that choice takes you, assessing and reassessing, making new bold choices, taking a risk, and falling on your face knowing that your creative partners will lend you a hand to get back up on your feet and do it all over again. Theatre makers are researchers, explorers, problem solvers, applying new data to the next iteration of the scene. What freedom and exhilaration it is to fly in the safety of a creative laboratory. The gift of my dyslexia allowed me to see differently, to feel deeply, to step into another's world with ease—to empathize. I learned that I would never be able to check off the box that said "Dyslexia"—done, solved. It is something that I continue to learn about, adjust to, and grow with, as I did in rehearsal. I realized that I would never finish growing as an artist, as a teacher, or as a human being.

When I first came to Mercersburg, the school supported my training in Lessac Kinesensics, a holistic, comprehensive and creative approach to all aspects of developing the body and the voice, for speaking, singing and communication. Arthur Lessac—the renowned voice coach and professor of theatre—became a very important mentor to me. He was 92 when I first began studying with him. Any of you who have ever taken a class with me or have been in a play with me have been influenced by his philosophy and his Kinesensic approach to sensation.

I would like to end my talk with a quote of his from a documentary about his life, made when he was 94 years old. Let me add that he went on to live to the age of 101, teaching and growing until the moment of his death.

“After I realized that I was developing something meaningful and worthwhile... I realized that I was always in a situation where new beginnings could take place, sometimes little ones, sometimes seemingly insignificant ones, but they weren’t to me... . That sense of always being ready for a new beginning—of something, for me is a kind of a lifeline... it’s another way of staying young.”

So let’s be ready for all the new beginnings we are about to experience, big ones and little ones—as we face this unprecedented and challenging year. Knowing that we can persevere, that the growing artist within us will be a guide, and that when we fall, there will be a hand reaching out to us to help us get up and start anew.

Thank you.

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