

Charge to the Class, 2014
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As the final, official act of graduation, I am to “charge” you as a graduating class. I am tempted to just say, as a commander in a movie would, *chaaaaarge*. But that would be wrong. In the movies, the commander is in the front. But we are *not* ahead of you. I don’t think we’ve ever been out in front of you because it is you who make us who we are at Stanford Law School, you who inspire us to do what we do. But *if* we were ever leading you, that job is over. *You* are out in front. *We* are the rear guard, rooting for you to achieve all that you hope for. But as you start that run, let me send you off with one thing.

I would like that thing to be *worth saying* and *memorable*. That is a tall order. So many important and memorable things have been said at graduations. (And many trivial and forgettable things have been said at graduations too.) But I have been searching high and low for a worthy topic for this charge and I think I’ve found it: the virtues of selfishness.

I cast many things aside before I settled on this. There are all sorts of things that we the faculty want to tell you as you leave us. We want you to have grand ambitions for yourself, we want you to be impatient to achieve them, and we want you to make a difference in the world wherever you land. Given your talent, your spirit, your grit, your creativity, you *should*, you *must*, and you are *obligated* to pursue big dreams. And we want you to have satisfying lives. But we know enough about you to know that you don’t need to hear these messages because you already know them, and you are already trying to live them.

But here is one message that you might need to hear: Take care of yourself. I jokingly called this the “virtue” of selfishness and of course that is not what I mean—selfishness is not a virtue. What I mean is this: If you want to do work that matters, and build a satisfying life, you have to *bring your best game*. And the simple truth is that you cannot do that *unless you take care of yourself*.

I think the point is fairly obvious, but somehow we easily forget it. Think about people whose job it is to bring their best game, literally—elite athletes. There is no aspect of their training that is not carefully calibrated to maximize their physical and mental performance. They do truly insane things. Michael Phelps, for instance. He has breakfast and then two hours later gets in the pool to swim for four hours. Yes, four hours. He breaks for lunch and then runs for two hours. Yes, two hours. Then he goes to the gym for weight work and treadmill time. He eats in a day what most people eat in three days—a standard breakfast is an 8-egg omelet. This training and diet have fundamentally changed his metabolism. And his mental training is to have practiced what to do in the pool so often that his body is on automatic pilot when he races. When his goggles filled with water in Beijing and he could not see, his muscle memory carried him through.

Lawyers do the same. In the week before the Supreme Court argument in the health care case, Paul Clement, one of the oral advocates, subjected himself to five consecutive days of moots of his argument. Another regular Supreme Court advocate locks herself in a hotel room for an entire weekend before the oral argument to live and breathe every detail of the case. This is not four hours of swimming, but she can excel at oral argument even if she experiences the equivalent of her goggles filling with water, namely, being blind-sided by unexpected questions from Supreme Court justices.

If it is obvious that high-stakes performances require intense training to assure that the performer is at her best, it should be just as obvious that the goal of living a meaningful life requires that too. You cannot live the life you want without constantly being in training for it—namely, you have to take care of yourself.

What do you have to do to bring your best game? It does mean the obvious—that is, taking care of yourself physically. Hence, you need to exercise, to eat your vegetables, to get enough sleep, to brush your teeth, to stay away from salt and sugar, and to make your doctor’s appointments. Yes. You need to do all of those good things that your parents told you to do.

But tending to yourself is a lot more challenging than that. Your ability to take care of yourself starts with something that sounds very simple: You have to understand yourself. That is harder than it sounds. Self-awareness is not something we are born with. Psychologists have conducted studies to identify the time of life when infants and toddlers realize that they are separate from what they see in the world. In these studies, researchers put a red dot on the noses of infants and toddlers and place the children in front of a mirror. Before self-awareness emerges, the infants and toddlers reach out to touch that interesting baby in the mirror with the red dot. When self-awareness has emerged, the babies touch their own nose to check out that red dot.

Realizing that *you* are the baby with the red dot on her nose is just the beginning, though. Fully understanding yourself—and coming to terms with what you understand—is a life-long project, and most of us have a long way to go. How many people do you know who have obvious personality traits of which they are unaware? Or of which they are in denial? I’ve got two teenagers, so I live with this every day. Every time I suggest that perhaps my teenagers are a bit contrarian, the conversation ends with one them informing me, loudly: “I do not disagree with everything you say.” (They do not seem to see the humor in this.)

Clearly one point of knowing yourself is to understand your limits. There is a saying that captures the point: “If you meet three jerks in one day, you’re the jerk.” But understanding yourself is not just about appreciating your weaknesses. If you think of this as your training to live the life you want to live, it is just as much about understanding your strengths.

The connection between understanding yourself, taking care of yourself, and bringing your best game is straightforward. If you do not know yourself, you do not understand your limits that you have to work on and work around, and you don’t

fully appreciate your talents. Most of all, though, you do not understand what in work and life gives you joy and pleasure.

Why don't we take care of ourselves? We all know this. But we don't act on it. We have all met the person who has *not* been in training for her life, is not tending to herself. Overworked, under-slept, oblivious to her limits—with the predictable consequence that she is not putting out her best. So why don't we naturally tend to ourselves? I'm not exactly sure, but let me speculate.

I do know that is not just that it's hard because we do a lot of things that are hard to do. There must be some other reasons.

One is surely the fruitless pursuit of perfectionism. Some of us suffer from this. You know. That voice in your head telling you that it's not quite perfect (whatever *it* is) and is therefore not finished. Unfortunately, this may be something that people who excel in law are especially prone to. Psychologists study something that they call attribution style. Attributional style is the way we explain the causes of different events in their lives. There are optimists and pessimists. In explaining a failure, for instance, someone with an optimistic attributional style would explain the failure as caused by external factors that are unstable and are specific—the bad score on the test was caused by the temperature in the testing room and a headache. Someone with a pessimistic style, on the other hand, would explain the failure as caused by something that is internal, stable, and global—thus, the bad score was caused by lack of smarts, poor capacity to take tests.

Psychologists have studied the relationship between attributional style and life success and what they have found probably won't surprise you. It's better to be an optimist. In many realms, optimistic attributional style is associated with positive outcomes—selling more insurance, better performance in a game, better scores on a math test, better overall health. Although there is limited research, optimists, in most studies, have higher academic achievement. But guess what? There seems to be an exception: Law. In at least one large study of law students, those with *optimistic* attributional style had *lower* academic achievement than the pessimists. One reason some of us may not tend to ourselves is that we are perfectionist—we are our own worst critics, and we are constantly falling short.

Another might be called the superhero myth. This is the view that you can (and should) do everything. That doing *more* is always better, that there are no limits to your capacity. This is not a good training technique. Michael Phelps would surely reject it because it is counterproductive. How many times have you had the greatest insight when you gave up and went home, when you stepped away from what you were doing? Except in quarterly earnings (and in ice cream), more is not necessarily better.

So how can you make sure that you take care of yourself in order to live the life you want, to make the contribution to the world that you want to make? There are all sorts of reasons to tend to yourself. Maybe the most compelling one is the "Michael Phelps" argument. It is patently ridiculous to think he could succeed without careful training. It is patently ridiculous to think a Supreme Court advocate

can deliver a successful argument without careful training. And it is patently ridiculous to think you could live the life you want without training for it, and that requires you to both understand and nurture yourself.

Let me leave you with some inspiration on this score.

You have done amazing things, and so have many of our graduates before you. Our graduate Peter Bouckaert, who is the director of emergencies at Human Rights Watch, is credited with shifting the work of Human Rights Watch from after-the-fact investigations of atrocities to on-the-scene, real-time but accurate reports of what is happening in the midst of atrocities—with predictable consequences for policy. Peggy Russell and Steven Dinkelspiel, when they were students, started the East Community Law Project with a group of students and you all know what that has contributed to the world. Similarly, last year's graduate Angela McCray founded the Project ReMade. One of our graduates from 2003, who suffered his whole life from dyslexia, developed the Intel Reader—which scans texts and then reads them, a lifesaver for those who suffer from dyslexia.

Or, better yet, think about your own hero, the person who has inspired you, the person who is a model for you. On this father's day weekend, I can say that, for me, one of my models is my father. A man who, after a rough childhood, somehow found a way to treat everything in his adult life as the chocolate sauce on top of the ice cream. He never found other people's foibles irritating, only understandable. He was decent and kind and funny and he loved and was contented with his life.

Do you think that any of your heroes could have made the difference they made without tending to themselves, without doing the equivalent of training? I don't think so. To bring their best game they had to take care of themselves. So please, when you are not tending to yourself, try to remember that. *Chaaaaaarge!*