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Berger Scholarship Dinner, Speech #2 – The Luck of the Outliers

“A fear of foolishness is what keeps us from painting the pictures we would like to paint, composing the poems, courting the lovers, making the friends, pursuing the jobs, and starting the businesses. Those who know *this* can confront and transcend their fear of ridicule: That every path breaker has looked foolish and been humiliated, yet society depends upon them utterly. Only those who are willing to risk looking foolish can invent a breakthrough.”

- Richard Farson and Ralph Keyes, from their book

Whoever Makes the Most Mistakes Wins

Ladies and Gentlemen, I've been a fearful fool for the past 20 years of my life. Despite the calm presence I purposefully project, I stand here before you tonight internally intimidated by your opinion of me and how I present myself, because, as powerful and prominent members of society, your opinions matter, and the society you uphold depends upon you utterly. You have accumulated a wealth, both of a mental and a material worth, which is valued by everyone present in this room. But it is your wisdom and knowledge that precede your presence as path-breakers, as money-makers, because without the first, you would have never made the second.

Even **Andrew Carnegie**, known for his steel company, his university, his philanthropy, and his status as the second richest person in the history of mankind, with his foresight, **“resolved to stop accumulating and to begin the infinitely more serious and difficult task of wise distribution.”**

And so now I've been painted into the picture, the recipient of this “wise distribution,” and I feel compelled to be responsible and accountable for what you have given me. Hence, my former fear of foolishness.

But I turned 21 this year, and maybe it's all psychological, but upon reaching official, legal “manhood,” self-reflection and self-assessment kicked in. I thought back to the major events that have brought me here: a grandmother's death, a surgery, a storm, and an acceptance letter to a university. I thought back to the core life lessons that my parents have taught me: respect, organization, and tenacity. I thought back to my family and friends who never had this opportunity, those who weren't lucky enough to catch the same breaks. But I also thought forward.

Around the same time I became “of age” I had just finished reading the book Outliers by **Malcolm Gladwell** for one of my classes. Gladwell's theory is that the outliers of our species – the Bill Gateses, the Rockefellers, the Carnegies – are not untouchable or incomprehensible geniuses who have made it as far as they have simply by their own skills and merits. Instead, he states that **“outliers are those who have been given opportunities – and who have had the strength and presence of mind to seize them... They are products of history and community, of opportunity and legacy. Their success is not exceptional or mysterious. It is grounded in a web of advantages and inheritances, some deserved, some not, some earned, some just plain lucky – but all critical to making them who they are. The outlier, in the end, is not an outlier at all.”**

Yet, I constantly compare myself to my contemporaries to see what I can learn from their accomplishments. I see students who vastly outrank me in terms of intelligence or insight, extracurricular activities, or connections with people of prominence. For the past 20 years I considered myself as struggling to keep up, fighting to keep my head above water, constantly treading just to stay afloat in a sea of outliers.

But once I read Gladwell's book, it finally struck me that I too have the ability, for how else could I have made it this far? It finally struck me that I too have the strength and foresight to take advantage of the breaks that life gives me. And it finally struck me that it is all of you who are giving me this opportunity, because the bottom line is this: without your donations, I couldn't attend Vanderbilt.

More importantly, we're lucky enough to have received our scholarships from living donors. Lucky because having that personal relationship and connection with great and successful men and women from our own city is far more encouraging than getting a handout from some random dead industrialists from decades past who will only be remembered for the money behind their names.

You are the living helping to close the achievement gap for the living. You are helping to break down the social barriers that keep kids contained within their cultural legacies and histories. You are giving young minds with the ability the opportunity to show society what we can achieve.

And because of that,

I no longer fear foolishness.

I've learned from my mistakes.

Falling flat in the past has helped me to find my own path, and that has made all the difference.

And now, only confidence runs through these veins.

Thank you.