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Peabody Roundtable Donor Society Dinner
7 October 2010

People and Passion: A Panacea for the Poison

Ladies and Gentlemen, tonight, I want to guide you on a thought experiment. I want to take you back into your past to help you think about your present so we can discuss our future. I want to make you reach back through the firing synapses and remember what it was like to be young, impressionable, foolish, and full of potential. So please, if you would, humor me now and close your eyes.

[5 seconds]

I want you to imagine the people who have meant the most to you, the people who have made the biggest, positive impacts upon your life. Can you see their faces? Can you remember what exactly it was that they did for you?

Was it grandma who picked you up from school everyday and made sure you did your homework because your parents were too busy working to do it themselves? Was it a sibling who handed down some of life's harshest wisdom to you so that you wouldn't have to figure it out the hard way like he did? Was it a friend who stayed up late studying with you, stayed after school practicing with you, or just stayed with you when you needed her the most? Was it an author whose ideas changed the way you looked at life, and after finishing the book, your eyes and mind were no longer able to see the world in the same way ever again? Was it a stranger who helped you simply for the sake of generosity? Was it a teacher who showed you what "respect" really meant by both demanding it as well as giving it? Was it a mentor who helped you to find your passion in life, to spark the fire that still burns inside you and will continue to burn inside you until only smoldering coals of you are left to light that fire in another?

Now, imagine what your life would have been like without those people.

Imagine having no grandma to retrieve you from the school parking lot.
Imagine walking home with a sack filled with heavy books and a chest filled with a heavy heart.

Imagine having no brother, no sister there to give you a roadmap to young life that you could actually read.

Imagine getting lost on the way to adulthood because the perspective wasn't the same and the obstacles weren't drawn to scale.

Imagine having no best friend to share in your shining moments and to commiserate with when it all seemed too overwhelming.

Imagine experiencing life without having an equal that could legitimately say "I see where you're coming from" because his or her life is the closest thing possible to yours.

Imagine having never read that life-changing book, never reading the wisdom pressed to those pages because it blends in with the billions of others just like it.
Imagine viewing the rest of life like the child you were before you read such wise words.

Imagine having no benevolent stranger who saw worth and opportunity in you, and gave something of himself to help you grasp that opportunity and realize your own worth.
Imagine never being shown the benefits of “pay it forward.”

Imagine having no teacher there that actually treated you like an adult and taught you like a person.
Imagine being belittled in every single one of your classroom experiences and leaving school with the bitter taste of forced instruction still festering in your mouth.

Imagine having no mentor who came to you with a head full of gasoline and a handful of matches.
Imagine still being that pile of firewood that was too damp with apathy to ever fully blaze with glory.

Now, stop and flip those thoughts.

What would your life have been like if you had experienced even more moments with those influential people, if you had met even more people throughout your existence who had made such a powerful, positive change in your life? What else could you have accomplished if you had just been given that extra push, extra support, extra wisdom, extra sense of knowing that someone else is out there to help you get back to your feet if you were to fall flat on your face?

Would you have done more? Would you have done it better?

Please, resurface from your thoughts and open your eyes once again.

[5 seconds]

(Now, if this were my class, I'd have you write a reflection paper on your memories, metacognitively analyzing your own thoughts and putting pen to paper to share them with the class, but since we're at a classy dinner, I'll leave you to ponder those questions on your own.)

Enter Peabody from stage right, a school of thought that focuses on human development, on people, on the people who helped you to become the prominent members of society that you are today, people who are sitting in these chairs tonight because they stood on the shoulders of yesterday's giants.

But why focus on people when we could be building skyscrapers, developing new industries, and researching new medicines?

To quote Robin Williams' character of Mr. Keating from the movie Dead Poets Society,
“We don't read and write poetry because it's cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. And the human race is filled with passion. And medicine, law, business, engineering, these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for.”

We focus on people because our study of people is ever-evolving, becoming ever more complex and intriguing and inter-related and cross-cultural and interdisciplinary and poetic and beautiful. Even Sir Isaac Newton, one of the greatest minds of humanity, admitted this, **“I can calculate the motions of heavenly bodies but not the madness of people,”** but this madness should not be a deterrent, but rather, a challenge for us to overcome in our understanding of ourselves. For as Benjamin Franklin reminds us, **“If a man empties his purse into his head, no man can take it away from him. An investment in knowledge always pays the best interest.”**

Because people are what make this world worth sticking around for,
if only just to see what they'll do next.
People are what can take abstract thoughts and make them real and relevant.
People are what make this life worth living.

Let us never forget that in our minds we hold the passion, the panacea for the poison.
Let us float on for forever with these words ever-present upon our lips.