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“Teaching Old Dogs”

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Thank you, Ai Lena, for that wonderful introduction. Thank you, Saskia, for the depth in your reading. And thank you, Class of 2019, for inviting me to be with you, here, today. I am honored and moved to be your choice to speak at Baccalaureate. I’m also a little bit nervous. I imagine that, among many other emotions, you are a little bit nervous, too. Not that you’re nervous for me (although my dad and my wife might be!), but that you’re nervous about what today means and what tomorrow brings. That makes a whole lot of sense.

Graduating from college is a major life transition. Just like starting college, there are expectations from the world. Starting college it was “what’s your major?” and “are you excited?” and “have you talked to your roommate yet?” Those are expectations for young people, those who are just starting to fledge. The expectations at this moment are bigger, that you’ll be doing A Thing, so the common refrain is “so what’s next?” or “do you have a job yet?” Maybe you do have a job, or a position in a year of service organization, or acceptance into a graduate program, or a plane ticket to somewhere, or something else, or maybe you don’t yet have an answer to the “what’s next” question. But still, the expectation is that you’re finishing this chapter, closing this door, or some other metaphorical end, so that you start paying your own bills (if you don’t already), living on your own, contributing to the world, and generally Adulting. If anything is worthy of nervousness, a transition like graduating from college certainly is! So what do I say to someone – nearly two hundred someones – going through such a transition?!

I thought about all sorts of things, talked to all sorts of people, and more or less worried about what to say from the moment I agreed to speak. I finally realized that it would be helpful to tell you that much of the rest of life is like teaching an old dog. Seriously. You might be familiar with the U.S. idiom of “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” It’s basically a shrug-your-shoulders way of saying that people and things are never going to change, so it’s not worth your time to even make the attempt to change anything. Here’s the deal. That statement, no – that mindset, is absolute crap. Old dogs can absolutely, 100%, without a doubt learn new tricks. Other people and the world can absolutely, 100%, without a doubt change. You can, you should, and you must, attempt to teach those old dogs and attempt to make change where you see that change needs to happen. You just have to know how to do that and what to expect.

As I think through the various parts of teaching old dogs, two overarching themes stand out to me. The first is patience. Having the patience to work for change is a necessity and a fundamental component of life. Think about your own level of patience; is it where you want it to be? If not, practice it! Patience is skill, and like all skills, takes development. This leads me to the second

theme I see, which is having a growth mindset¹. A growth mindset is the belief that core components of people can be changed and developed through persistent effort. This is in contrast to a fixed mindset, which is the belief that people have core components that cannot be changed. Often studied with individuals in terms of their beliefs about their own intelligence or talent, growth mindsets also apply to our beliefs about and interactions with others.

So how do you apply a growth mindset to teaching an old dog? It starts with rejecting that idea that they cannot learn and believing that they can. From there, you have to figure out what your old dog needs in order to learn a new trick.

As I see it, teaching an old dog new tricks is a fairly straightforward, at least on the surface, three part process. First, teaching an old dog means clearly thinking about and communicating your goals. Your old dog is not going to understand if you're trying to teach it many tricks multiple different ways all at the same time. Second, it means being authentically you and building rapport with your old dog. Your old dog has to learn who you are and that it can trust you. Third, and most importantly, it means being aware that you will confront obstacles. Sometimes your old dog is going to decide it would rather take a nap on the couch instead of learn new tricks. Or better yet, sometimes your old dog is going to decide to take a dump on the carpet just as you were about to begin teaching it. In those situations, you need to be patient as you work to overcome those obstacles. Taking a step back, this three-part process looks a lot like how the rest of life works, too; it's all a process, but it's one you can shape to the best of your ability.

Before we look more closely at the three-part process of teaching an old dog, it helps to think about who or what your "old dogs" might be. You might have a literal old dog that you're trying to teach to sit, or walk on a leash, or get along with a cat. What's more likely, however, is that your old dogs are the people you already know and love or those you will meet, the institutions or organizations to which you belong or will join, the large and small communities in which you live throughout your life, or even yourself. You are not immune from old dog status just because you are chronologically young.

You've already encountered old dogs. Take a moment; I'm sure you can think of one.

Regardless of who or what you thought of, remember that all old dogs – whether they are people, institutions, or literal old dogs – are capable of growth and change. Let's figure out how.

Part one of teaching an old dog is about the clarity and consistency of your communication. This is the easiest part. Figure out what you want to say and how to articulate it clearly (though this may mean iterations of refinement), then keep talking about it. Sometimes, you may be the only voice talking about a possible change or area of growth. Being a solitary voice can be simultaneously isolating, scary, and awkward. Embrace that awkwardness, that fear, and that isolation, because your perspective matters. In my field, social psychology, we talk about persuasion and attitude change. One of the results from research in that domain is that in order for a minority opinion holder to be influential, the message conveyed must be consistent². We also know that the clearer the message, the more persuasive it is. Thus, when working toward a change in an old dog, no matter who or what that old dog may be, the more clear and consistent you can make your communication,

¹ Dweck, C. S. (2012). Mindsets and human nature: Change in the Middle East, the schoolyard, the racial divide, and willpower. *American Psychologist*, 67, 614-622.

² See, for example, Moscovici, S., Lage, E., & Naffrechoux, M. (1969). Influence of a consistent minority on the responses of a majority in a color perception task. *Sociometry*, 34, 365-380.

the more successful you will be. It takes some time to develop a clear and consistent message, so I do have a word of caution for you. As you move into the world from here, you may see all sorts of things you want to change, old dogs to whom you would like to teach new tricks. But you can't tackle all of them, at the same time, all by yourself. You may want to, but I strongly encourage that you do not. You are one person with a finite amount of time and energy. Instead, pick one thing and dive in. Refine your message and change your old dog. Once you've made that change, start on another.

Part two of teaching an old dog is about being authentic and building rapport. These two concepts sometimes work well together. When we feel like we know who someone really is, we feel like we can make connections, or at least understand how to work with them. We know what to expect and the world feels predictable. This predictability allows for the building of a network of people supporting you and your message, with you supporting them and their messages in return, and all of you working to teach new tricks. However, the relationship between authenticity and rapport can be complicated in two primary ways. Sometimes, people assume that to be authentic means to be unchanging; as if there is only one true version of each person or thing. Sure, there might be some things about me, or you, or Earlham, or wherever you call home, that haven't changed over time. For me, maybe what hasn't changed is my optimistic outlook. But viewing authenticity as unchanging means making the assumption that any change or deviation is inauthentic. But part of authenticity IS change – you are not your kindergarten self. That means that what is authentically you, or your best friend, or significant other, right now, might not always be authentically you or them. My wife, Shana, and I regularly talk about how we have changed since we've known each other. We are both different people, in some large and small ways, than we were when we met. This growth is one of the reasons that authenticity and rapport can have a complicated relationship sometimes. If you've changed, or watched someone else change, maintaining rapport can be tricky. We need to relearn what were once predictable patterns. If you think about a literal old dog who has been with you for a while, it might not understand new behavior patterns and will be super confused when new behaviors emerge. Another reason that authenticity and rapport can have a complicated relationship is that it takes time for rapport to build. For any old dogs, literal or figurative, dealing with newness, such as moving to a new location or interacting with a new person, means building rapport. Even if the new location or new person have been the same “authentic” version of themselves forever, that rapport is not yet present because it takes time to understand how the newness works and how it fits in to your prior understanding of the world. All of this makes part two of teaching old dogs a bit trickier.

Now we've arrived at part three of teaching old dogs: obstacles. This is, by far, the hardest part of teaching old dogs, who- or whatever they may be. Both of the readings you heard today mentioned obstacles. But both of the readings also represented not being pulled down by obstacles, which is important. While Whitman says he will carry his burdens with him, he also says he will divest himself of things holding him and will not be troubled by those who deny him³. In contrast, Silverstein simply rejects obstacles⁴. However you deal with them, confronting obstacles should be an expected part of teaching any old dog.

³ Whitman, W. (1856). Song of the open road. Retrieved, April 10, 2019, from <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48859/song-of-the-open-road>.

⁴ Silverstein, S. (2014). Listen to the mustn'ts. In S. Silverstein *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.

There are all sorts of obstacles you are going to face. You already know how to overcome minor obstacles. For example, one of my favorite random hallway conversations happened with a member of your class – looking at you, Nina! – and it’s a perfect demonstration of overcoming small obstacles. It goes something like this: While chatting in the elevator, Nina indicated that she’d caught whatever Earlham plague was going around at the time. When I expressed sympathy, she responded with “Yeah, but I’ve got ibuprofen, antihistamines, and the will to live, so I’m good.” She’d figured out how to overcome the obstacles (symptoms of her illness) and was forging ahead. Overcoming larger obstacles works much the same way.

When facing obstacles, I find it helpful to figure out what they are and where they come from. Some obstacles will come from outside of you; I think there are three primary types of those obstacles. First, you may not have the resources you need. If that happens, figure out who has those resources and build networks (see part two) or figure out how else to get them. Second, you will encounter people who tell you that you cannot do the thing you are trying to do. Often, these people will not stand in your way, so channel your inner Ariana Grande, say “Thank you, next,” and move on. Third, there will be people who actively oppose you. While it can be very tempting to disregard these people, take lessons from our consensus process: find out why they oppose you, listen carefully, and try to find ways to meet them where they are. If it turns out you cannot find common ground, know that you can still move forward.

Obstacles from outside of yourself often seem more tangible, and therefore, easier to deal with. But it’s often more important to confront the obstacles coming from within. One internal obstacle you will face, as Silverstein reminds us, are your mustn’ts. What are your mustn’ts and where do they come from? Ask yourself if those mustn’ts work for you – it’s okay to answer yes or no, as knowing the answer allows you to identify them as beneficial or harmful. A second internal obstacle is the burdens you carry. Knowing what those burdens are, and that you carry them, may allow you to shape your life in a way that lessens their impact. Finally, a third internal obstacle you will likely face is impostor syndrome – feeling like you don’t know enough or aren’t good enough to be where you are. The vast majority of people feel like an impostor at various points in their lives. I certainly have and sometimes still do. People who are far more amazing and accomplished than I am have experienced impostor syndrome. But here’s the thing – you know your shit. The vast majority of the time, impostor syndrome is your own inner critic talking louder than the people who believe in you, or who hired you, or who asked you to speak at a Baccalaureate ceremony. Veeeeery rarely, you might not know the thing you think you need to know – and after all, as An Adult, shouldn’t you know The Things?! So I’m going to fill you in on a secret. Most of the time, adulting consists of consulting Google or finding an “adultier adult.” Don’t let impostor syndrome tear you down or keep you from growth; you have learned and taught and you will learn and teach others new tricks.

Think about the old dogs in your life. Are they literal? Are they metaphorical? Are they you? Regardless, don’t give up on them. Develop your growth mindset. Start believing, if you didn’t already, that old dogs can learn new tricks. They can! To teach them new tricks, you need a clear and consistent message, to build rapport, to deal with obstacles, and the patience to wait while you work for the change you want.

If I can leave you with anything, Class of 2019, let me leave you with this. Change and growth can be hard. Change and growth can be scary. But change and growth are both part of the process of teaching old dogs new tricks. You’ve got this.