

Good evening and welcome to Commencement 2014! My name is Matt Sanger and I am fortunate enough to be the principal of Garden Spot High School. Congratulations Class of 2014...it sure is a great day to be a Spartan!

I'd like to start this evening by sharing with you a story. Before I do that, however, I want you to take a look at a quote that I recently came across while reading the news. It is projected on the screen before you. Opportunity is nowhere. Honestly, spend a few minutes reading or watching the news and it's pretty easy to validate that statement. Please, keep that quote in mind as I speak with you this evening. Opportunity is nowhere. Got it? Great!

Now, on to my story. There are these two young fish swimming along the Conestoga River and they happen to come across an older fish who is swimming in the opposite direction. The older fish nods and says, "Good morning, guys. How's the water?" The two young fish swim on for a while, and the one suddenly stops, looks over to the other and says, "What the heck is water?"
(TeamONE, 2014)

The point of the fish story is simple: the most obvious and important realities in life are often the ones that are the most difficult to see and discuss (TeamONE, 2014). In laymen's terms, the fish story is a moral. However, the fact is that in the day-to-day challenges of adult existence, moral stories can be of life or death importance (TeamONE, 2014).

Seniors, let's be honest..."you haven't a clue as to what "day-in, day-out" really means. There happen to be large parts of adult American life that no one ever talks about at commencement. One such part involves boredom, routine, and petty frustration. Your parents and the older folks in attendance know all too well what I'm talking about" (TeamONE, 2014).

Think of it this way, it's an average adult day, you get up in the morning, go to your job, and work for eight or ten hours. At the end of the day you're tired and stressed. All you want to do is go home, eat dinner, and maybe, just maybe, unwind for an hour before hitting the sack. Because, guess what, in a few hours you'll have to do it all over again (TeamONE, 2014).

Unfortunately, as you're getting ready to make dinner, you realize there's no food at home. You haven't had time to shop this week

because of your job. Now, you have to get into your car and drive to the grocery store. And guess what...it's the end of the work day so traffic, as one might expect, is terrible. Consequently, getting to the grocery store now takes hours instead of minutes, and when you finally do get there it's overly crowded, because it's the time of day when all the other people who just got off of work try to squeeze in some grocery shopping. So, any hope of quickly "getting in and out" goes right out of the window. What's more is you have to wander all over the store's confusing aisles to find the few items that you want (TeamONE, 2014). Oh, and that huge race car grocery cart that's covered with baby drool and animal cracker crumbs happens to be the cart you're trying to maneuver through this sea of humanity.

Despite these circumstances, you eventually get all of your dinner supplies and head to the checkout line. Except now it turns out there is only one check-out lane open. Imagine that! So the line you're in is unbelievably long, which is overly annoying and just plain stupid (TeamONE, 2014).

As you try to wrap your mind around why none of the self-checkout lines are open, you realize that you can't take your frustration out on the frantic teenage girl working the register, who

is overworked and whose daily tedium surpasses the imagination of any of us here at this ceremony (TeamONE, 2014).

At any rate, you finally get to the front of the checkout line, pay for your food, and are told to “Have a nice day” in a voice that is the absolute voice of death (TeamONE, 2014). Then you take your 3 foot long receipt, your green canvas man-bag of groceries, and your race car grocery cart (with the one crazy wheel that pulls annoyingly to the right) all the way through the crowded and bumpy parking lot. You start your car and mentally prepare for the drive home through slow, buggy-laden traffic (TeamONE, 2014).

Everyone here has done this, of course. However, it hasn't yet been a part of you graduates' actual life routine – hour after hour, day after day, week after week, month after month, and year after year. But guess what, it will be! And there will be many more annoying, seemingly meaningless routines that I refrained from mentioning for the sake of time (TeamONE, 2014).

That is not the point, however. The point is that petty, frustrating day-to-day routines like this are exactly where the work of choosing your perspective is going to come into play. The traffic jams and the long checkout lines give me time to think, and if I

don't make the conscious decision about *how* to think and *what* to pay attention to, I'm going to be furious and miserable every time I have to shop (TeamONE, 2014). That's just how our brains have been culturally hardwired here in America. We simply are not trained to "pay it forward" as Dr. Hollister just encouraged you to do. Let's be honest, the certainty of situations like this are really all about *me* (TeamONE, 2014). *My* hungriness, *my* fatigue, *my* desire to just get home, and it's going to seem to the world like everybody else is just in *my* way (TeamONE, 2014).

And who are all these people in my way, anyway? Look at how repulsive they are. How non-human they look in the checkout line. Listen to how annoying they are for talking so loud on their cell phones in the middle of the line. Look at how deeply and personally unfair this is for *me* (TeamONE, 2014).

"If I choose to think this way in a store or on the highway, fine" (TeamONE, 2014). Many of us do. Except thinking this way tends to be so easy and automatic that it's no longer a choice (TeamONE, 2014). Again, this is how we have been culturally hardwired in America. It's the automatic way that I experience the mundane, frustrating parts of adult life when I'm operating in the egotistic. In this mindset, it's easy to see that my immediate

needs and feelings should determine the world's priorities (TeamONE, 2014).

The thing is, of course, there are totally different ways to think about the aforementioned situations. Let's change our perspective for a moment. In this traffic, all of the vehicles that are idling in my way, is it not impossible that some of these people have been in terrible accidents in the past? Now, driving is so terrifying that the only way they can feel safe is to drive a tank-like SUV (TeamONE, 2014).

Or that F-150 that just cut me off. Could it be driven by a father whose only child is in cardiac arrest in the seat next to him? The man is frantically trying to get to Lancaster General Hospital before it's too late. You see, he's in a bigger, more legitimate hurry. And, I am actually in *his* way (Wallace, 2005).

Or I can choose to consider the likelihood that everyone else in the grocery store's checkout line is just as bored and frustrated as I am. In fact, by the looks of them, some of these people probably have harder, and more tedious lives than I do (TeamONE, 2014).

Please don't think that I'm trying to tell you how to live, or how to think. Life's hard! It takes resolve and effort. If you're anything like me, some days you won't be able to change your perspective, or you just won't feel like it (TeamONE, 2014).

However, most days, if you're aware enough to make a concerted choice, you can choose to look differently at that lady in the checkout line. You know the one I'm talking about...the one who just screamed obscenities at her child. Yeah, that's her...the one who has needle tracks all over her arm...a sure sign that she's a heroin addict. But you know what? Maybe she's not usually like this. Maybe she's been up the last five nights holding the hand of a husband who's dying of brain cancer and the illicit drugs have become the only thing that can make her feel as good as she did when her husband was in the prime of his life just a few months ago. Or maybe this lady is the low-wage waitress at the local diner who anonymously paid your family's dinner bill the previous weekend (TeamONE, 2014).

Of course, none of this is likely, but is it really impossible? It just depends on what you choose to consider. If you're absolutely certain that you know what reality is, and you're operating on your hardwired setting, "then you, like me, probably won't consider

possibilities that aren't annoying and miserable" (TeamONE, 2014).

However, if you really learn how to pay attention, then you will know there are other perspectives. It will actually be within your power to experience a crowded, purgatory-like situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that made the universe: love, fellowship, and the spiritual oneness of all things at their core (TeamONE, 2014).

Not that all of these things are necessarily true. In fact, the only thing that is true is that you get to choose your perspective as you're going through life's journey. This, I contend, is the freedom and beauty of a real education; an education that I believe you received while attending Garden Spot High School. I trust you learned how to be well-adjusted. How to decipher what has meaning and what does not (TeamONE, 2014).

That, Class of 2014, is real freedom. That, Class of 2014, is being educated. My sincere hope is that we taught you how to use the gray cells between your ears; not *what* to think, but *how* to think. The alternative is unconsciousness, the rat race, the constant

gnawing sense of a life that could have been...in other words, the alternative is a slow and painful death (TeamONE, 2014).

I know this probably doesn't sound like the inspirational, sunshine and lollipop commencement speech you were all expecting. For that I sincerely apologize. What it is, however, is life; free of all the Hollywood nonsense that we are spoon-fed on a daily basis. You are, of course, free to think of it whatever you wish (TeamONE, 2014).

Just please, please do not dismiss it as a holier than thou Mr. Sanger sermon. None of this is about morality, dogma, or questions of life after death. Truth lies in the life we choose to live *before* death. In part, it's about the value of your high school education, which has almost nothing to do with knowledge, and everything to do with a simple awareness; an awareness of what is so real and essential, so hiding in simplicity and in plain sight, around us all the time, that we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over – this is water – this is water – this is water (TeamONE, 2014).

Class of 2014, it is unequivocally difficult to take on a different perspective in the midst of the commotion that we call life. To be

so alert, so alive and in tune with the world around us. But I want to tell you that what you get out of life depends on *your* perspective. I am convinced that you can achieve anything in life...anything. But you, Class of 2014, need to choose to do it! And when you choose to entertain a different perspective, you may soon find the quotes you come across in the news such as, “opportunity is nowhere” actually reads, “opportunity is *now* here”, and it commences tonight (TeamONE, 2014)

Congratulations Class of 2014. I will miss you dearly...God bless!

Works Cited

TeamONE. (2014, April 27). *This is water – commencement speech by David Foster Wallace* [Video File]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0lu2e-q8ntM>.

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