

FIRST THINGS FIRST

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Pretty tall order to follow the Great American Eclipse. And maybe even more so to be placed in the company of Wittenberg Series speakers. I am not a best-selling author. I did not escape a repressive regime. I am not an Emmy winning filmmaker. I did not tour with Adele. And, until Sunday evening, I did not know that “first things first” was a line in an Iggy Azalea hit. Don’t worry, I am not going to try to rap.

I dropped in on some classes yesterday. It’s good, I think, for a president to do that and be reminded of the centrality of teaching and learning. I still love FDOC, even though I’m not in the classroom on a regular basis and haven’t been for a decade. Watching our faculty colleagues get the semester started, doing their first things with their classes, reaffirmed the first thing I want to do today – tell you a little bit more about myself.

FIRST THINGS FIRST PART 1 – Who am I?

Some of you were more involved in the search process that brought me to Wittenberg, some of you reached out to former colleagues of mine to learn more about me, and a few of you have had the chance to work with me during my first two months at Witt. So, pieces of this may be old news to some. But beyond name, major, something notable I did last summer (I started this really great new job!), and a fun fact, I think it will be useful for you to know a little bit more about me.

Remember that word – useful.

I was born in Athens, Ohio. My father, who was a first generation college student, was finishing his Ph.D. in Speech Communication at Ohio University. My arrival interrupted his preparation for a final examination in phonetics. He remembers vividly that the last thing he read before the nurse came out to tell him he had a son (those were different times, no fathers in the delivery room) was about glaudal fricative approaches to receding vowel glides. I do not know of such

approaches. Not sure why he remembers that, especially vividly. But I am also not sure why the only two places he could ever remember the directions to were his office and the golf course. I do know he found his vocation and his avocation in those places. I don't remember much about Athens. My dad finished his degree and we moved to Carbondale, Illinois when I was about three months old. He spent most of his career at Penn State, as a faculty member, and at the University of New Mexico, as an administrator. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree. He's retired and can now find his way to many golf courses.

My mother, the younger daughter of two college educated K-12 teachers, is artistic, creative, and organized. When the school year was over, my grandfather moved the family to Glacier National Park where he was a ranger for the summers. She and her older sister had each other to play with, and to avoid the bears with. During my childhood, she was mostly a stay-at-home mom. Later, she found her vocation, a place where she could bring together her artistry, creativity, and organization.

She directed special events for the president's office at Penn State. Not too far from the tree, again. Next time you are at an event on campus, thank the people who organized it and are working at it; they work hard.

I have a younger sister. Back in the day, she was an accomplished musician and a much better athlete than I was. When she was eight, she won the county championship in the backstroke, and a trophy. I'd never gotten a trophy in little league baseball (those were different times, no participation trophies). I started swimming the next season. Swimming became the most important activity of my youth and later led to my first career.

I grew up around college campuses and with friends whose parents worked on college campuses, in State College, Pennsylvania from the time I was seven. Fun fact – There are at least four State College Area High School graduates at Wittenberg right now. I didn't realize how much my life has been shaped by my time as a "fac brat" until much later.

I did the normal things as a kid. Normal, at least, for a suburban, upper middle class, white, male child. I was privileged, though I certainly wouldn't have recognized it. We played whiffle ball, capture the flag, dodge ball, and other games in the park down the street or in the street in front of our houses (those were different times, no video games, though we did get Atari Pong when I was in high school). Vacations were usually to visit grandparents. Starting at age twelve, my life pretty much revolved around swimming, with golf on the side in the summer.

My junior year in high school I sustained a shoulder injury that caused me to lose the entire season. I stayed involved with the team and my closest friends by helping the coaches. I had been part of an age group state champion relay team, but it turned out I was better on the deck than in the water.

When I graduated from high school, I did what most of my classmates did – I enrolled at Penn State. I also became the head coach of the State College Area YMCA AquaLions.

Between school, coaching, and delivering pizzas for Domino's, I didn't have much time for anything else. Practice was at 5:30am, so I intentionally scheduled 8:00am classes (those were different times, some of them were Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday).

I earned my BS in Finance with distinction, but my passion was for swimming. My swimmers and I enjoyed a lot of success. I was able to help them believe they could achieve at a higher level than they thought possible. I really enjoyed helping others succeed. My work, and an American Swimming Coaches' Association internship (those were different times, internships were pretty rare), led to job offers and opportunities to coach in Nashville, Denver, Knoxville, Tuscaloosa, and at the US Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs. Our teams had world record holders and Olympic champions. I watched them as I worked mostly with middle-school aged swimmers.

My full-time coaching career came to an end when 1) I couldn't afford to get my car repaired, when 2) I began to question what we were asking 8-9-10 year-old kids to do in the way of training and travel, and when 3) I was in a long-distance romantic relationship.

Sharon and I both grew up in State College. We were a year apart in school, but did not meet until I was a freshman at Penn State and she was a senior in high school. We were friends. I dated her best friends. She dated mine. We became very good friends. We started dating about five years later. I have been married to my best friend for almost 29 years. She is a partner in my work as your president.

After coaching, I started working in corporate finance. I earned an MBA, also from Penn State. I had a successful career, but something was missing. I started coaching again part-time. That stopped when Janie and, then, Kate came along. Being a parent was and is great, but there was still something missing in my work life. I started teaching as an adjunct at Penn State

alongside my managerial roles in finance. It became clear I could take my work experience and my coaching experience and help others succeed through teaching. I decided to pursue a Ph.D. at the University of Texas and we moved to Austin.

Students, make a note – Going back to graduate school with two young children, and going from a good salary to a graduate assistantship is really, really hard. I took a break from my doctoral studies mid-stream. I was not on any campus, other than a corporate campus at which there were 20,000 employees, for the longest stretch in my life. Something was definitely missing. It was almost a year later when I went to a conference at SMU. I knew right then that I wanted to do my life's work on a college campus. I was going to work in the family business, higher education, one way or another. I earned the opportunity to finish my Ph.D. while teaching at Juniata College. Somewhere in there my Dad said, "You are too academic to be practical and too practical to be academic. I think you'll end up an administrator." It was during that time that Provost Jim Lakso, Wittenberg '67, started tapping me for

leadership roles. Jim was a role model; I thought I might like to be a Provost.

I imagine most of the faculty and staff here know my career path from there. For others, briefly – After Juniata, ten years at Albion College. Four different jobs during that time – faculty member, academic program director, vice president for finance and administration, and interim president. At Oberlin College and Conservatory for the last three years as vice president for finance and administration. Now Wittenberg.

What do I hope you, especially students, will take from all that? First, you don't always know where life will take you. Build skills that will be transferable and stand the test of time. Learn how to write, how to think, and how to develop relationships. Keep learning, formally through continued study and in any and every way you can. Plan, but be ready to change course quickly. Dwight Eisenhower once said, "I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable." Over time, different threads will get woven into your fabric. Find

something that engages your mind and arouses your passion, a vocation, and create a tapestry that fulfills you and serves others.

PART 2 – USEFULLNESS AND MY “THIS I BELIEVE”

The writings of William Durden, a former president of Dickinson College, have been a big influence on me. He draws on the thinking of Dr. Benjamin Rush, signer of the Declaration of Independence, founder of Dickinson, and later founder of Franklin College (now Franklin & Marshall), who felt, as described by Durden, “an American liberal arts education was to be, above all, useful – useful to oneself, but also to society.” Rush and his contemporaries wanted an educational system that matched the government that came out of the American Revolution. They were concerned that the models of higher education from the past, from Europe, were not well suited to their time and place. Thomas Jefferson wanted a “practical education” to be provided at his University of Virginia. Rush wrote:

It is equally a matter of regret that no accommodation has been made in the system of education in our seminaries [colleges] to the new form of government and the many national duties, and objects of knowledge, that have been imposed upon us by the American Revolution. Instead of instructing our sons in the Arts most essential to their existence, and in the means of acquiring that kind of knowledge which is connected to the time, the country, and the government in which they live, they are compelled to spend [time] learning two languages which no longer exist, and are rarely spoken, which have ceased to be the vehicles of Science and literature, and which contain no knowledge but what is left to be met within a more improved and perfect state in modern languages. We have rejected hereditary power in the governments of our country. But we continue the willing subjects of a system of education imposed upon us by our ancestors in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Had agriculture, mechanics, astronomy, navigation and medicine been equally stationary, how different from the present would have been the condition of mankind.”

The time at which Rush left Dickinson to found Franklin was when the former did not hire a chemistry professor or a German professor. Certain disciplines were not thought to have a place even then.

Fast forward to today, and I think Rush's criticisms in his time bear some resemblance to those we hear today. Again quoting Durden, "The liberal arts are under assault by those who, under the mantle of affordability and efficiency, would reject it for the immediate, but often temporary, benefit of education as job training." Does that mean Rush would take the side of those, today, who see little value in the liberal arts? Perhaps, but I think there are some elements of what Rush imagined that are very much alive in liberal education and at Wittenberg.

He believed that a useful education occurred inside and outside the classroom. That the "extracurricular and recreational activities, and their living arrangements" were an important part of that education. He wanted his students to be engaged in the community and its institutions. After all, part of what a

useful education did was prepare citizens who could carry out a democratic form of government. For Rush that meant creating debating societies (student organizations) and having students live with local families (residential education).

Durden, who retired from Dickinson in 2013 after serving fourteen years, felt that some of today's criticism were warranted. He worried that education was becoming more personally useful and less societally useful. He also raised concern about movement to a less holistic, more compartmentalized educational experience. He wrote, "...we must return to the conception of undergraduate education that is comprehensive and does not compartmentalize students' experiences into artificial components that separate the curricular from the extracurricular. We must return to the notion of a "useful" education that encompasses and intertwines personal and public usefulness, demonstrating to our students that personal success and understanding are most complete when they contribute to the public good."

I believe what we do in liberal education is useful. Not all do, and we must take the questions of our usefulness seriously. I think that the institutions that will succeed in the future are those that are intentional about integrating all aspects of the enterprise into the education of their students. We all have a role to play in the learning, growth, and discovery of our students. In addition, like Rush, I think we must continue to evolve in what we teach, and also how we teach it.

Since its founding, Wittenberg has been ahead of many of its peers in what has been taught. In early Wittenberg catalogs, at the time Sprecher was president, there were courses in mathematics and the sciences that were outside the norm for the time. During his presidency, Ort led the introduction of elective studies for juniors and seniors, a first for Lutheran colleges. At that time, we also became test optional.

Depending on one's intended course of study, one only had to take some of the entrance exams in Latin, Greek, mathematics, English, history, and geography. There was a business major here long before most liberal arts and sciences colleges and

universities had one. We continue to move forward today with new programs like analytics and nursing. What will be next? Our motto and our mission remind us of the need to serve others and the greater good. I believe, if we keep the motto, the mission, and usefulness in our sights, Wittenberg will continue to provide a useful education for many years to come.

So, there you have it. First things first. A little bit about me and a little bit about my thoughts on liberal education and our historic and contemporary place in it.

I am excited about the coming year. For me it will be a constant stream of firsts. There will be a lot of listening and learning. You'll see me out and about – in classrooms and the dining hall, at artistic performances and athletic contests. You'll also see me and Sharon walking our dogs, Libbie and Baxter, the first thing on most of my days. I am really looking forward to the unfolding of our first year together.

Thank you.