

GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES CONVOCATION ADDRESS

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JUST DO IT

Dean Butler, colleagues, families and, especially, those of you graduating this weekend:

Thank you for the honor and opportunity to address you on what should be one of the happiest days of your lives. Your graduate education – which may never have felt quite like it had an actual beginning or middle – now finds itself at an end, allowing you truly to begin the rest of your lives as scholars, investigators, educators . . . or whatever comes next for you.

My grandfather was a man not afforded the educational advantages of my generation. He made his living selling bridal dresses in Brooklyn, and he passed away in 1986, the year that I submitted my dissertation here at Yale. But he was healthy until the final weeks of his life, and I do remember speaking with him about completing graduate school and joining the faculty.

Appreciating the opportunity represented by a doctorate from Yale University, he said, “I’m sure you know, Peter, that somewhere in the Bible it is written, ‘you’d better make the most of your life, ‘cuz eventually you’re just gonna die.’” He concluded this little sermon with something like, “So, just do it!”

Too bad that Nike never realized that my grandfather uttered its ubiquitous slogan years before it became the basis for a worldwide marketing campaign! He would

have died a wealthy man . . . or at least would have been wearing sneakers at the time of his passing.

My grandfather's biblical scholarship was, perhaps, better than I might have imagined for someone neither well educated nor especially pious. Indeed, Kohelet, the prophet of that most existentially challenging of books, Ecclesiastes¹, says:

“Whatsoever thy hand attaineth to do by thy strength, that do. For there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.”

Papa was right: He had remembered a scriptural call to arms; a kind of Jewish *carpe diem*. Don't waste this opportunity: Seize the day! No, do more than seize it: Embrace it; own it; live it as if it were the last of one's days. It was more than just grandfatherly advice but, rather, a moral imperative. Those provided with such opportunities – opportunities he never had – are obliged not to squander them.

In my few moments with you today, I hope to discuss both parts of this surprising biblical verse: The first part, encouraging us to engage what we do to the fullest; to do things with passion and commitment. But also the second part, reminding us that life is finite. Both aspects of this verse are significant today, but for different reasons.

Let's start with the easier part: “Whatsoever thy hand attaineth to do by thy strength, that do.” This is not unfamiliar advice. Goethe is thought to have said, “devote each day to the object then in time, and every evening will find something done,” and “Plunge boldly into the thick of life, and seize it where you will, it is always interesting.” The Bal Shem Tov expressed similar sentiments: “The world is new to us every morning

¹ Ecclesiastes, Chapter 9, Verse 10.

... and every man should believe he is reborn each day.” Or, “...he not busy being born is busy dying.” That last part wasn’t uttered by the Bal Shem Tov, the founder of the Chassidic movement in Judaism; it was Bob Dylan.

There are psychological reasons to “do by thy strength.” Behaving in this way turns out to be a key to happiness. You see, psychologists have examined closely the experience of doing something to the fullest, throwing all of oneself into a project, whether it is painting or writing or gardening or playing music or conducting a laboratory experiment or writing mathematical equations or nearly any activity, as long as one can become completely absorbed in it. In this state, one becomes unaware of time, which passes very quickly, and one is totally unself-conscious. One is distracted by nothing and is focused only on the task at hand. This energizing experience of being totally immersed in what one is doing so that there is no room left in consciousness to think about anything else represents a distinct kind of pleasure that has been given the name *flow*.²

The effortless and intrinsically rewarding experience of flow can be found when one’s personal resources are in perfect balance with what one is doing. Unfortunately, we find ourselves in such situations far too infrequently. Sometimes the demands of what we are doing exceed our capacities, and we experience anxiety and stress. More often, we engage in activities that do not tax them nearly enough – our psychological resources far outstrip what is necessary – and we become bored and listless. Consider the psychological experience of watching mindless television, for instance.

² Csíkszentmihályi, M. (1975). *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Csíkszentmihályi, M. (1990). *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper and Row.

However, when personal capacities and task demands are in exquisite balance, one feels neither anxious nor bored, but rather, instead, quite wonderful; one has achieved flow. The athlete who is completely “in the zone” is experiencing flow. So is the jazz pianist fully immersed in an improvised solo playing measure after measure – perhaps for the first time – with no sense of the passing minutes or, indeed, of anything else.

In your lives ahead you will have opportunities to find flow, and you must seize them: “Whatsoever thy hand attaineth to do by thy strength, that do.”

But what about the other part of this verse? The part about there being no work, no device, no knowledge, nor no wisdom in the grave? And the reminder that that is where one, at the end of the day, “goest?” Why can’t we just whistle past the graveyard?

An awareness of the possibility of one’s death – what psychologists call *mortality salience* – gives rise to complicated emotions, emotions that call on an array of coping tactics. Investigators in my field have given this very human dilemma the clever name *terror management*.³ The idea is that confronting mortality (rather than denying it) can be a powerful motivating force in our lives.

We search for meaning every day. We strive for continuity – for a life story; we build relationships and fall in love; we form and join social organizations; we embrace a system of laws and values; we develop and refine a culture, all in an attempt to live compatibly with the sometimes conscious and sometimes unconscious knowledge that we

³ Greenberg, J.; Solomon, S.; Pyszczynski, T. (1997). Terror management theory of self-esteem and cultural worldviews: Empirical assessments and conceptual refinements. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 29, 61-139. Pyszczynski, T.; Greenberg, J., & Solomon, S. (1997). Why do we need what we need? A terror management perspective on the roots of human social motivation. *Psychological Inquiry*, 8, 1–20.

will not live forever, according to terror management theory.

A reminder of our mortality helps us learn to value ourselves and those around us. Indeed, coping with mortality may be the basis for civilization itself. Now you know why I prefer an office with a view of the Grove Street Cemetery.

The great American poet, Wallace Stevens knew this – without having enrolled in Introduction to Psychology – when he wrote of death as the “mother of beauty” in his poem, *Sunday Morning*:⁴

Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,
Alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams
And our desires.

and

Death is the mother of beauty, mystical,
Within whose burning bosom we devise
Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly.

And, so my fellow alumni of Yale’s Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, I say to you this afternoon, here in the courtyard of the Hall of Graduate Studies: “Whatsoever thy hand attaineth to do by thy strength, that do. For there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.”

Or, better yet, as my grandfather would have said: “Just do it!” And congratulations, of course.

⁴ Stevens, W. (1923). *Harmonium*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.