

Social Capital

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President Kepple, Provost Lakso, faculty, families, and most of all, members of the graduating class of 2012, it is such a privilege to address you today.

I must confess, back in January when President Kepple asked me to speak, I was thrilled, honored, and excited . . . for approximately five minutes. After which point, I realized that I would have to say something profound. Let me tell you, the anxiety that realization produced was also profound. Fortunately, I overcame it fairly quickly, and here's how.

It occurred to me that my own graduation from Juniata, back in 1971, might offer some guidance. So I thought back to that day and to the commencement speech. I remembered it was sunny. But that's all I remembered. And it's still all that I remember. If a brilliant insight was revealed in that speech, I missed it. The day was simply too nice.

So graduates, knowing that your primary memory of today may relate to the weather, I'll keep it simple. My advice to you is three words: develop social capital.

Now I know that's not a traditional topic. Graduation speeches are supposed to be about the importance of originality and individualism, of following your dreams, trusting your instincts, and blazing your own unique trail in the world. But I'll avoid that route for two reasons. First, it seems ironic to speak of individualism to a group of people dressed in identical caps and gowns. And second, while individualism is important, I'm convinced that many of our greatest experiences in life, both professionally and personally, come about through our connectedness with others.

It took me a while to understand that. You see, when I was younger, I sought to stand alone more than together. I fancied myself gifted with powers of discernment, or more the ability to quickly detect those of lesser intelligence (or at least with opinions less intelligent) than my own. For example, when I was a student here at Juniata, I recall walking home from lunch with some friends. An upperclassman, physics major, Bill Phillips, briefly joined us. I didn't know Bill well, but he promptly gave an opinion I found so utterly ridiculous that I rolled my eyes. As he left, I said to a friend, "That's one vapid guy." Twenty-five years later, Bill won a Nobel Prize in Physics. His contribution to the field was the development of methods to cool and trap atoms with laser light. Clearly, one vapid guy.

Likewise, during my first year on the faculty at Harvard, I attended a seminar with a friend. The speaker, a fellow from Australia named Barry Marshall, presented a theory that ulcers of the stomach and

duodenum were due to bacterial infections. About halfway through the seminar, my friend and I looked at one another and agreed that this was perhaps the single most idiotic thing that we had ever heard. It should come as no surprise then that Barry also went on to win a Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine.

Looking back on these encounters, one thing is clear –had I not changed my approach to people, I would have quickly found the world’s academics lining up at my door, eagerly seeking my disdain and the accompanying Nobel Prize.

Fortunately, I’ve long since embraced a new motto: develop social capital. Cut people slack, and instead of seeking to differentiate yourself, search for common ground. Probe their viewpoints. Learn from them. Above all, find meaningful ways to connect. The rewards of this outlook are many.

First, there’s the obvious. You may have heard that between sixty-five and eighty percent of jobs are found through networking. Whether you want to learn more about an industry, or get your foot in the door at a particular company, the stronger your network, the better your chances. And long after you’ve secured that first job, networking will continue to support you as your career evolves. Perhaps a former colleague will tap you on the shoulder one day for a new business venture. Or maybe the barista at your coffee shop will put you in touch with that publisher you’ve been dying to meet. Opportunities can arise in the most unlikely places and at the most unexpected times. So keep your options open and your network strong.

A second benefit of investing in social capital is that it broadens your perspective. One of my favorite classes at Juniata was “Great Epochs in World Culture,” a year-long freshman course that tackled age-old questions such as the existence of God and the nature of war. What made the class so unique was the team-teaching format, which brought together some of the brightest minds on campus: professors in physics, religion, philosophy, chemistry, biology, humanism, and social science. With so many disciplines represented, the debates were fascinating. Each professor brought his or her own perspective. The biologist versus the humanist. The chemist versus the philosopher. We quickly learned that even our professors had sharply different views. And rather than detract from the debate, their differences made it richer.

Years later, I felt this idea play out in my career. I was one of a small group of biologists invited to attend a research conference in the Swiss Alps. Half of us had a background in human epithelia. The other half studied microbial genetics. Rather than define these specialties for you, suffice it to say that in the field of biology, at least at that time, our backgrounds were so different that at first we struggled even to communicate. But through focused effort and persistence, we came to understand one another. In fact, an entire new field emerged as a result. It’s called “prokaryotic-eukaryotic GI interactions,” and it has led to important discoveries concerning the development and functioning of the gastrointestinal tract. When

you develop social capital, when you expand both the size and diversity of your network, you'll find that your perspective expands along with it.

A third benefit of developing social capital is its capacity to improve society. Just think of some of the greatest problems we face as a nation today. Take my own field, health care. Today more than fifty million Americans lack health insurance. The United States spends \$2.5 trillion each year on health care. We spend twice as much, and in some cases, almost three times as much per capita as countries such as Australia, Canada, Germany, and the United Kingdom. Yet we rank low in several critical health indices. Why? Clearly there's no shortage of talent. The United States boasts the best physicians, nurses, and public health officials in the world. So the human capital is there. We also boast the most advanced medical technology. And when it comes to financial capital, I don't think anyone can argue that we're not spending enough money on health care. So what's wrong? What's missing from the equation? I would argue that it is social capital.

The current healthcare system is not a system at all. It's a fragmented collection of parts. There is a disconnect between physicians and hospitals, between patients and insurers, between government policy makers and industry. Think about it. Over seventy-five percent of American health care spending is devoted to individuals with chronic conditions, such as heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, obesity, and stroke. Fixing a problem of this magnitude can't be accomplished by any one party alone. It requires collaboration and continuity of care: patients working with their physicians to make important lifestyle changes; physicians working with researchers to identify the most effective treatment recommendations; hospitals coordinating care with nursing homes and physician offices; and insurers and government officials partnering to find ways to incentivize prevention and wellness. If all the stakeholders pooled their resources and expertise, just imagine how different our health care system could be. This is just one example of the impact social capital could have on society. Imagine the implications for the environment, for politics, or for international affairs.

Finally, perhaps most importantly, when you develop social capital, you will discover one of the principal joys in life: the people around you are amazing. For example, while I was CEO of the University of Chicago Medical Center, my Vice President for Community Affairs was an ambitious, brilliant, young woman. Her name was Michelle. Michelle was married to a nice young man with an unusual first name that none of us remembered. We would attend events at the medical center, and Michelle would bring her husband along. That's the way we referred to him, "Michelle's husband." Michelle's husband was both intelligent and serious. When engaged, he had interesting things to say. He was contemplative, penetrating, and whether I agreed with him or not, I had to admire his passion and conviction. Looking back, I'm grateful I made an effort to connect with him. For when Michelle and her husband moved to

Washington, DC in January 2009, I was proud to know both her and her husband, President Barack Obama.

Now will every stranger you meet wind up being president one day? Of course they won't. But maybe one will develop a cure for Alzheimer's. Maybe one will show up on the silver screen. Who knows—maybe one will become your spouse. So make it one of your goals in life to engage as many people as possible.

When I say engage, I mean doing something more substantial than updating your Facebook status with, "At graduation...speaker almost done..." Instead of interacting "wall to wall," try "face to face." Instead of exchanging pleasantries, try exchanging ideas.

Years ago, the country's medical schools were notoriously Darwinian. On the first day of class, the professor would stand up and say dramatically, "Look at the person on your right. Now look at the person on your left. One of you won't be here four years from now." Today I want to give you a different directive.

Look at the person on your right.

Look at the person on your left.

Now look at those in front of you and those behind you.

Really look at them because with stunning frequency, some of your classmates, including those you don't currently know, will pop up later in life. They will broaden your views. They will make interesting contributions to society. They will become colleagues. They will become friends.

Members of the Juniata Class of 2012, the author Anais Nin famously said, "Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage." Today I say to you, "Life shrinks or expands in proportion to the people you know."

So reach out. Engage. The universe is as big as you make it.