Why Are You (We) Here?

WELLESLEY

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The following remarks are excerpted from the Distinguished Faculty Lecture delivered at Orientation in September of 1999.

F. Scott Fitzgerald said that "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function." I want to give your intelligences a bit of a workout by making some propositions to you that won't be opposed, exactly, to what you've heard before, but that may push against what you've heard before and that may thus ask you to conceive somewhat differently of the tasks and the new life before you.

I'm going to take a wild guess, for instance, that somebody has said to you, "It's important to remember that there's a lot more to college than just academics," or maybe, "You really need to get involved in a lot of activities here and not just spend all your time on schoolwork." And what I want to say first in response to such bits of wisdom is a resounding "yes and no."

Yes, of course, life is filled with both opportunities and obligations that don't fall under the heading of work, with obligations that sometimes must trump your work, or with opportunities for pleasure or growth or renewal that it's right and necessary to make time for. There are times for all of us when it's right to lay aside work, even rather pressing work, to meet the demands of family or friendship; times when it's right to squeeze work just a little bit to make space for other kinds of valuable, life-enhancing activities; or times when you just need to take a break so that you can return to work refreshed another hour or another day.

But no: There's no more important reason for being here – really no other truly important reason for being here – than to become absorbed in intellectual work. To the truism, "There's more to life than work," let me add an opposing or complicating truth that's equally crucial for you to grasp and that's much

closer to the heart of our collective enterprise here. There's more to life than work, sure, but there's also a lot more life in work – and especially in intellectual work – than you may realize. And it's the life of intellectual work, the life of the mind, that has called this institution into being and that sustains it and that calls all of us here as we begin this new year.

Everywhere you go for all of your lives you will be faced with both the opportunities and the obligations of love and friendship, of social and political action, of personal and spiritual growth. When it comes to facing and managing these obligations and opportunities, your life at Wellesley is of a piece with the rest of your life; your lives – like mine and those of all your teachers – are worried and enriched by all of these other claims on your time and attention.

But there's also something quite special and distinctive about Wellesley, or about any college or university, a sense in which your time here is set apart from the other times of your life; and a sense in which this place is set apart from the world as well as connected to it. This is the place, and this is the time of your life, in which your first obligation, and your great opportunity, is to open yourself to the extraordinary pleasures of learning and intellectual inquiry. What you learn may well have an impact on the decisions you make and on the power you wield in those other areas of your life – in fact, we certainly hope it will. There's no sharp, bright line that separates intellectual inquiry from other areas of our social and moral and emotional lives. But even if there are no sharp, bright lines, there are rough, practical, lived distinctions to make – and this is the place and the time of your lives when learning comes first.

So let's get back to that odd compound word, "schoolwork," and to the assertion that there's much more to life than it. Well, of course, and it is indeed one secret of survival here to remember that. But the more important secret – and the better kept one – is that work itself, and especially intellectual work, can be a deeply pleasurable part of life. And if you can unlock that secret, it can help you not just to survive here but to flourish. The students who flourish at Wellesley or at any other institution are those who discover not only a happy balance between work and play, but who discover an important source of happiness in their work. It's good to take a break at the end of a long, hard day, but it's even better if you have been so challenged and genuinely engaged by your work that the day doesn't seem to have been all that long or hard.

I don't mean to say that there's no difference between work and play, or to recommend to you an unattainably utopian life in which you whistle your way through every task. Intellectual work can be tedious like any other work; it can be frustrating, and anxiety producing in a variety of ways that are especially its

own. But it can also be extraordinarily gratifying and absorbing; it's work that you can lose yourself in, to use a figure of speech that's worth pondering. It's quite true that there's often a price of entry. You can't expect just to fall right into the pleasures of every new task of learning, any more than you can fall right into the pleasure of playing a musical instrument, or fall right into the pleasure of playing competition-level tennis, or fall right into the pleasure of any activity that requires significant learning and skill. But that doesn't mean that you don't ultimately pursue those activities for pleasure.

Indeed, difficult pleasures can be the most gratifying – and there is no subject or course here at Wellesley that does not have great pleasure to offer if you can do the hard work necessary to open yourself to it. You'll like some subjects more than others, of course, you'll find some pleasures more readily available to you than others, of course; but you should look for the pleasure in every field of study. In every field of study, there are the pleasures of discovery, the excitement of encountering genuinely new information and new ways of looking at the world; and there are the pleasure of understanding, of figuring something out for yourself and, however suddenly or gradually, replacing the pain of incomprehension with the gratification of a perceived order.

With all the talk of pleasure, however, it's time for me to reverse field a bit and to ask you to perform again that F. Scott Fitzgerald trick of holding two opposing thoughts in your mind at the same time. I have said that you should seek pleasure in your studies, and I meant it. At the same time, however, you should not just study what already pleases you. Follow your passions by all means, but don't make the limiting mistake of assuming that you know already the nature and the range of those passions. Don't make the mistake either of thinking that when a book or a subject fails to please you that it's the book or the subject that's been found wanting. The pleasure is there, all right, and you only cheat yourself and make your own life harder if you fail to discover it. Many of your teachers will be immensely skilled at helping you to find the excitement, and to reach the understanding, of their chosen subjects. But don't hold out for that. Don't think of it as somebody else's job to make you interested, to come and find you and coax you out. Some books, some subjects – and most of your teachers here – will meet you more than halfway; but some won't, and you can dramatically enhance both the chance and the character of your success at Wellesley if you will step out and pursue your studies eagerly and open-mindedly.

None of this means that you won't or shouldn't have preferences – you will and you should – or that you won't ultimately make your own independent judgments about what you study – indeed, you will and you must. You can't possibly

agree with everything that you read or hear or find every subject of equal interest and value. But it's both strategically advisable and morally requisite for you to render your judgments cautiously and with a due and humble acknowledgment of all of those other inquirers who may differ from you in taste or in judgment. The longer and the more sincerely that you can consider the possibility that a particular course or subject might have great riches to offer – even if you haven't found them quite yet – the greater your chances of discovering the intellectual pleasure that both leads to success and that is already, in and of itself, a form of success. The longer and the more sincerely that you can consider the possibility that you may be mistaken in an intellectual or moral or political judgment, the better grounded and informed and defended your judgments will be.

I'd like now to extend these arguments by reconsidering and complicating a couple of other familiar ways of thinking and talking about what you're going to do here. You might have heard it said that you are here at Wellesley in order to grow into the best and fullest versions of yourselves that you can be. I've even been known to say such a thing myself, and I need first to acknowledge the force and the reasonableness of this way of conceiving of the process of education. Growth is a nearly irresistible metaphor, and the self is a nearly unavoidable category, when we turn to the subject of education. But I'd like you now to look more closely and critically at all this growth talk and self-development talk, to consider some of its implications, and also to consider some alternative ways of talking and thinking.

First, growth. What about this word that we hear so often and usually in such swoony tones? "I just want to keep learning and growing." "You have to keep growing, or you die." Well, yes. But if growth is an irresistible metaphor, it's also an imperfect and misleading one for the total experience that Wellesley, or any college or university, invites you to have. To say that your time in college stands out from the rest of your life as a time of growth is both to say too much and too little. Too much, because you've all been growing for a while now, and you surely won't stop growing when you leave here. It isn't the fact of growth that sets college apart. But too little, because growth really isn't a sufficient word for what you will do here. To speak of growth is to suggest that what will happen to you here will be somehow effortless and organic, and to suggest, furthermore, that you already contain within your seedling selves the condensed form and substance of all that you will become. But is that how the process of human development really works – and in particular, the focused and specialized part of that process that we call education? Surely there's something more energized and effortful that is required of us, an activity more human and less plantlike, a

process of gathering and building and making. And this process can go forward only when you've made the crucial recognition that the raw materials are not all within you, that you have to seek them out – and seek them without – in the active process of learning.

And now, the self: One hears a lot about self-development in discussions of education, and also about self-esteem, which is commended to us most often as the antidote or at least the alternative to a corrosive, life-inhibiting self-dissatisfaction. And to the extent that those are the two choices – self-esteem or self-dissatisfaction – I'm a big fan of self-esteem. I'm not against self-development, either, of course, any more than I'm against growth. But once again, I want to ask you to think about the implications of these familiar ways of talking, and, in particular, the implications of locating the self so centrally in our conception of education. What happens if we try to push the self aside a little bit?

I spoke a few minutes ago about the central importance of finding work in which you could lose yourself. A figure of speech worth pondering, I said, and I'd like now to ponder it for a moment. I was speaking then about a desirable technique or study skill, about the handy and happy ability to be deeply absorbed in your work. I want to return now to that image of losing yourself, and to the buried metaphor in "absorbed," to discover a larger significance for them in the proper conception of education.

When we speak of losing ourselves in work, we are first describing a local and temporary experience in which we lose track of time, perhaps, and in which we feel the pleasure that comes from having our minds totally and unselfconsciously engaged. But the phrase suggests more than that and can refer to more than just an intense afternoon or evening of study. When we experience the excitement of learning, we lose ourselves in another larger sense, too. For the process of education invites us to do an end run around the false dilemma of self-esteem vs. self-doubt. In pursuing intellectual work, we pursue moods and moments in which we are neither esteeming nor dis-esteeming ourselves, but instead have our minds really and truly on something else. Although our studies may and should lead to our self-development, among other things, the study habit that we need to develop – the best means to our ends – is the habit of self-forgetfulness. This self-forgetfulness, moreover, needn't be experienced as painful or laborious. Indeed, it can come to us as a relief and a liberation. These selves we inhabit can be so hungry and demanding; they can require such constant labor of maintenance and anxiety-management. "What am I doing?" "How am I doing?" "How do I look while doing it?" We wear ourselves out with these questions, and our constant attention to them not only depletes our spirits but distorts our vision and inhibits our ethical and moral growth.

Let me quote George Eliot, an English novelist of the nineteenth century who, in one of the greatest of all novels, called *Middlemarch,* has the smartest and best things I know of to say about the warping, and pervasive effects of self-regard. "Will not a tiny speck very close to our vision," asks Eliot, "blot out the glory of the world, and leave only a margin by which we see the blot? I know no speck so troublesome as self." *Middlemarch* is a truly absorbing story, an extraordinary novel about the complex process by which human beings can emerge from their self-enclosure – can emerge from what Eliot calls "moral stupidity" into a fuller and clearer relationship with the world. I invite you to the English department to find out more about George Eliot – and maybe also to the history or the women's studies departments to find out why she felt obliged to sign her writings – her real name was Marian Evans – with a man's name. For now, I just want to name her as the inspiration and the authority behind this argument about self-forgetfulness – and in particular, behind the assertion that there is a crucial ethical and moral dimension to the discovery and exercise of intellectual passion.

Sometimes this ethical dimension is easy to recognize. When the something else we have our minds on is actually somebody else, another person, living or dead, or a whole other way of life, then we are quite clearly engaged in the morally enlarging activity of recognizing the reality of other persons. But often, in the course of intense study, we forget ourselves not just in contemplation of another person or persons, but in contemplation of an impersonal process or order or set of propositions about the world, a something that interests and engages us for itself and that we simply want to understand or just to know more about. And in those cases, too, I would argue, even when it is an impersonal task or subject that we have turned outward to and not another person, this act of turning outward has both an ethical and a practical value. For whenever we can go out of ourselves into our work, we reap the practical benefits of clarified vision and increased efficiency – and we also implicitly reaffirm the ethical proposition that there is a world of concerns and contingencies beyond us, a world not of our own making, a world that was there before us and will be there after us, and that is vastly larger than we are.

You may hear it said sometimes – and human nature being what it is, you'll probably like to hear it said – that the real reason that Wellesley College is here is for you. You may even say that yourself when you get to feeling a little irked about one or another form of institutional nonperformance. It won't be unreasonable of you to feel that way or even to say it – though you don't want to say it too loudly or too often – and that familiar remark, "Wellesley College is here for

you," like all the others that I've cited expresses an important truth. But like those other important truths, it's really just a half truth – or maybe rather less than half.

So let's look at things a bit differently. Let's try again the experiment that I described a few moments ago – the experiment of putting to one side your selves and mine and considering again, from the new perspective, the question of why Wellesley College is here. Because there's a deep sense in which I'm not here just for you, and Wellesley isn't either – and you're certainly not here just for me, or even for me and all of my colleagues, or even just for each other. We all of us, teachers and students alike, have very important jobs to do – and we are all of us, like all human beings, entitled in some ways to be considered as ends in ourselves. But we are agents as well as ends, and we have responsibilities that go beyond ourselves. Let me try out on you this answer to the question of my title. Maybe the real reason that you're here – even though you don't know it – and the reason that I'm here – even though I often forget it – and the reason that Wellesley College is here – all of your teachers and all of the people who administer and support this institution – is to take care of the library, the library and the laboratories, and all of the accumulated human understanding that they represent.

After all, the books are bigger than we are in some important senses. They were here before us, and they'll be here after us, and they embody a range of experience far wider and more various than ours. We need them. But at the same time, they need us. This caretaking job is a job that should humble us, but it isn't a humble job. The books need to be read and understood and challenged and extended and added to, and they live on only in the lives and minds of those who engage and value them. So that's why you're here: You're here to join in a great tradition of learning and inquiry and also to challenge it and to contribute to it and keep it alive. You're here to learn from your teachers, but also to help and fulfill them because they can't fulfill themselves or play their own role in this great enterprise without the challenge and the opportunity that you offer them with your own eagerness to learn. You're here because learning and understanding are goods in themselves, because learning and understanding are better than ignorance and incomprehension in just the same way that health is better than sickness and kindness is better than cruelty.

The complete text of this speech is available upon request.