

Small Things Matter

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Opening Convocation, August 25, 2016

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President Troha, Provost Bowen, platform party, faculty, staff, and students, let us welcome the Class of 2020 into our amazing Juniata College community! Is everyone excited? Personally, I am a little nervous now. Some of you may be sharing the same sentiment.

Students, how did you arrive here? All of you made the same, excellent decision to come to Juniata College, but you did so through many different pathways. Perhaps you grew up in Pennsylvania and knew about Juniata. Perhaps you traveled hundreds or even thousands of miles to start your collegiate journey here. Many of you probably visited Juniata before making your decision. Do you remember your feelings that day? Were you excited or nervous? Did the beauty of our campus and its natural surroundings inspire you?

When I first stepped on campus, I sensed that Juniata is a place where small things matter. At Juniata, I have developed an appreciation for the little acts of kindness that enrich our lives. In *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, Arthur Conan Doyle wrote, “It has long been an axiom of mine that the little things are infinitely the most important.”¹ Little things may shape our character, define our potential, and magnify our influence and leadership. So let us consider some small things that matter.

I am a microbiologist and my laboratory team studies the microscopic organisms that permeate our bodies and environment. Like Juniata, microorganisms are tiny, but mighty. A sea of microbes invisibly covers our bodies. Some are pathogens that make us sick. Others are “good” microbes, about which we know less, but these microbes can be important for keeping us healthy.* Surprisingly, the number of microbial cells associated with our body exceeds the number of all of our own cells! Although disgusting to think about, if we collected all of the microbes in and on each of our bodies and weighed them, they would be heavier than our brain!

* When shopping on Amazon, I came across advertisements for cute stuffed “microbes.” Sadly, Amazon only sells stuffed “pathogens,” probably because it is more thrilling to buy toys that represent microbes that sicken or even kill us, than those that help us. I bought a bunch of these “microbes” and, to keep you awake during this part of my talk, I have asked Dr. Bowen and Dr. Troha to toss them out into the audience to help “inoculate” you. You have now just received *Giardia*! Sorry for the stomach cramps and diarrhea.

The microbial ecosystem that lives in and on each of our bodies includes a wide variety of different microbes. It is like an invisible microbial cloud surrounding and permeating each of us and that intimately interacts with our cells and organ systems. When this microbial ecosystem gets “out of whack,” it may lead to negative effects on our health. Therefore, although they are invisible to the naked eye, microbes can have the power of life or death over us. Microbes are small things that can have huge effects.

However, small and powerful things are not confined to the microscopic world. We can also see them in the day-to-day examples of the small acts of kindness that we may experience from and contribute to our Juniata community. Somewhere someone is longing for a little encouragement. They do not need much—maybe just a simple expression of hope or a small act of kindness.

I came to Juniata as a well-prepared scientist, excited for an unknown future here. But actually inside, I was a broken person. I suffered from debilitating panic attacks and depression after the tragic and sudden death of my lifelong friend and brother, Joseph Lamendella. What gave me the strength to persevere through this challenging time? As I reflect, it was an endless series of seemingly small but selfless acts by students, faculty, and staff at Juniata that inspired and encouraged me day after day.

Consider a few precise examples of the “small things” that I might experience during a typical Juniata day.

I start the day at 7:00 a.m., maybe a little tired and groggy, and so go to Jitters café in von Liebig. Mary cheerfully greets me with a “Well howdy there, what can I get ya, hun?” She fills my cup all the way to the brim to maximize the caffeine potential. Much appreciated.

At 8:00 a.m. or so I may look outside, in the dead of winter, to see Dr. Troha and Dr. Bowen serving coffee and cookies to students in subzero temperatures. I then kiss my cup of coffee as I watch from my warm, cozy space.

I may then spend some time preparing for classes by printing out my lecture notes. Wham, I encounter a paper jam only minutes before lecture. Murphy’s Law strikes again; I never learn. However, Susan Pierotti, our office manager, stops what she is working on to come help undo the atrocious paper disaster that I created.

After lunch, I may be checking emails and getting some work done. However, we all need breaks, right? So I procrastinate and walk down to the laboratory to check on my research students and make myself a k-cup coffee. It is a common sight to see two, three, or four students huddled around one little MacBook trying to troubleshoot a bioinformatics problem. Students taking time out of their busy schedule to help each other is a beautiful thing that inspires me.

A look, a wink, a pat on the shoulder, an open door—my hope is that you will all contribute to and receive this part of the Juniata culture. Bring a bit of this spirit to our global community during and even after your time at Juniata.

President Troha quoted a Juniata student in one of his first speeches here. He asked some students, “If you could, what would you change about Juniata?” A student responded, “Let Juniata change you.” These words resonate for me because Juniata has profoundly changed me and encouraged me to become a better person by my embracing and appreciating the many small yet transformational acts and thoughts of kindness that I have received. I hope for the same deep and enriching experience for each of you.

You all hold the power to build people up or tear them down. By choosing encouragement, you are embodying enlightened leadership, which broadens your sphere of influence. All of this starts with doing little things that help others around us.

Of course, the little things can be easy to miss. In a fast-paced, chaotic world, the newest iPhone or hilarious snapchat can distract us from the details that really count. We must be unhurried and intentional when we look for the little things.

As I close, I wish to share one last story about making sure we take the time out of our busy day to appreciate the small things. On campus one evening, I was walking to my car with my two-and-one-half year old son Joey, who was full of questions. His “Why, mama” questions were endless. I was walking to the car with a diaper bag, computer bag, and toy bag slung over my arms, thinking about what the heck I should cook for dinner that did not involve microwaving Kraft Easy-Mac. I was also thinking about the convocation speech I needed to finish. All the while, my son yammered on and on with a whirlwind of questions to which I tried to provide affirmative answers: “Yes Joey, that is a stop sign.” “Yes Joey that is in fact a blue truck.” “Why is it blue?” “Because they painted it blue.” And so on.

As I rolled my eyes and took a deep breath for a sanity check, he said, “Mama, isn’t this just boo-tee-ful?” I stopped in my tracks, and looked up and asked, “What is beautiful, Joey?” He gestured, waving his left hand back and forth, “All of it, mama.” I looked up and it was, in fact, stunningly beautiful. The sun was just starting its descent behind the hills, glistening off the football players in Knox Stadium. In that one, small, brief moment I got those familiar goosebumps that I had the first day I stepped on campus. Those little goosebumps reassured me, and should assure all of you, that you have found the right place: Juniata, our home.

NOTES

1. Arthur Conan Doyle, “A Case of Identity” in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (London: George Newnes, 1892), p. 194.