

Chasing Our Best Selves: Finding Blind Spots and Doing Great Small Things

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I never really liked football. I played eight years, four years in high school for Coach Bob Patzwall and four years at Juniata College. At the end of my junior year in high school I told Coach Patzwall that I didn't think I would play football my senior year. He said, "If you continue to play well for me I will get you into college." At the end of my third year at Juniata College, I said to Mary Snyder, who was the secretary for the football coach and athletic director, Walt Nadzak, that I didn't think I would play my senior year. Mary said to me, "You are having a good career and your grades are good. If you continue to play football you could get an NCAA scholarship to graduate school." And so today, here I stand. I am forever indebted to the two of them for seeing a future for me that I had yet to see for myself.

I graduated from Juniata College in 1972. That was forty-six years ago; almost half a century. Now I know a number of you 2018 graduates are thinking, "He is one old man." Let me caution you, however, not to get too smug about your youthfulness. Just ask your parents and guardians about how quickly time passes. Heck, just ask anyone here on the stage this morning. One day you are graduating from college and the next day you are old enough to be giving the commencement address. It won't be long before you are standing here and some 2064 Juniata graduate is whispering to his or her classmate, "He is one old dude" or "She is one old lady." It is this generational divide that is the point of my commencement address.

I have asked myself what it means to be a graduate of Juniata College. Is there something about being a graduate of Juniata College in 1972 that connects me with you or us with them—regardless of the year of our respective graduations? Is there something in the DNA of Juniata graduates—regardless of how we arrived as freshmen (whether as jocks, nerds, urban, rural, suburban, northerners, southerners, east coast, west coast, heartland, black, white, yellow, brown, red, native or foreign born)—that marks us as "made in Juniata?"

I submit that which is quintessential Juniata—the DNA that binds us across generations—is that we are taught and we learn here that for the rest of our lives we are to be committed to chasing our best selves. You may be thinking, "Four years at \$40,000 a year and that's it? In all this time we learned to chase our best selves?" Bear with me. The chase is much harder and much more complex than it sounds. Consider two areas

where chasing our best selves is, in fact, a lifelong challenge. First, we are challenged to identify the blind spots in our personal lives, and second we are challenged to do the great small things in order to rectify the damage that our blind spots have done to ourselves and to others. Because this is part of our Juniata DNA, we have little choice but to address these blind spots and spend our lives chasing our best selves by doing great small things.

SEX AND GENDER AS BLIND SPOTS

Two of the biggest blind spots that we, as alumni of Juniata, have to reckon with throughout our lives are sex and race. Men, if the #MeToo and the Time's Up movements have taught us anything it is that we know so very little about the women in our lives. That lack of knowledge, that blind spot that we as men have about women is measurably dangerous to their health and very often adverse to their careers. By the way, fellows, the blind spot that we have and the danger we pose is not just about the women we date and those we marry, but it also applies to mothers, grandmothers, sisters, daughters, nieces, and cousins. In fact, any girl or woman with whom we may come into contact is at risk of being hurt by crashing into our blind spots.

Guys, think about it. Knowing what you know about you, if you showed up at your door and asked you to go out with you, how brave or reckless would you have to be to accept your own proposal? I know if I showed up and asked me out, I would have to have me answer some questions first. Questions like, how did you find me? Where are we going? Is it just you or are there others? How much gas is in the car? Fortunately, my wife Diane did not ever ask me these questions.

So consider what #MeToo and Time's Up have exposed about men, our blind spots, and the danger we pose to women, their health, and the quality of their lives. More than fifty women have come forward with allegations ranging from rape to sexual harassment by movie mogul Harvey Weinstein. Bill Cosby ("America's Dad") stands accused of rape and the sexual assault of more than sixty women. A few weeks ago he was convicted on three counts of aggravated indecent assault for having drugged and molested a woman in 2004 when she worked at Temple University.

It would be easy to dismiss the behavior of men that endangers the health and welfare of women and girls as the aberrant actions found primarily in Hollywood. But that conclusion misses the point that women and girls are preyed upon by men across the social, economic, and employment spectra. We find women and girls at risk in arts and entertainment, news media, business, politics, sports, and yes, even at colleges and universities. Here in Pennsylvania, for example, you have the bizarre situation of an elected official, Tarah Toohil, needing the sergeant at arms to meet her each day in the statehouse parking garage, escort her all day, even to committee hearings, debates, and house votes in order to protect her from another elected official, Representative Nick Miccarelli, whom she used to date. According to a recent story in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Representative Toohil obtained an order of protection against Representative Miccarelli because he kicked her, pinched her, and pinned her by the neck to a wall in the State Capitol.¹

Over a span of forty years, eight women have accused Dr. Inder Verma, a prominent geneticist and cancer scientist at the Salk Institute, of grabbing their breasts, pinching their buttocks, forcibly kissing and propositioning them, and repeatedly commenting on their physical attributes in professional settings.²

In the past year alone, more than 211 celebrities, politicians, CEOs, and others have been accused of sexual misconduct. At the Nike headquarters in Beaverton, Oregon, women who worked there have reported on staff outings that started at restaurants and ended up at strip clubs discussing the women's extremities. As of this moment, ten of the top male executives, including Trevor Edwards, president of the NIKE brand division, have had to resign. One of the most disturbing accounts of women as prey is that of former California police officer, James DeAngelo, who raped fifty women over a twelve-year period.

When it comes to understanding the meaning of sex and gender, our blind spot is enormous and we will spend a lifetime confronting our personal blindness. Guys, our blind spot about women is so large that even in the year 2017, many of us found nothing odd or troubling about the Senate majority leader's decision to create a working group comprised of thirteen men, but no women, to focus on health care and revisions to the Affordable Care Act.

Men are not the only ones with a blind spot about the meaning of sex. #MeToo and Time's Up are perhaps as much about women coming to terms with the meaning of sex and gender and confronting their personal blind spots, even as many are victims themselves of sexual assault or sexual harassment. For example, exit poll data from the 2016 special election for the Senate seat in Alabama, reveals that 52% of white female college graduates and 73% of white female non-college graduates voted for Roy Moore. And 47% of white women who voted for Roy Moore thought that the allegations of his sexual misconduct, made by eight women, six of whom were minors (the youngest was fourteen) were false.

#MeToo is not, however, just about rape, sexual assault, and physical violence perpetrated against women by sexual predators. It is also about including me too in the Senate committees discussing a national health care bill. How about including me too when considering who to recommend for internships, faculty appointments, post docs, and other academic assignments. And how about hiring me too or promoting me too without first trying to seduce me or sleep with me. Chasing our best selves means that as Juniata College alumni you and I are bound by our common DNA to be active and conscious about confronting our blind spots about sex and gender; and my fellow Juniata Eagles, that DNA means we will be at this task for a lifetime.

RACE AS A BLIND SPOT

Black Lives Matter and Take a Knee, just like #MeToo and Time's Up, are about the blind spots that we have in our lives. The attention given to and the concern over the physical safety and sexual health of women are no more important than the physical safety and the health of black lives. Black Lives Matter is no less valid than #MeToo. Like sex and gender, race and color are enormous blind spots for us. W.E.B. DuBois,

a Harvard-educated sociologist, published his text, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in 1903. In it he famously observed, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line.” The twentieth century ended December 31, 2000. We are now in the twenty-first century and DuBois’s observation about the color line is just as prescient today as it was when DuBois wrote about it in 1903.

Another publication, also written a long time ago, even before *The Souls of Black Folk*, and seemingly unrelated to DuBois’s text is the Twenty-third Psalm. The Psalm begins with the words “The Lord is my Shepherd . . .”. About halfway through the Psalm we find this unnerving and haunting phrase, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.” I would propose to you that Black Lives Matter and Take a Knee have everything to do with the Twenty-third Psalm and nothing at all to do with disrespecting the flag.

Black people in America live each day in the shadow of death. For so many of you who do not live this experience, I understand that what I just said sounds incredulous. But that is exactly what a blind spot is. You just can’t see it. Consider for a moment that since 2015, in a project called Fatal Force, the *Washington Post* has tracked deadly police shootings in the U.S. every year. According to *Washington Post* data, police have shot and killed 3,309 people since 2015 and of those killed, 231, or 7%, were not armed with guns, knives, or other objects that could be used as weapons at the time of the shootings. Thirty-six percent of these unarmed persons killed by police were black. In 2015, police killed thirty-eight unarmed black people, in 2016 it was nineteen, in 2017 it was twenty, and this year, seven unarmed black people have been killed by the police.³

As a black male, I have had my own walk through the valley of the shadow of death. As a child, I was in Florida for my grandfather’s funeral when I was almost hit crossing the street by a police cruiser. The white police officer told me that I had better watch myself or my parents would find me dead laying in a ditch somewhere. While I was an Instructor of Sociology at Northampton County Area Community College in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, two white police officers came one night, got me out of bed, and took me to the police station. In the patrol car on the way to the station I asked why I was being arrested. They said for carrying a concealed weapon in Michigan. I have never possessed a concealed weapon, and at that time, I had never been in the state of Michigan. For African-Americans, every encounter with police has the potential to end badly; it doesn’t matter if you are two men waiting to meet someone at Starbucks, five women playing golf, or a guy working out with his buddy in a gym where he is a member. Black students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, the site of the recent mass shooting in Florida, held a press conference to say that the heightened security measures established at their school in response to the February 2018 shooting—in particular, the increased school policing—did not make them safer. In fact, they expressed that they felt harmed by the increased police presence.

Black Lives Matter and Take a Knee are not simply about the killing of unarmed black people in the street by police. Black lives matter in the office suites as well as on public streets. Black lives matter in the

offices of state and local officials in Michigan when they decided that the city of Flint, where 54% of the population is black and the median household income is just \$25,000 a year, could save money by switching to Flint River water, then decided not to treat the water to prevent corrosion of the city's decades-old supply pipes. The result is that today the black and poor people of Flint, Michigan, now have massively-high blood lead levels and were exposed to E. coli and total coliform bacteria.

Black lives matter when the Senate is debating national health care legislation and there is no one to represent the health disparities in black lives. Not only did the Senate Health Care reform committee include no women, it also did not include Senator Tim Scott of South Carolina, the only black Republican Senator who, before his congressional career, had sold insurance and owned one of the most successful Allstate insurance branches in South Carolina. And black lives matter in the graduate dorms at Yale University.

Look, here is the point! Almost everything that you and I hold dear has a different meaning for other people. What I learned at Juniata, and by the way so did you, is that we must first confront ourselves and challenge our own beliefs about who we are and how those beliefs impact our relationships with others who are near and dear to us as well as those who are strange and strangers to us. Juniata teaches us to check our blind spots, not just while we are students here but for the rest of our lives. Second, after teaching us to confront our blind spots Juniata compels us to do something about it. There is no need to wait on or expect to win the Nobel Peace Prize (as at least one prominent person appears at this moment to be doing) for doing the right thing. The DNA we inherit from our time at Juniata calls us to do the great small things⁴ that help us see past our blind spots and to pursue justice.

DOING GREAT SMALL THINGS

It is the DNA in our Juniata College experience that in 1965 compelled fifteen Juniata College students to crowd into five cars and to head south on a 900-mile trek to Montgomery, Alabama, to join the march that began on Bloody Sunday on the Edmund Pettus bridge. To be sure, there were also professors from Juniata who made the trip. But I want you to think about the students who drove all night into the Selma-to-Montgomery March and ultimately into American history.

How did the students from "tiny Juniata College" (as reported by the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*) develop this sense of social justice? Where did the Juniata students acquire the conviction of conscience, to risk their safety, to defy their parents, professors, and administrators to travel south to participate in this march where one-third of the students would be injured? Where did the students learn such courage? It was at Juniata College that these students learned about justice, conviction, and personal responsibility, and it was at Juniata College where they acquired the courage to do this great small thing.

During my first term as a Juniata Trustee, two big issues dominated our attention. One was the College's first multi-year capital campaign and the other was whether to retain the image of an Indian as Juniata's mascot. The two issues were not unrelated since a number of alums and donors threatened to

withhold their donations to the campaign if the Trustees voted to get rid of the Indian as the College's mascot. I believe the Board Chair, Klare Sunderland, aged ten years in ten days because the debate among the Trustees and the Juniata College community was passionate, protracted, and often personal. Blind spots were on full display as people who were not Native Americans debated the honor, privilege, and purpose of retaining an Indian as the College's mascot. In the end, the same DNA that drove Juniata students south is the same DNA that compelled the Trustees, with the support of the Juniata College community, to do the great small thing, to do the right thing, to do the just thing, and to reject the appropriation of the image of a people as a part of the property of Juniata College. We are now proud to be the Juniata Eagles and do not have to apologize in 2018 for being the Juniata Indians.

When I was in law school, I sued Duke University for racial discrimination in the hiring of writing lab instructors for its freshman English program. Duke would typically hire graduate students, law students, or medical students as freshmen writing lab instructors. The year I applied, the English department needed twelve instructors. When I was not hired I met with the head of the writing program and then with the Chair of the English Department about the hiring qualifications and the hiring process. I was not satisfied with the answers I received and so I filed suit with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in Durham, North Carolina. During discovery it was revealed that Duke had never hired black graduate students or black law or medical school students as lab writing instructors. Who sues a university with its own law school? What sane law student sues the university from which he expects to receive a law degree? Where does such courage come from? I submit that it comes from the same DNA that drove carloads of students south to protest injustice, from the same DNA that compelled the Trustees to vote for justice, and it was this same DNA that insisted that I sue Duke to correct its injustice. One of the immediate outcomes of my suit was that Duke hired its first black lab writing instructor, a female, who, ironically enough, was a law student who happened to be a classmate.

I have spent some time this morning encouraging you to do great small things. As the saying goes, talk is cheap. So I want to let you know that I am endowing a lectureship series on social justice to provide funding to support an annual event in which Juniata invites a person of some renown to deliver a public lecture on a topic related to social justice. The primary purpose of this endowment is to assist the Juniata College community in its efforts to teach, learn, and communicate about the many blind spots that keep us in the dark about one another as well as about sources of social injustice so central to the American experience. This endowed lectureship series is to be administered by the Provost who, with the advice and consent of a committee of students and faculty, will provide advice on the selection of a social justice topic and relevant speaker for the year. I have pledged \$50,000 and already donated half of the funds towards this initiative. Today, I am making another donation of \$5,000 in support of the endowed lectureship.

My fellow Eagles, I challenge you this morning to continue chasing your best selves, to see past the blind spots in your lives and to do great small things in pursuit of justice. In the forty-six years since I sat

where you are now seated, this is what I have carried with me from my time as a student and as a Trustee at Juniata College. You and I are on a lifelong quest, chasing our best selves, compelled to confront the blind spots in our own lives that prevent us from seeing the bright spots in the lives of others. The hardest things we will face in this quest is avoiding complacency, the inclination to protect privilege, and the failure to investigate for ourselves the false and incomplete narratives offered to us that support our complacency and which justifies our privilege. We, the sons and daughters of Juniata College, are in a lifelong pursuit of our best selves. We are challenged to confront our blind spots, we are compelled to do the great small things in pursuit of justice, not because we are male or female, black or white, liberal or conservative. We confront our blind spots and we do the great small things because we graduated from Juniata College and it is in our DNA.

NOTES

1. Angela Couloumbis & Brad Bumsted, “Luzerne lawmaker gets protection order against Rep. Nick Miccarelli,” *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, PA) March 9, 2018; Angela Couloumbis & Brad Bumsted, “Rep. Nick Miccarelli's accuser talks to investigators,” *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, PA) March 12, 2018.
2. Amy Maxmen, “Harassment and discrimination allegations roil a top US biomedical institute,” *Nature*, April 30, 2018. https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-05025-z?error=cookies_not_supported&code=508c4f18-5bd3-4662-9648-011f964c2a5c
3. The *Washington Post* has compiled annual reports of fatal police shootings since 2015. The database is searchable and available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/national/police-shootings-2018/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.4170b368a6ee .
4. Jodi Picoult, *Great Small Things* (New York: Ballentine Books, 2016).