

Farquar Faculty Member, Dr. Gary Gershman- Speech on Life Reflection and No Regrets:



Thanks for the opportunity

Sort of overwhelming – to be the person to start a new tradition

What I do and say may set the tone for years to come

Like meeting a famous person – all psyched to meet him or her, and then what do I talk about with them

This was similar – thirty minutes – so many thoughts and then what do I talk about – what is important, what are the key things that I want to say, before I go to the great beyond, or the hole on the ground, or whatever

I mentioned this to some people and they said – “30 minutes? I wouldn’t want to say anything. 30 minutes left I sure as hell am not going to talk to a bunch of people.” Some said they would curse and rant and rave.

How should I dress? I was going to show up in shorts and a t-shirt – unshaven – hell it is my last 30 minutes – I want to be comfortable!

Am I supposed to be inspiring? Am I supposed to sound like Jimmy Valvano and the famous speech he gave, when he really did have a short time to live (if you have never heard it go on line and listen to it – it is funny and witty and inspiring) There is a great point in the speech where Valvano is running over time and he says: “That screen is flashing up there thirty seconds like I care about that screen right now, huh? I got tumors all over my body. I’m worried about some guy in the back going thirty seconds?”

Am I supposed to be like Lou Gehrig as he gave one of the great farewell speeches of all time, to the Yankee faithful, as ALS ravaged his body soon to kill him and he started with the immortal words... "Today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth."

So I was given a lot of things to think about in giving this lecture – what is the meaning of life – what kind of person have I become – how will I leave my mark – how is everything I've worked for, or done up to this point going to contribute back to society?

And I am not sure if I am going to directly answer any of those questions

So to start I will appeal to one of the great sages and philosophers of the modern era who phrased the question and the issue – Monty Python

Why are we here? What's life all about?  
Is God really real, or is there some doubt?  
Well, tonight, we're going to sort it all out,  
For, tonight, it's 'The Meaning of Life'.

What's the point of all this hoax?  
Is it the chicken and the egg time? Are we just yolks?  
Or, perhaps, we're just one of God's little jokes.  
Well, ça c'est le 'Meaning of Life'.

Is life just a game where we make up the rules  
While we're searching for something to say,  
Or are we just simply spiraling coils  
Of self-replicating DNA. Nay, nay, nay, nay, nay, nay.

In this 'life', what is our fate?  
Is there Heaven and Hell? Do we reincarnate?  
Is mankind evolving, or is it too late?  
Well, tonight, here's 'The Meaning of Life'.

But that is merely a starting point - I thought that was a bit of a cop out – recite some Monty Python and sit down, so I decided I needed to organize this all around a theme – around a concept, and I sat talking with my girlfriend, and we hashed out ideas, I came to an important realization – that if I was about to die, and I was looking back at my life I feel now, as I stand here, I could say – I have no regrets.

And I think the key to life, the meaning of life so to speak – is to be able to end it without regrets

That does not mean I made no mistakes with plenty still to come, and there are not things that if I had to do over again, I would do differently – rather it means that I have lived life in a way and manner that I feel comfortable with myself and the society around me that I have hopefully contributed to – and I think that in imparting wisdom – that is what I need to try impress on people – to live life in that manner, and explain how I got there – and maybe that will help you – and that I feel is the purpose of this lecture

I have no regrets because my life has not been one on hold, I have pursued those things I wanted to, I have done many of the things I want to do – although there are still lots more to do –

I still want to go to Africa, I want to explore parts of South America and especially and see La Paz. There are books I want to read. Songs I want to learn on my guitar.

I have been fortunate in my life and got to do a lot of things – I have stood on mountain tops on three continents – and surveyed the world around me, and come to the conclusion that life is good and there are lots of good things out there to take advantage of, but alas too many people get lost in the minutiae of life and miss the wonders and joys it beholds. So obsessed are so many of my friends with arbitrary goals of success and money and other things, that life passes them by without them realizing it, and I wonder if they could now, or even in 20 years say I have no regrets.

To discuss why I want to try and impress on you how important it is to not have regrets – and why it is important to do things not just now when you are in college, but throughout your life that expand yourself, that enrich your life experience, that create a life that see enjoyment for yourself, but also contributes back so that not only you, but others around you can smile with satisfaction as you speak of no regrets and they can agree with you – I am going to talk a lot about my life, and some of my experiences to illustrate WHY I feel I have no regrets.

I would be remiss at this point if I did not mention my parents. I have an amazing mother and my father, while he lived, was also an incredible human being. My parents instilled in me values that did not allow me to dwell on the mundane and average but permitted me the personal freedom to assault the stars. My parents are the rare individuals who loved each other more each day, and when my Dad died, about 10 years ago, my mom, noted then and still notes now, he was the best there ever was and there will never be another like him. And it was that love, and that guidance that helped me. They gave me a goal – to find someone like that – not an easy task – but I have. And their relationship taught me – don't waste too much time. Unfortunately, my father got ill – he was only in his early 70's, and in two years Parkinson's disease swept through him, reducing a man of towering intellect and expansive compassion to a shell of what he was. My father saved a lot of money for retirement – he and my mom hoped to spend time traveling and visiting friends around the world – alas, they never got to do that as he fell to the disease. Our memories of him, my memories drive me to not have to look back with concern of could have beens and would have beens. I do not think my father left this world with regret, he should not have, and I don't want to either. Time is short – and it is important that opportunities that arise are grabbed – chances to help, chances to enjoy, chances to just BE.

I look at my younger brother – who after 15 years of a drug induced haze – from the age of 14 to 29, he was not sober a day in his life – he entered recovery. I asked him once does he regret the lost time of 15 years – and there is a lot of lost time in there – and he says no. If not for that time, he would not be where he is now (married, kids, good job and sober 14 years) – does he wish he had some of that time back – yes, but does he regret what he did – no, his only regrets are the people he may have hurt along the way.

We each have those moments, those events that shape us, give us pause, and help create that ability to look forward and backward with either pleasure or chagrin.

For me, I think there are three things have helped shape my life and put me in a position where I can say – no regrets

And you will have to forgive me as I wax sentimental and philosophical about things – because after all I only have 30 minutes left [even less now] – so it is my time, and I can say what I want!

First is my experience at summer camp. I talk about it all the time – because having spent 30 years at a single summer camp – almost every summer – 8 weeks minimum I was there – it is a major part of my life. I sometimes feel weird talking about camp – makes me sound like the line out of the movie American Pie – “well one summer at band camp...” But the camp I am referring too was far different. Not like the silly movies you see, and if you have never been to camp – you may not really understand

Some people argue the world can be divided between those who go to camp and those who do not – in some ways I buy into that – except I would further divide it into those who went to my camp – Camp Joseph and Betty Harlam in the Pocono Mountains in Pennsylvania – and everyone else. Growing up in the northeast, most Jewish kids went to camp – and camp means not 8 hours during the day, or one week away - but 4 weeks minimum, on lockdown in a facility buried in the mountains – no contact with the outside world - literally – no visits from parents – letters and care packages were the only communication with the outside world – no it was not prison, it was 14 of us living in a bunk together – doing everything together – getting to know each other such a way that for the most part my best friends in the world are still those people I met when I was 9, 10 or 11 years old and have maintained my friendship with – we grew up together in a way that normal friends don't – it was at camp that I learned what friendship really means, I learned social skills, I had my first girlfriend, my first kiss, my first serious girlfriend, I learned about EVERYTHING.

Camp was my life.

In part it still is. I have been to numerous marriages of friends from camp. I have seen my friends die. My first real knowledge of and experience with AIDS, was one of my good friends who I grew up with at camp. We were in the same bunk for years. We were co-counselors together. We did everything together. And he died from AIDS, before it was a household word

Camp opened my eyes to the world out there, despite the fact that we were buried in the mountains. I met people from all over the world there. And it made me realize as much as anything that there is a big world out there – and helped put me on a path that has opened the world to me, and really myself to the world.

Often time I look back at camp – and wonder how my life would be different without it. Almost every summer of my life from 1971 to 2002 was spent at camp. When camp ended I would go to the shore (what we call the beach) for a couple of weeks – to decompress – to try and refit myself back into the “real world” from camp – but otherwise at least 8 weeks every one of those summers was spent at camp – I quit my job in a law office to return to camp. I put my dissertation on hold one summer – to go to camp. I didn’t teach summer school to return to camp. And no regrets.

While some of my friends did all kinds of things – in many cases, got married, had kids, I was still at summer camp – and in the end my life gathered a fullness, and an openness different from them – because while it limited me in many ways – trying creating a relationship with someone when they know you will disappear for 11 weeks every summer (that is how long I was there when I ran the show) – it allowed so many amazing relationships in the context of that place that what I missed on one hand, I made up tenfold on the other. And in the end created for myself a way to move through life with a confidence and zest, that I am not sure a lot of people have – yet many of us who grew up in camp – have it

And camp grounded me. It showed me what was really important. In camp one cannot be selfish. One cannot ignore the people around them. Everything is compressed. The smallest comment of slight is magnified. Tensions increase. Emotions run high. A two-week relationship in camp was like a two-year one in the outside world. Imagine meeting someone, and from the moment you begin to see each other, you are with each other every day, all day, every night, every meal – try that! We knew each other so well, still do, that those people are like my family – we still in essence live together, cry together and laugh together – and those people help keep me

in line – when I do something stupid, or fail to act in a proper manner, I can expect the hammer to drop.

Camp is the glue of my life. It provided me with the ability to take risks and not worry. When you have an enlarged supportive family like that it is far easier.

When one is responsible for 800 lives every summer – you view the world differently. Watch a staff member almost die, only to be saved by one of the nurses in front of your eyes, as you ponder what am I going to tell his parents. To have to make the decision whether or not to order emergency surgery on a ten-year old, because I cannot contact their parents or the emergency contacts. Singing the bare necessities in front of the entire camp. Or how about having to call the parents of 8 15 year olds who were caught in compromising positions and having to tell the parents that they needed to pick up their children because of improper behavior, having to explain that behavior, and how about when one of those sets of parents are friends of yours, who were in fact your counselors – 20 years earlier!

I think that those experiences helped put me in a position where much in life I can shrug off, and focus on the things that matter – and just not worry about what other people think or how they view me – and instead worry about what is right, what is important and then do the right things, the proper things. It taught me the value of principles and holding to those principles, and so that in the end , I do not regret my decisions or my actions

Two other things really have made me realize certain things about myself and what I want in life so that I can stand here and say I HAVE NO REGRETS.

In the summer of 1987, one of a couple of summers I did not go to camp, I went to Europe with a friend of mine with one major goal in mind. Yes we were going to travel around, backpacking our way through western Europe – but there was one thing to do – the key to the trip – we were going to go to Pamplona Spain and Run with the Bulls.

For those of you who do not know – every summer from July 7- July 14, there is a festival called the feast of San Fermin held in Pamplona Spain – where the highlight is every morning at about 8 am, people line the streets and bulls are let loose to charge through the streets – as idiots like me run in front of them hoping to avoid impalement and fulfill a dream.

For me – the dream was born when I read the Drifters by James Michener. Not a great literary work, - but one of the most important books I ever read,

because it put me in Pamplona and helped ignite my desire to travel the world and see it. Really see it.

I read the Drifters – in the 70's. I went out and bought a red bandana – when you run with the bulls you are supposed to wear all white, a red bandana and a red sash – I bought that bandana, hung it my room and swore I would wear it one day in Pamplona in the Estafeta – one of the streets through the town of Pamplona, where the bulls run. I fulfilled that dream.

Now running with the bulls is a unique experience. It is not like you see in the movies. A bull can run a mile in 2 minutes. The fastest man in the world, just under 4. So if you do it "right" the bull will catch you. Many people run behind the bulls, jumping into the street after they pass, and tapping them on their butts. Many people run so far ahead they never really see the bulls – me and my friend Lenny – we ran right in the middle of it – with bulls right behind me – so that the terror I felt, the adrenaline rush that surged through me are almost indescribable – and that really is the trick – to stand in the middle of the street – not run behind watching the bull's rear end – or not be so far out in front, the experience never catches you – just be right in it .

Pamplona was an adventure, from the moment we got on the train in Paris to make our way to the Spanish mountains. I could spend hours talking about it – from 11 hours in a café in Bordeaux, to taking the wrong train and having to leap from one moving train as it slowed through a town to leap on the right one as it came through the same town, bribing our way on with two bottles of Sangria I had in my pack – to standing in the streets as bulls surged towards us – to the taste of the chicken and beer at 9 am following the run – to everything! But my time runs short, so...

In writing this lecture, I pulled out my journal I kept. The three days in Pamplona there are no entries. My first entry, sitting in the train station waiting for my connection to Nice and for the girl who I met and was going to travel there with me for a few days – my entry is: (excuse the language) Pamplona !! Holy F-ing Shit. If my trip was to end now, my life would be complete, there would be no regrets, I have run with the Bulls at Pamplona! unquote

Oh yes, and who did I travel to Pamplona with – Lenny – a friend from camp.

Pamplona was about having dreams and fulfilling them. The final line of the Drifters which was the book that sent me to Pamplona – is Every Man must inspect his dreams and know them for what they are – Pamplona was the

first big dream – after that I knew – no fear, no regrets – just pursue the dreams.

If I had given this talk a month ago, I am not sure if the tone and tenor, the theme would be the same. Because in writing about important things in my life I would probably only mention the above two., or maybe a different third then the one I am about to mention. Maybe it would be about my rugby career, or playing the piano. However, three weeks ago – right now – I was standing in the cold and despair of Auschwitz-Birkenau – man's great symbol of how inhumane and horrible we can be to each other.

And that experience – 6 hours walking in the cold and snow, through the bunkers where the victims eeked out their daily existence, looking at the human relics of 60 year ago – piles of hair, and shoes and eyeglasses, walking up to the wall against which people were executed, seeing the cells where prisoners were kept, touching the barracks that held countless innocents, standing IN the gas chamber and at the door of the crematorium – my life was changed.

For all I had read and seen about the Holocaust, and survivors I have talked to – I was not really prepared for what I experienced. It is an experience I think everyone needs – and I would recommend everyone to find a way to go there – and see it – evil - first hand. Because it is in seeing it I was forced to reflect back upon myself and my life and think long hard and deep about it – and you know what – I was able to take satisfaction - my life is good, very good and I have no regrets.

The experience of Auschwitz forced me to take a personal inventory – I do not know how you can walk through that place and not do that – and it made me realize a couple of things

What I think of as problems – are nothing. Nothing. I should not complain about ANYTHING. I still do – cause it is fun to wine and bitch – but the reality is my life, most of our lives are okay, more than okay.

My life has been very good. And while I have experienced anti-Semitism first hand, and been bloodied by it, literally, it has not shattered my life – and I have been able to do the things I want to do, and continue to be able to do those things - fight for causes I believe in, try in my own little way to make the world a better place – travel the world and see the ruins of places like Angkor Wat – stand on mountain tops in New Zealand and Switzerland and Washington and New Hampshire,– and look out and take in all the world has to offer – and it is a lot. And far too often we get focused on goals that are exclusive not inclusive – that shut out much around us rather than bring

things towards us. We live our lives in fear – and of what? Fear – fear walks the grounds of Auschwitz – fear is not something we need to have.

Life is short as my mom always tells me – it is not a dress rehearsal.

There is a great scene in the movie Papillion – with Dustin Hoffman and Steve McQueen – where in a moment of delirium, a dream sequence, Papillion, played by Steve McQueen – stands before a court . Papillion is in jail for murdering a pimp.

Papillion", one Judge begins, "You are charged with the most terrible crime a human being can commit. I accuse you of a Wasted Life. How do you plead?"

McQueen, standing head bowed down, looks up, and replies, "Guilty. I must plead guilty"

The judge responds – the penalty for that is death

Are you guilty? I don't think I am.

One thing we know in life, we will die. I am not a hedonist and I am not saying life is just about playing and taking pleasure – but the point is to get out of life what it offers you – to enjoy it – to experience it – to take pleasure in both the work and the play – to give back and to find a way in your way – to contribute – I would think the worst crime is to look back and say – BLEH – I did nothing . I accomplished nothing, I contributed nothing. Then your penalty death, means nothing.

One does not want to be like Papillion

So... the point of all this – is do not have regrets – I have no regrets because my life is not like Papillion's – it is not wasted – I feel that I have had a chance to make my mark on numerous people, to influence them in a positive way –

Whether it is student or friends, or myself!!

Camp gave me an opportunity to be part of an institution for 30 years, 10 of those in charge to help shape numerous children and adults – to be an important force in the reform Jewish Youth Movement – so that ex campers and staff members still write me and talk to me about the positives of that experience. And as a teacher, I still get some of that same opportunity.

Pamplona gave me an chance to challenge myself in an extraordinary way and face fears.

Auschwitz made me one again confront fears and question my very core – left me with a reminder to never stop questioning, never stop challenging, for to stop, means to surrender.

I will end with four quotes

The first comes from what I consider one of the great movies of all time – Walt Disney's The jungle Book – And Baloo is a great guy – not just a roly poly bear – but a good friend, loyal, trustworthy, puts his life on the line for Mowgli and in the end does what is right for his friend.

Now when you pick a pawpaw  
Or prickly pear  
And you pick a raw paw  
Next time Beware  
Don't pick the prickly pear by the paw  
When you pick a pear  
try to use the claw  
But you don't have to use a claw when you pick the pear from the big  
paw paw  
Have I given you a clue?  
Gee thanks Baloo  
The bare necessities of life will come to you!

So just try and relax, yeah cool it  
Fall apart in my backyard  
'Cause let me tell you something little britches  
If you act like that bee acts, uh uh  
You're working too hard

And don't spend your time lookin' around  
For something you want that can't be found  
When you find out you can live without it  
And go along not thinkin' about it  
I'll tell you something true

The bare necessities of life will come to you

The second is from Frank Herbert's classic book *Dune*: in the book, there is a litany recited when people are scared and it goes:

I must not fear  
Fear is the mind-killer.  
Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration.  
I will face my fear.  
I will permit it to pass  
Over me and through me.  
And when it has gone past  
I will turn the inner eye  
To see its path.  
Where the fear has gone  
There will be nothing.  
Only I will remain....

The third is another quote from the Drifters –

The permanent temptation of life is to confuse dreams with reality..  
The permanent defeat of life comes when dreams are surrendered to reality"

And the final quote comes from Elie Wiesel – and his most recent book: The Time of the Uprooted

Look, young friend and brother  
Do your eyes see the young woman with the grave  
Manner who is destined to you?  
See how she leans her head to her left as if seeking  
Your hand on her shoulder, see the dream of  
Mystery and desire that hovers over her beautiful  
And melancholy face; that dream is yours  
Look and you will know what it is to love  
But it will be too late

Do not let it be too late

Take heed from Baloo and Elie

Relish the bare necessities

Accept your fears, challenge them

Dare to dream your dreams and pursue them

Do not surrender

Do not be Papillion

Have NO REGRETS