DINNER SPEECH 2003: “DEAR PATRICK”

Every year at the end of this dinner I give a speech. The speech is a combination of free advice and warning. Free advice often is worth less than you pay for it, so part of the warning is: beware of the free advice. The other part of the warning might be summarized as: beware, this is some serious stuff you are getting yourselves into for all sorts of reasons. Usually I try to give my free advice and my warnings in the context of a story, and because I am as self-absorbed as the next I person (if not more), the story has to do with me and my family.

Two years ago, the story was about me and my oldest daughter, Sarah. Last year, it was about me, my father, a bicycle thief, and my other two daughters, Aisling and Jennifer. Tonight, it is about me and my son Patrick. And tonight it is less a story and more a little epistle, written by me to him. Patrick is about to leave home for college and, as you will see, I could not resist the temptation to give him a little fatherly advice. He has read this advice but declined my invitation to be here tonight to hear it in public—I wonder why.

I will also confess that because Patrick is on his way off to school, my wife, Susan, and I have been overwhelmed by dealing with Patrick’s departure: packing, mailing, making plane reservations, planning, realizing how old we have gotten, etc. Given those overwhelming facts and the fact they were overwhelming us, I thought that by using my letter to Patrick as my speech to you, I could kill two birds with one speech. But I did add some stuff just for you.4

Anyway...

Dear Patrick:

As you set out for college I thought I might write you a short letter giving you a little advice. I realize this is a preachy thing to do, and, since it comes from your father, you have every right to throw it out without reading it, but here I go. I will also read it to the first-year law school class, so writing it gives me content for my yearly after dinner speech to 1 Ls—thanks! [See I told him what I was going to do. Now, as you know, like Patrick, you too are in a period of transition in your lives. You are starting something new. Whether you are coming to UT straight from college or whether you have left some other career, or both (as I know is true of at least one of you), you are in a time of transition and starting something new. Back to the letter...]

3 I can’t find that speech and it was good so do a better job of keeping your papers.
4 The bracketed material that follows was added for the law students.
Before advice, Patrick, I’ll start with the confessions. I was inspired by someone else to write this letter. One afternoon, as I was running, a friend of mine asked me what words of wisdom I had provided to my son (you) as he (you) set off for college. Before I had a chance to answer, my friend, as is his way, continued. He said, “Sir [he calls me sir], did you say, ‘To thine own self be true?’”

“No,” I honestly answered.

“That’s good, sir,” my friend said, “because even though the guy who wrote that line—Shakespeare—was pretty sharp, the person who spoke it was a fool, wasn’t he?”

“Polonius, you mean?”

“Yes sir, Hamlet’s tutor,” answered my friend.

“I think so,” I said.

“Doesn’t Polonius manage to get stabbed while he’s hiding behind a curtain, sir?” my friend asked.

Whether, when my friend and I started talking, the conversation was meant to be or not meant to be exactly like it went, our running conversation got me thinking. It also got me thinking that, even though someone might be a fool like Polonius, he [or she] might still manage to give good advice. That, of course, made me think of myself.

Thinking of myself gets me to the second part of the confession. If the people with whom I went to college read this letter, they would definitely tell you that, knowing your father then, I should be honest and say, “Do as I say, not as I do.” That’s because I definitely did not follow much of the advice I am about to give you. So, let’s get to the preachy part. And since I’m being preachy, if you are still reading, I hope you won’t mind if I bold and bullet point some of this.

**Get up in the morning**

This may sound painfully obvious, but that does not mean it isn’t a good way to start the day. Lots of neat stuff happens all day long, but you won’t know about it if you spend the day in bed. When I was in college, my friends told me lots of great stuff occurred in the morning—some of that stuff was class—but mostly I only heard about it. Getting up is a fantastic way to start the day. Lots of people can’t or don’t want to get up. I recommend it, even if it’s hard some days. That brings the accompanying reminder to mind.

**Go to bed at night**

Night is great too; I love it. But if you are going to get up in the morning, make sure that you go to bed at night. I’m certainly not against the occasional late-night conversation,
movie, romance, whatever; but a lot of the bad stuff I did when I was in college, I did at night-late at night. And it made it a lot harder to get up in the morning. I also know people who started bad habits in school that they were sure they could quit whenever they wanted. Some of them were wrong; the bad habits were hard to break. [Aside to law students. I hate to tell you this, but the bad-stuff advice may be particularly important for you. Statistics and many sad stories tell us that we lawyers may be more prone to substance abuse than others. Part of it is definitely stress. We are engaged in a stressful profession. We represent real people with real hopes, real dreams, and real problems. They rely upon us. That’s stressful. Another thing that may happen to lawyers and law students is that we work hard all week, and often all weekend as well, and then we blow off steam by, partying and over-partying. Please be careful, and if you need help, seek it out. There are resources available to you on campus, in the community, and in the profession. Many lawyers who are disbarred or otherwise disciplined can trace their problems, in part, to substance abuse.]

One thing I never did was stay up all night studying, not even in law school. I always thought it defeated the purpose because if I stayed up all night, I would have been too tired in the morning for the studying to do any good. And if I had a need to study all night long, quite frankly, I would have been too stressed out to force much stuff into my head. The closest I came was in law school once for my Income Tax exam. It was the fall of my second year, and I had been working on law review and studying for other tests, and I was up until about 4:45 a.m., got in bed, slept two hours, got up again, studied more, and went to school to take the test, knowing I would end up failing because I was so tired. When I got there and looked around I saw the sorriest looking, most tired bunch of people I had ever seen and knew it would be okay. But don’t make that mistake. Go to bed at night and get up in the morning.

**Be receptive to what you like**

I suspect that you already have this one down. I say I suspect that you already have this one down because I have been a party to, and an eavesdropper on, many conversations in which people have asked you what you want to do at, and after, school and what you want to study. I respect the heck out of you when you say that you really don’t know. I like it when you throw in a little laugh. You know that sets some people back—throws them off balance. That’s not a bad thing.

Of course, you don’t definitely know what you want to do or what you want to study; that’s what going to school is for. That’s why we are sending you off to college and paying for it so you can be exposed to different stuff and maybe figure out what it is that makes you happy and interested and intrigued. But don’t worry if you don’t know the answers to the “what will you do” questions even after you have declared a major and after you have graduated from college. I suggest that you should be extremely happy if, when it comes time to declare a major or go off into the so-called outside world, you have so much stuff that interests you that you are still at a loss. If that’s the case, you are not at a loss at all; you are on the edge of an intellectually vibrant and stimulating existence. Those Renaissance people had a pretty good idea. Anyway, be receptive to what you like.
Take a bunch of different stuff and enjoy it. Take more of what interests you. Just because you do well at something does not mean you love it, but doing well may show that you have talent and interest in an area. But don’t choose to study something just because you do well grade-wise. Always keep an eye on that happiness meter. [IL aside: You are ahead of Patrick. You have already made an important decision. You want to get a law degree, but please, think about the receptive advice to some extent. A law degree is a great thing. You can practice law with it, but you don’t have to. There are all sorts of professions and types of law practice you can go into. Think about your options: private practice, public interest, litigation, business law, plain old business, education, and more. Think also about getting a good, broad legal education while you are here. All law is interrelated. Expose yourself to a bunch of it. Of course, we do ease your burden by requiring your full first year. You’re welcome.]

Be receptive to the views and backgrounds of other people

A lot of what I really learned in college I learned from the people I met. Of course, if I had followed my earlier advice and gotten up in the morning, I might have learned more in class. C’est la vie. People are wonderful, interesting, curious, amazing, and confounding things. They have all sorts of ideas, biases, traits, and more. Be receptive to what they have to say. Get to know people who are not like you. In just a few years, the nation will have no majority race. That will be a good thing. Get ready for that day by interacting with all sorts of different people. You’ll know more as a result, and the rest of your life will be a lot fuller and a lot more fulfilling. [Law students, this is for you too. You will be meeting, representing, and dealing with all sorts of people who are not like you. How are you going to do that without any perspective on those peoples’ backgrounds, views, and experiences? How are you going to do that without learning the skills of trying to be better at understanding, listening to, and understanding people different from you? If you become a judge, how are you going to really decide a case if you can’t appreciate the people involved? If you become an elected official, you must represent all your constituents, and you will do that better if you have some basis to relate to all your constituents. Here at UT, we value the fact that we are a diverse and inclusive intellectual and social community. Take advantage of that.] Now, along with this point:
Fall in love

I know that if you are still reading this letter, this piece of advice may get you to crumple up the letter and throw it out, but I had to say it. Go and fall in love. Fall in love with some intellectual pursuit (I already mentioned that one). Fall in love with an activity. I know you love to read and watch movies and listen to rock ‘n’ roll. Keep it up (but remember to go to bed at night). Fall in love with a cause. In addition to all those things, if you can manage it and are fortunate enough, fall in love with another person. It is one of the best feelings in the whole world hopefully for both of you. I know that odds are falling in love will end up breaking your heart a couple of times, but it really is worth it. It lets you know you are alive. While the love part helps you get up in the morning, the heartbreak part makes you want to pull the covers up over your head. And you probably should allocate a few cover-over-the-head hours per broken heart. [ILs, I realize that some of that last bit of advice was more personal to my son than to you, but I still read it. Of course for you, I leave it up to you. Additionally, and seriously, if someone wants to fall in love with you, and you want nothing to do with them and/or you want to end it, and things start getting out of hand, please know that we are here to help you and that there are resources and people both at the College of Law and the University who can help.] Falling in love makes me want to generalize, so...

Be Bold

I think being receptive to what you like, being receptive to people, and falling in love can all fit under a bigger umbrella of taking risks. I know you well enough to know you won’t jump out of a plane without a parachute, shoot heroin, or rob a bank. Even though I know you won’t do that stuff, DON’T DO IT. But, take risks. Don’t always pick the safe way when it comes to classes, activities, career, etc. If you want to go to Hollywood to write screenplays (after you graduate), go. If you want to try to be a freelance journalist, figure out how, and do it. Society is going to provide you with a lot of easy ways to do a lot of stuff you don’t really want to do, and you’ll get paid for it—don’t fall prey. Do your own thinking, even if that’s hard. [ILs- The same is true for you. The practice of law is a great thing, and many people love it. The same goes for the private practice of law in a large firm that pays well. If that’s for you, more power to you. But if you have other aspirations—public service, public interest—don’t forget them. Keep them in mind. I know I told you to be receptive before, and now I am telling you to remember what you are thinking now, and you may think that is a little inconsistent. I don’t. The point is that it will be easier for many of you to enter the private practice of law with a large firm than it will be to do other things. This is because the firms that come to interview on campus are mostly those large firms. And we love them. But if you think that may not be for you, let us help you find what may be a better match. Don’t take the easy way, unless that is what you want to do.]
Always be as honest as you are

Patrick, you and I have talked about this before. You have a tremendous amount of integrity and are one of the most honest people I know, including the ironing board and fire extinguisher stories. Your honesty makes me very proud. You must have inherited it from your mother. Stay that way. Sadly, stuff that makes you stop and think can pop up all the time. Watch out. These days, as a student, it is easier to take an intellectual shortcut than it ever was before, thanks to the Internet. But be attentive, watch out, put the hard work in, and stay yourself; and you will be fine. I know it. [Law school friends, our profession depends upon our honesty and integrity. You will face professional and ethical challenges all the time. At law school, you will face them when you write papers, take exams, and more. Abide by our Honor Code and Writing Standards. If you have not read them, do so. We take them very seriously. Among the most unpleasant things Dean Sobieski, the faculty, and I have to do are sort through alleged and actual violations of our ethical standards. A violation can impact upon your ability to graduate and to obtain or keep your license to practice law.]

Be nice

My mother always told me to be nice. I think the heavy way to say the same thing is to say, “be compassionate.” You have a great opportunity. I don’t say that in a way to add pressure. You probably feel enough of that, so I don’t mean to pile on any more. But college [and law school] is a great opportunity. Know how lucky you are, and use that good fortune to help out others to the extent you can. In this world we walk a balance between helping ourselves and helping others. Don’t fall totally into the me, me, me side. A ton of people in the world hurt a whole lot more than you and me. Do what you can to make them feel a little bit better. [ILs, same here! One of the things we really value at the College of Law is our collegiality: our ability to work together in a cooperative manner. Become a part of that tradition while you are here.]

Stay great

You are a great person. You have already accomplished a ton. Remember when you were in first grade and were diagnosed with dyslexia? Well thanks to (three years at Brighton Academy in Baton Rouge), your hard work, Nintendo magazines, Tolkien, and your mother’s optimism, you twice topped out on the ACT reading section, did great in high school, and will go off to a fantastic college with a bunch of AP credits. The point is, you can do this! Not only can you do it, but you can do it well. Remember what you did to get where you are, and have confidence that you will continue to do great things. [ILs, you too! I admit I read that last part to brag about my son, but none of you would be here tonight if you had not already done great things. Let me brag about you too! We would not have admitted you if we did not think you would succeed here. So, succeed! Do great! There will be times when you have doubts, but persevere. One of the things we are trying to get you to do in law school is to question your ideas, your opinions, and your views. But do not doubt or question your ability to succeed. Use the skills that got you here, and we will be sitting together at graduation in a couple of years.]
Figure out what makes you happy and never settle for less

There is a song by John Cougar Mellencamp; it’s one of his early hits called “Jack and Diane.” John Cougar Mellencamp is still around. He always impressed me as a sort of Indiana version of Bruce Springsteen. I like them both, but I admit they are blue collar champions singing about how tough life is while actually making a fortune off the music. When the singer released “Jack and Diane,” his name may have been John Cougar, or it could have been John Mellencamp. I don’t think it was John Cougar Mellencamp yet. In fact, and I know I am off on a tangent, the only combination of names the singer has not used is Cougar Mellencamp, without the John. Imagine that name, Cougar Mellencamp. It’s as if it’s a line from a hypothetical novel: “As Daphne sipped her whiskey sour on the beach club porch and stared out over the ocean, she asked herself, ‘Why did Collin and Tommie Mellencamp ever name their youngest son Cougar?’”

Sorry, I got side-tracked. Anyway, the song, “Jack and Diane,” is about a girl and a boy. In it, the singer says, “Oh yeah..., life goes on, long after the thrill of living is gone.” Thinking about it, I am convinced that the key is to prove John Cougar Mellencamp wrong about the thrill being gone and to live a long life.

Sorry to go on for so long. Have fun, work hard, and good luck.

Love,

Dad