

This speech was delivered by Ms. Ginny Cerussi, Chair of the Math Department, to the Loyola School community on Wednesday, December 17, 2008.

Open to Growth

As you are well aware, the graduate of a Jesuit high school at the time of graduation should be Academically Excellent, Open to Growth, Religious, Loving, and Committed to Doing Justice. While all five qualities are viewed as equally important, I can't help but think that being Open to Growth takes the lead for all the others. I say this because if someone is truly open to growth, it should be easier for that person to become more academically excellent, more religious, more loving, and more committed to doing justice.

Last July there was an article in the business section of the New York Times discussing why some people reach their creative potential in business while other equally talented people do not. After three decades of painstaking research by a Stanford psychologist, she concluded that the answer to this puzzle lies in how people think about intelligence and talent. Those who believe they were born with all the smarts and gifts they're ever going to have approach life with a fixed mind-set. Those who believe that their own abilities can expand over time live with a growth mind-set, and these have proven to be the most innovative and successful ones. She says that society is obsessed with the idea of talent and genius and people who are naturals with innate ability but people who believe solely in the power of talent tend not to fulfill their potential because they're so concerned with looking smart and not making mistakes. But people who believe that talent can be developed are the ones who really push, stretch, take risks, leave their comfort zones, confront their own mistakes, and then learn from them. Having a growth mindset can profoundly affect all aspects of a person's life, not only from success at school and later in a job, but from personal relationships and parenting as well.

In preparation for this talk, I looked back on my own life experiences to reflect on those times when I felt I was called to be open to growth, and I share them with you now in the hope that my examples might inspire you to be open to new experiences as well.

I am sure that most of you think that I have always been a teacher but such is not the case. When I was in college there were basically two career paths open to women: nursing and teaching, and I was interested in neither. I majored in chemistry and math and my first job after graduation was with Exxon Engineering and later I worked in information retrieval for the Shell Oil Company. When my sons were born I stayed home with them and was out of the work force for twelve years, but I did teach preschool religious education in my local parish on a volunteer basis. Well, this teaching thing appealed to me and so the idea was put into my head that maybe I should pursue teaching on a full-time basis. A friend told me about an opening teaching math and science at a girls' high school in the Bronx, and even though I had not taken any courses on how to be an effective teacher, had never student taught a class or even observed one, I took the risk and applied for the job. After I was hired and before I actually began to work there, I almost backed out because I was so nervous and felt so unqualified, but I stuck with it and although the first year was very tough, I liked it enough to continue to teach there. Eventually, while working full time, I attended graduate school part time in pursuit of a Master's Degree which I earned the same year my older son received his law degree. After teaching at that school for eight years, I was invited to be Academic Assistant Principal, a post I held for the following seven years. Then I felt deep inside me that it was time to take a risk again. I was not happy in my role as Assistant Principal and missed being a full-time classroom teacher. When I realized that the highlight of my day was the 45 minutes I was in class, I decided to leave my comfort zone once again and look for another job. It was not easy to do that at my age, but that job search brought me to Loyola ten years ago. I am so happy that I was open to growth enough to chance a career change later in life and had I not taken that risk to leave my comfort zone, I would not be standing here before you today. I have found that teaching high school isn't that much different from my first experiences of teaching pre-school --- it's just that now the students are in bigger bodies!

So how can you begin to become open to growth? Perhaps you might want to think about joining a club new to you, or trying out for a part in the spring play or being a member of a sports team. Maybe you might enjoy writing an article for the Blazer and seeing your name in print, serving as a lector, altar server, or Eucharistic Minister at school liturgies, joining chorus, reading for pleasure, helping the less fortunate through participation in Brownbaggers or a service trip, or by reaching out beyond your immediate circle of friends to making some new friends. At home you might make a conscious effort to

be a good role model for younger siblings. There may be times when taking the risk did not turn out the way you had hoped it would. There is always the chance for rejection or failure. Well, then we pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and we learn from our mistakes. It is not the end of the world to make a mistake. What you don't want to do is make the same mistakes over and over again. If you have an open-to-growth mindset, you will be able to develop the kind of perseverance and resilience required to convert life's setbacks into future successes. You won't wake up one morning as an adult, look back on your high school years, and ask yourself the question, "What if?" You will have lived that answer.

Thank you for your attention.