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Grad-At-Grad  
Open to Growth  
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(Delivered to the Loyola community at morning assembly.)

For the past few weeks, we have heard about many different ways of being open to growth from Mr. Lyness. People who are open to growth take responsibility for growth in many different areas of their lives, and often put themselves outside of their comfort zones. Over the past four years, I have opened myself to growth personally, mentally, physically and spiritually.

According to the Grad-At-Grad document, a student who is open to growth is more conscious of his or her feelings and is freer and more authentic in expressing them. Over the past four years, I have grown tremendously in my relationship with myself and my ability to express my feelings.

My elementary school self was very different than who I am now. As a young kid, I was famously quiet and shy. Everyone in my elementary school knew each other since we were five, we had no secrets, and we didn't really get to choose our friends—we were stuck with whomever we befriended in the first grade. Even by the fifth grade, classmates, with whom I had gone to school for five years, asked me if I ever talked. Apparently they had never heard me say a word, other than to answer a question in class. At the time I was fine with that.

As I grew up, however, I began to realize that I did not want to be this quiet person anymore. My classmates were so used to treating me a certain way, that they didn't notice how different I was becoming, so I began to drift away from my friends. In my eyes, I was not that quiet girl anymore, but my friends were all outgoing and crazy, and they really only appreciated the shy me that gave them an audience. I pretended not to hear all the inside jokes I was not part of and all the whispers about me behind my back. It seemed as if we were all still really close friends, but I knew every time I left the room the catty comments would start.

I had high expectations coming to Loyola. I hoped that the second I walked through the door I would transform into this outgoing, completely different person. Not surprisingly, finding myself was not that easy and during freshman year I found it really difficult to come out of my shell. I first began to make really good friends by joining teams--in basketball we had to work together to win, so I bonded with teammates and I met a few of my closest friends through track and cross country. There were only five of us on the team and everyone was new, so we figured out together what it meant to be a team, while Mr. Donacik made practices fun allowing us to enjoy one another as people and not simply as other runners. Some of my small classes have also forced me to talk more and as I grew comfortable in the Loyola community, it became much easier to become the person I wanted to be.

According to the Grad-At-Grad document, someone who is open to growth is beginning to seek new experiences, even those that involve some risk or the possibility of failure. If someone told my freshman self that I would end up on the Girls Varsity basketball team, I would have never believed them.

I had never played basketball before in my life. Prior to coming to Loyola I had only planned on running track and cross-country. A few months into school, however, Mr. Palladino

encouraged me try out for the basketball team. Try-outs scared me out of my mind. I was clueless and terrified and wearing little cross-country shorts, while everyone else were pros wearing long basketball shorts. My shots flew through the air, going nowhere near the backboard, and other players stole the ball from me countless times. I was ready to quit by the end of the first try-out. The coaches encouraged me not to give up, and I decided that I would not allow myself to be a quitter.

Even once I was on the team, however, the first game I played in was a disaster. Throughout the season, I worked really hard during practice to improve where I lacked--which was most places. I put a ton of extra effort into the skills that I knew I had, and worked hard to earn a starting spot on the JV team.

For me, playing basketball has been more about learning how to play on a team than about learning the actual skills. Up until freshman year I had only played tennis and run track competitively. Though I was on teams for these sports, the competition was individual. By joining basketball, I learned how much communication and awareness is necessary to function as a group. When I messed up, it didn't just affect me, but my whole team. Basketball helped me become more responsible for my actions in group situations. I love experiencing so many people spending all their time and effort on one goal.

I have also begun to take risks through public speaking. As I mentioned, I am a naturally quiet person, so speaking in front of large, or even small, groups of people has really challenged me. Again, if someone told me even just last year that I would do a Grad-At-Grad speech in front of assembly, I would have thought they were crazy since public speaking has been a phobia of mine since around the second grade. There was a time, sophomore year, when Ms. Baber asked me to read at Mass, and I blatantly refused. It was the last thing on earth I ever wanted to do. I began to realize, though, that public speaking is a necessary and useful skill, whether I like it or not. Last year I asked Ms. Baber to let me read at Mass and since then I have actively tried to overcome my fear. Though so far these efforts have been somewhat futile, I really would like to keep taking risks like these, so that sometime in the future I will be able to use public speaking to my advantage.

According to the Grad-At-Grad document, a student who is open to growth is exploring career and life-style choices within a value framework. Since coming to Loyola, I have begun to answer God calling me to serve those in need.

In Freshman and Sophomore years, I completed the required service hours, and even went on a Camden trip, but no part of service or social justice had ever really clicked for me. I did what I had to do, and even a little bit more, just because. I didn't feel any special obligation for helping others, and only went on my first Camden trip because I heard it how great it was, not because I was truly interested.

At the beginning of Junior year, when it was time to pick a placement to return to every week, my mom signed me up to tutor at a place called Mercy Center. Mercy Center is in the South Bronx, in an area where most kids grow up speaking Spanish at home, because their parents do not understand English. At Mercy Center we tutor these kids in reading, in three different ways: reading aloud, singing songs and playing games.

The first Saturday morning I worked there, I was really intimidated. Though the program supervisor, Mayra, was extremely warm and welcoming, the sense of community was so strong I

felt out of place. It didn't help that I was one of the few people in the building who didn't speak any Spanish.

Nevertheless, I returned every week, and after a few months I became a part of that community that had scared me at first. Tutoring the same first or second grader every week and building relationships with them helped me to realize what a difference I was making in their lives. I saw particular improvement in one of my tutees, Gustavo. He was ready and willing to read third grade chapter books by the end of first grade, and this really opened my eyes to the difference that one person could make.

I began to return to Mercy Center every Saturday not because I had to complete my hours, but because I felt responsible for the kids. Why not help someone if I had the chance? Through Mercy Center I first heard God's call to serve others, though I didn't even know it. Later that year I truly experienced my first Camden trip, and, believe me, there's a difference between going to Camden and experiencing it. On this trip, the call to serve became apparent in my life, and I realized I had already begun to answer it.

The more service work I do, the more I realize I want to incorporate it into my future. Making service one of my top priorities motivated me to travel down to Georgia for the Ignatian Teach-In and School of the Americas' protest only a few weeks ago. The Teach-In was spectacular. People representing all different social justice issues spoke passionately about their causes. The speakers' passion inspired me to think about how to entwine my future with service. I know that my future will incorporate service somehow, but I'm still trying to figure out how. There are so many areas and components of justice for me to explore before I could ever make that decision. When I do need to make decisions, however, I will look to God who is the one who first called me to serve, knowing God will also be able to help me figure out where to go from here.

Since I came to Loyola, I not only have grown as a person, but also in my relationship with God. Personal growth has led me to see God in all those around me, and even in myself. By recognizing God's presence, I have been able to more effectively become an agent of God's love, which is what the five Grad-At-Grad characteristics are really all about.

Thank you.