

Delivered by Brynn Norris to the Loyola community at morning assembly, November 23, 2009. A Loyola student is becoming more open to growth.

“Carpe diem,” or as many know it, “seize the day.” I would define being Open to Growth as understanding oneself enough to seize the day or, in some cases, the moment. It is the awareness of how our surroundings affect us, along with how we affect our surroundings. It is also developing a habit of reflection on experiences, which is something I have tried to do here at Loyola through retreats, Christian Service, my friendships, academics, and my experiences in general. Being Open to Growth, as defined by the Jesuit Secondary Education Association, is also seeking new experiences, even those that may be a little frightening or bring some risk of failure. It’s a little frightening for me to be speaking to you today, sharing with you what I believe about being Open to Growth, and hopefully helping you realize how you are and can be Open to Growth through your own experiences as well.

I walked in the doors of Loyola that first day of freshman year with what I thought was an open mind. Sure, I walked into Loyola a little timid – but I stayed that way most of the year. Do not get me wrong—I was friendly and energetic, but I never really let down my guard. I had the mindset of doing what I was asked and I did not put forth any extra effort. I also made friends freshman year, but I never went out of my way to open up to them. I certainly was enthusiastic about everything as well, but that was more from nerves than anything else. I did not like standing out and I was content that way. However, that was what being Open to Growth is about. It is about going beyond the expected, taking a chance, being open to new experiences.

My experience at Loyola has allowed me to do just that. Loyola has given me experiences with Christian Service, retreats, and academics through which I have become more Open to Growth. In grammar school, I had experiences with both retreats and service. However, my experiences with them at Loyola have been so different. In eighth grade every Friday afternoon, we would go either to a nursing home, a soup kitchen, or the lower school. Although we were helping the less fortunate, we never had direct contact and we would only do things that were comfortable, behind-the-scenes work. At the nursing home, I remember making bracelets one day for some of the residents. It was fun, but I got the sense that the staff created the job for us so we would be comfortable, which is not the point of helping others. My idea of Christian Service changed at Loyola. Now I do my service at Mary Manning Walsh where I am sometimes put in uncomfortable positions. I have to mold to the program, and the program does not mold to my needs – which should be the case. Whenever I have to help feed someone, I never feel quite in my element. However, I have to forget about myself in that instance and remember that I am there for the people and not for myself. I have learned to put others before me and to be open sometimes to feeling uncomfortable.

I also had never before gone on a retreat where people open up to one another. I went on a retreat in the seventh grade as a requirement for Confirmation but it was nothing compared to Loyola retreats. On that retreat we were given talks, we discussed religion, and we did reflections during which a person would talk and we would be asked to imagine God. We were on the retreat for a single day. We did not participate all that much; all we did was sit most of the time and listen. Only a few people were given the chance to share, and what they shared was not very personal. Loyola changed this

experience for me as well. Loyola's retreat program is a lot more than going over the Bible and listening to others talk about reflecting. It is a more personal experience. We are challenged to understand ourselves along with God. I will not go into detail and give away what goes on during the retreats, but I will say that you will walk away from every retreat having learned something new about yourself as long as you open yourself up to it. Personally, I had to challenge myself to be more open, to share my thoughts on different things, because I was never asked to do that before high school.

Academically, I was challenged as well. When I was younger I was used to getting good grades – A's maybe one or two B's. These grades were not just "handed to" me, but attaining them was not the greatest challenge ever. Today I have to challenge myself daily to grow as a student through new ways of studying in order to receive an A. I have to work hard to receive that grade. I have come across many instances where I have struggled to gain that A because I did not understand a subject. I have had to learn how to be open to not understanding everything immediately and to looking for new ways to succeed. Because of Loyola, I now embrace that growth and I have become more independent because of it.

I have also found myself being Open to Growth through a major passion of mine. When I was younger, I played basketball just to hang out with friends and be active. Unbelievably, I would either play post or forward because I usually was one of the taller people on the team. That, however, is not the case now. I am not only referring to my obvious lack in height but the fact that now I play basketball for more than just hanging out with friends. Basketball is another way for me to be Open to Growth and better

understand myself. I have to be patient with my weaknesses as well as learn how to focus on my strengths and work them to my advantage. When I first tried out for basketball in freshman year, my shooting was terrible. In a sense, I just chucked the ball in the air and hoped it would not ricochet off the rim. For the rest of the year I tried my hardest to fix my shot and I did to a certain degree, but I still based my shots off of hope that they would go in. When sophomore year came around, I still had trouble, but in order to make the varsity team in junior year, I would have to learn the correct way to shoot. I spent my whole sophomore year trying to get my shot down. I had to forget my previous ways of shooting and start from scratch. I had to be open to learning a new way to shoot. I also had trouble – and still have trouble to this day – with being a leader. As a point guard, I have the pressure of leadership and sometimes it feels a lot like stage fright on the court. I have learned to get over that, however, by taking into consideration my strengths in basketball. I use my energy – I have a lot of that! – and channel it into being enthusiastic on the court. I also take my determination to get over my fears on the court in order to win the game. Being Open to Growth has a lot to do with accepting both my strengths and weaknesses and using them to the team's advantage. I have to take into consideration everyone else on the team and their talents. We become a support system and we grow as a team.

Loyola also has helped me come face to face with yet another characteristic of being Open to Growth: exploring career and life-style choices within a values framework. I do not remember when it finally hit me that I wanted to be a teacher, because for many years I had dreamed of either becoming an interior designer or a psychologist. However, my experience here at Loyola helped me realize what I want to do with my

life. Through my academics and my friends, I have realized that I want to be a teacher. During freshman year history was one of my most challenging subjects. I was awful at multiple choice questions and I was terrible with dates and names. However, I find myself in senior year taking two history classes. I still struggle with dates and names, but I figured that taking the easy way out by not taking any history class would not allow me to grow. I chose to take History of New York because I wanted to be able to explain to people why living in New York is such a terrific thing, beyond telling people that I love it just because I was born and raised here and it has a lot of pretty buildings. I also chose to take Global Perspectives this year so that I could learn what is going on in the world and so that I can give an intelligent answer when someone asks my opinion on the war that is going on. I would like to become a teacher that can encourage students to want to learn more about a subject; I want to be the teacher that teaches them more about that subject, as well.

Although I found my path to being more Open to Growth through sports and through my career choice, people can find that path anywhere. In fact being Open to Growth entails being open to all aspects of life, not just the things you most enjoy. It is about overcoming your fears and using your talents to make the best out of every situation.