



P³: A Formula for Life*

by Dr. Robert A. Scott
President, Adelphi University

Introduction

This is a day of celebration and reflection, a day of memory and hopefulness. It is a day to ask big questions: Who am I? Who will I become?

I faced those questions, and still do. All those around us, including your parents and teachers, face them as well. We are never truly, fully “grown up,” but constantly growing—in knowledge, skill, and, we hope, empathy.

Today, I will reflect briefly on these ideas and what they might mean to you. I will do so by talking about three words that begin with “P”: Privilege, Passion, and Potential—“P-cubed,” if you will.

Privilege

Gathered with the mayor and others at the reviewing stand on Memorial Day, I was impressed by the number of bands, the quantity of instruments, the variety of uniforms, and the skill of the students. My mind wandered to scenes at the fields of St. Paul’s and the Community Pool. I was reminded again and again of what a special place Garden City is, and wondered how many of us reflect on what a privilege it is to live in such a community, and the responsibilities that accompany such privilege.

I was also reminded of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., who once said,

I believe that every right implies a responsibility; every opportunity, an obligation; every possession (or privilege), a duty.¹

In our Village, a former president of Adelphi, reflecting on education as an advantage, a privilege, said,

There will be—I trust—an—ever deepening realization among us all that the fundamental purpose of an education is to enable one more intelligently and more potently to help—not to hinder, to build—not to destroy, to serve—not to demand service.²

Yes, we are privileged to live in Garden City and attend these schools, but this privilege yields many different returns based on our talents, our interests, and our motivations. For some it is academics—literature, science, or history; for others it is the arts—drama, painting, verse; for still others it might be sports—on teams or solo; for yet others it may be in service to those in need.

Privilege then is a starting point; it is a way of talking about advantages and how talents are nurtured, interests are aroused, motivation is stoked. The test is whether we use education to distinguish between fact, fiction, and faith, and how we use our advantages and talents for the benefit of society as a whole.

Passion

Which leads seamlessly to the second element in our formula: “Passion.” By passion, I mean eagerness, “fire in the belly,” a desire to learn and a zest to achieve a goal, a willingness to dream.

Bon Jovi, the rock star, once said in reflecting on his success,

It’s passion, not pedigree, that can and will win in the end. Free yourself from

comparison. Just because someone has fancy sneakers doesn’t mean they can run faster.³

Indeed, fancy sneakers are not sufficient to win a race. Privilege may get us to the starting block, but passion and talent are required to reach the goal. Passion is about commitment, caring about the results—but not just any results. Who we are can be defined by the results to which we aspire and the passions we exhibit. Most of us experience two forms of activity in our lives, some transactional and some transformational, each of which produces results.

During your high school years, you might have worked at a cash register for extra money—clearly transactional—and then gone home to turn sound into music through practice. Or you might have progressed from diagramming sentence structures to creating prose. Or perhaps you started out selling ice cream and then began making new flavors.

Transformation—whether of sound, flavors, or lives, i.e. adding value, not just tallying results—requires passion as well as respect for others and their role. In my experience, those with passion, a love for what they do, have a special talent—they listen. They listen to an inner voice as well as to others—neighbors, co-workers, fellow students—and hear and see what others do not. They understand the world on their own terms, not just on the basis of what they hear or read.

I recall a quote that captures this special talent to suspend thought and let the senses lead to new insights:



All there is to thinking is seeing something you weren't noticing which makes you see—or hear—something that isn't even visible—or audible.⁴

By listening in this way, we use all of our senses, we hear and value others' stories, we notice context and color, we add to our ability to pursue dreams with passion, we call upon head, heart, and hand, with soul. For those with passion, no one will be able to say that you are “out of touch, out of tune, out of temper.”⁵

Potential

Instead, others will see you as having potential, our third element. But potential for what? As the acclaimed professor of bioethics Carl Elliott asked, “to what extent is the shape of a life given to us, and to what extent do we create it?”⁶

Each of us has potential: the potential “to think, to dream, to learn, to try, to do.”⁷ This doesn't mean that we each have the same potential, or that we each can achieve the same result—except that we each can aspire to be the best that we can be; we each can aspire for excellence in all that we do; we each can use our potential to achieve lasting influence for good.

To talk about potential is to talk about the future, described in this way by Victor Hugo:

The Future has many names:
For the weak it is unattainable,
For the fearful it is unknown,
For the bold it is opportunity.⁸

Many in this audience have already shown that they are bold, and have seized opportunities to learn, to try, to do—in the lab, on the field, and in service to others. Among this latter group, I include Adelphi Prize for Leadership winners Isabella Bergagnini, Jean Cui, Clare McKenna, Kaitlin McQuade, Christine O'Connor, James Regalbutto, and Juliana Thorstenn. They have used their time and talents for service to others in truly exemplary ways, and are ready to seize opportunity in the future. They know that education is as much about character and citizenship as it is about careers and commerce, and demonstrate this understanding in extraordinary ways.

Conclusion

Privilege, passion, potential: a formula for life for individuals, organizations, nations. If a vibrant moral imagination, a sound sense of history, and a global vision are essential ingredients for success, for anticipating and preparing for change, then “P-cubed” represents the essential framework for our lives as citizens and professionals who not only know what to do and how to do it, but also when or whether to do it.

It has been said that “Education is not simply about academic achievement,” but, as formulated in 1947 a few miles away at Lake Success, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “it is about understanding, tolerance, and friendship, which are the basis of peace in our world.”⁹ And your education will be even deeper when privilege is recognized and passion motivates potential.

Go, then, knowing that you have the capacity to change everyone you meet and everything you touch, that every encounter can be a turning point, that you can continue to grow in knowledge, skill, and empathy, and that in learning about yourself, you will know the secret of “P-cubed.”

Congratulations, class of 2005!

Notes

1. Rockefeller, John D. Jr. “Ten Principles Speech.” United Services Organization, NYC July 8, 1941.
2. Blodgett, Frank D. Commencement Address, Adelphi College, June 11, 1930. Adelphi University.
3. Bon Jovi, Jon. American Rock Musician. Commencement Address, Monmouth University (N.J.), 2001.
Quoted in Reinholdt, Heidi and John Ross, Editors, *The Quotable Graduate*. Connecticut: The Lyons Press, 2003.
4. Maclean, Norman. *A River Runs Through It*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976, p.8.
5. Rothstein, Edward. “Churchill, Heroic Relic or Relevant Now?” *The New York Times*, Saturday, March 29, 2003, D7.
6. Elliott, Carl. “A Life of One's Own,” a review of *The Ethics of Identity* by Kwame Anthony Appiah. *The American Prospect*, June 2005, p.77.
7. Conklin, Beverly. *The Language of Teaching*. Boulder, Colorado: Blue Mountain Press, 1999, unpaginated.
8. Attributed to Victor Hugo.
9. Aung San Suu Kyi, General Secretary, National League for Democracy, Burma. Quoted in Reinholdt and Ross, *Op.Cit.*

Dr. Robert A. Scott was appointed by the Adelphi University Board of Trustees as the ninth president and professor of anthropology and sociology in July 2000. He has built on Adelphi's rich traditions in undergraduate and graduate education and continues to link the liberal arts and sciences with professional programs. He has been the driving force behind the success Adelphi University has achieved in the past five years.