

The Paradox of Possibility: The Expanse of What Is Possible Comes Only When You Choose to Stand in the Fray

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I am going to do my best to share some things—both humorous and serious—that are socially relevant and that will hopefully motivate you to reconsider old ways of thinking and being. The title of my address today is “The Paradox of Possibility.”

Now, for this piece to really make sense, I need to do two things: first, you need to know a little more about my identity—or my “backstory” if you will, and second, I need to give you some working definitions. So, let’s start with who I am—the relatively condensed version. I was born in Chicago but spent significant amounts of time living in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Tallahassee, Florida, Birmingham, Alabama, and now Huntingdon, Pennsylvania—all very different kinds of places with different kinds of people. And this has resulted in me becoming very good at acculturation, and I’ve developed a pretty robust pluralistic view of society. I’m a vegetarian, but I don’t like greens—collards, mustards, turnips, anybody’s greens—so please don’t try to get me to eat them.

I was raised by my parents—who are both college graduates with advanced degrees—not to be afraid to venture outside of society’s binary gender box, and this I credit for fostering my love of science. And following in my parents’ footsteps, I too have earned a bunch of degrees and have had—what I think—are a lot of cool and interesting jobs. But what I’ve come to love doing the most is being a professor like my Dad and having the opportunity to interact with students like you.

Now, I also have to tell you, I had a really weird relationship with school throughout my life. Don’t get me wrong; I genuinely loved school, and my parents made sure I went to the very best of them, but very frequently, I was the only Black person in my classes. This meant that I received a sustained exposure to some pretty harmful ideas about people of color and the assumed reasons for our success and failure—negative beliefs that still linger in some ideological circles today. But fortunately, I also had intentional proximity to diverse groups of people who were living lives very different from my own middleclass upbringing, and I learned through interaction and later academic study to understand that we

can't ignore patterns of inequity and the deep historical roots of our present social issues. Most of all though, I learned not to fear being uncomfortable. I learned to be my own competition, and I also learned how to use the paradox of possibility as a tool for success.



Figure 1: Dr. Poole Speaking at Juniaata College Convocation for the Class of 2026. Photo credit: Student photographer Olivia Marie '23.

Okay, so enough about me; now the definitions. Are you familiar with the word “paradox”? Well, according to the *Oxford Languages* dictionary, a paradox is “a seemingly absurd or self-contradictory proposition that when investigated, may actually prove to be true.”¹ For example, “in a great paradox, she has discovered that a decrease in her faculty service obligations has increased the reward she gleans from doing them.”

What about the word “possibility”? What does that word mean to you? Does it have a positive or negative connotation? *Webster’s* defines possibility as “a thing that may happen or be the case”—as in “it was always the case or possibility that he might be turned down for that big NSF grant.”²

Now, would it surprise you to learn that there are dozens upon dozens of songs that espouse the idea of “possibility”? Well, here’s a sample of just a few of them: Debbie Gibson’s (1990), “Anything is Possible,” Jonny Lang’s (2006), “Anything’s Possible,” Lea Michele’s (2017), “Anything’s Possible,” and Joshua Henry’s (2021), “Possible.”³ And so, it would seem that our society is well steeped in—if not slightly obsessed with—the notion of possibility. And that’s not bad. For some people though, possibility is synonymous with wishful thinking, blind optimism, or random chance, and for others, possibility is

about doing everything right to ensure a particular outcome or leveraging one's privilege to select from a menu of alternatives already preconfigured for the taking.

But I would argue that there's a catch—or a paradox of sorts—that goes along with the idea of possibility. And just what is this paradox, you ask? Well, as I've thought about my own life, the paradox of possibility seems to be this: you may not really know what's possible, unless and until, you've experienced challenges, and the revelation of the expanse of all that's possible often comes only when you've chosen to intentionally stand in the fray—as hard as it may be—rather than run away from challenges.

Now how can I be so sure? Let me tell you about my 2021/2022 academic year. It was among the worst years I've ever had. Adriane Sheffield, my best friend of more than ten years from grad school, died suddenly. Besides being one of the most gifted educators I've ever known, she'd also become a steadying force in my life, and since we met in 2011, we'd planned to do this professor thing together. And then, I experienced some unexpected instability in my job and housing situation. I was feeling frustrated by having my hard work here at the college, seemingly taken for granted, and I just felt pretty invisible (which is ironic, because it's kinda hard not to notice ME).

But now let me tell you about one of my best academic years ever, last year, my 2021/2022 academic year. It was the year where losing Adriane led to an awesome new friendship with Tiffany, a brilliant scholar who'd been Adriane's colleague and best friend at Coastal Carolina University; I found and purchased a home in record time; I earned tenure and was promoted to Associate Professor; I was selected for the Henry H. '57 and Joan R. Gibbel Award for outstanding junior faculty; I received the May Day Outstanding Faculty award for exceptional service to the college; and I worked with some truly awesome colleagues and students on some amazing grants and projects—in geology, the humanities, biochemistry, political psychology, and academic success research. But best of all, I discovered that there are many people here at Juniata who genuinely care about me and who will also care about you. They showed up for me, stood in the gap for me, went to bat for me, cooked for me, literally opened their homes for me, and reassured me in words and in a variety of other deeds, that I am indeed seen and valued. So, what kept me encouraged and unwilling to quit or relent? The paradox of possibility.

Now, I'm not suggesting that I would have intentionally chosen to go through any of those things, or that people should persevere in the performance of activities that they no longer value; yet, because I learned in the course of my life experiences to lean into and purposely seek out challenges, I was open to the expanse of possibilities that might come, even from one of the most trying years in my life.

During your time at Juniata, I hope that you'll have fun, that you'll learn and grow, and be enriched as scholars and as citizens. But, I also want you to seek out challenges: social challenges, academic challenges, and challenges to your worldview, because I believe that these kinds of challenges,

in particular, are the gateway to the expanse of possibility—positive possibility—in the twenty-first century and beyond. For instance, social challenge could come in the form of purposely going out of your way to meaningfully include someone in a project, activity, or event, because they are different than you—in terms of their social class, gender, race, ethnicity or other components of their identity—even if you’re told by some people that it’s better to just “stick with your own kind.”

What about academic challenges? This could come in the form of having to adopt or adapt new strategies for studying and learning—recognizing that your previous academic record is neither a promise nor a liability in your quest for achievement and advancing toward finishing your degree.

And finally, worldview challenges might show up as you grapple with the proposition that your opinions are only as relevant, as reliable, and as useful in today’s society as the veracity of the sources you’ve sought and the depth of investigation you’ve undertaken to inform them. In other words, it’s hard to really know what you believe and why you believe it, unless you’ve intentionally undertaken a concerted exploration of “the what” and “the why” of the experiences and realities of people who are different than you.

So, as I wrap up this address, here’s what I want you to take away as you go forward into this fall 2022 semester, across your time at Juniata, and into the lives I hope you’ll live as intentionally thoughtful, deeply curious, and fervently compassionate human beings. First, purposely seek out new relationships that illuminate the diversity of human experience and eclipses the limits of your own life’s comfortable boundaries and narrative. Second, you may not get an ‘A’ in every class you take—and that’s not necessarily the best goal for learning anyway—but every class you take can add to your knowledge and understanding about the world. And third, don’t shy away from hard truth-revealing conversations, grounded in facts and evidence, because they are important and necessary, and part of the college experience. These kinds of challenges are the gateway to possibilities—possibilities for personal growth and becoming more of who you want to be and possibilities for social transformation that can lead to a better future for everyone.

NOTES

1. *Oxford Languages Dictionary*, s.v. “paradox,” accessed August 25, 2022. <https://languages.oup.com/research/oxford-english-dictionary/>
2. *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. “possibility.” Accessed August 25, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/possibility>.
3. Debbie Gibson, “Anything is Possible” (0:33 to 0:48), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jS0_RqBQc50; Johnny Lang, “Anything’s Possible” (0:56 to 1:17), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KjOAh3sSPPY>; Lea Michele, “Anything’s Possible” (0:52 to 1:28), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PSjgSH60l5s>; Joshua Henry, “Possible” (0:57 to 1:17), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PMCe7mvcNxY>.

