

“Juniata: Where Your Best Is Never Good Enough”

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There is a word that frequently inserts itself into our conversation. The term first grabbed my attention several years ago, when I was a teaching assistant in grad school. A student asked to see me during office hours. After arriving for the appointment, the student asked, “Could you tell me why I failed the recent quiz?” I asked to see the quiz and, after looking it over, I said, “It appears you failed the quiz because all the answers are wrong.” The student, tender and sincere in approach, asked, “What do my answers have to do with my grade? I did my best on the quiz. Shouldn’t I be graded on my best effort rather than my results?” *Best.*

This term showed up again in Dr. Maurice Taylor’s 2018 Juniata College Commencement Address. Taylor is a 1972 Juniata College grad who recently retired from Morgan State University, where he served as vice president for academic outreach and engagement. In his speech, Taylor defined the Juniata experience: “We are to be committed to chasing our best selves.”¹ This idea was echoed by Sabrina Ionescu at Kobe Bryant’s memorial service when she declared, “I wanted to be just like him . . . To be the first one to show up and the last one to leave. To love the grind. To be your best when you don’t feel your best. And make other people around you the best version of themselves.”² *Best.*

The course Music Fundamentals used to include an assignment where students composed an advertising jingle. The class would prepare by examining a few of the more memorable Madison Avenue ear worms, like “Nationwide is on your side,” “We are Farmers. Bum ba-dum dum dum dum dum!” and McDonald’s “I’m Lovin’ It.”³ And, for the more local folks, who can forget that “Gene Stocker is a great, great guy.”⁴ On the day the jingles were due, I’d collect them and sing through them for the class. As you can imagine, jingle subject matter covered the gamut: “Standing Stone Coffee, where the crew meets the brew.” There was one with a dig against a rival conference opponent; I think it went something like “Kiss my fanny, you Susquehanny.” And a student favorite: “East Houses - Where the party meets the hardy.” The one I remember most, however, is one the students most connected to: “Juniata, where your best is never good enough.” This student’s sense that, no matter how hard they tried, it was never good enough resonated with most of the students in the class. *Best.*

More recently, President Biden, in his inaugural address, quoted Gene Scheer’s “American Anthem” with its repeated phrase “America, America, I gave my best to you.”⁵ *Best*.

You students are here today because your faculty chose you as the best candidate for your award. *Best*.

“Best” is everywhere. So, what does it mean to be best? As in many other situations, context determines meaning.

The first context is what I’ll call “competitive best.” Frequently paraphrased as “We’re #1,” we are most familiar with this definition in the context of sports. In the 2021 March Madness, Stanford beat Arizona 54-53. Stanford was the best . . . by one point. In the other championship game, Baylor beat Gonzaga 86-70. Even though Gonzaga had the best won/loss record (31-1 over Baylor’s 28-2), in the competition that counted, Baylor was the best. Competitive best focuses on a particular time and place. This year, Stanford is the best. Next year, the odds-on favorite is UConn. Go Huskies.

The second context is “comprehensive best.” This is also known as the GOAT—the Greatest of All Time. LeBron or Jordan? Brady or Montana? Serena or, well, Serena?⁶ Unlike competitive best, which focuses on a particular time and place, comprehensive best focuses on the long term. After all, “all time” means for all time.

For the third context, imagine I’m rushing out to an exam and my roommate says, “Hey, don’t you have that big exam today?” I reply, “Yeah. And I didn’t have time to study, so it’ll be ugly.” My roommate, in an apologetic tone, sends me off with, “Well, do your best. That’s all you can do.” We’ll call this “compromised best.” My roommate’s encouragement acknowledges the compromised position I’m in from not studying adequately. As I reflect on the three weeks leading up to the exam, I have to be honest with myself and identify how I could have better negotiated my time, priorities, and health to reduce the amount of compromise in this particular “best.” Compromised best is just that – compromised; sometimes it’s unavoidable, but most of the time, it’s avoidable.

Competitive, comprehensive, compromised.

Finally, there is what I’ll call “compassionate best.” This is the best that Maurice Taylor referenced when summarizing Juniata’s soul. It’s the best Sabrina Ionescu seeks to cultivate in others. It’s the best we all benefit from. It’s the best self: individual and collective. To be fair, our ears and hearts have recently become acutely aware of our “best self” need. It’s not that the need is new; it’s that our awareness is new. This best self, this soul of Juniata, to borrow a phrase, cries out at dawn and stays until dusk.

If my best, your best, our best is ever going to be good enough, it must function well in all four of these contexts. This best self is competitive in the sense that we strive against stereotypes, assumptions, blind spots, apathy, and an excuse-laden loss for what can be done. This best self is comprehensive in the

sense that we understand that this is a long journey requiring a day-to-day grind of small steps, with attention to detail but without losing the larger picture. This best self is compromised in the sense that, far too often, we are lazy and choose the path of least resistance. We fail to learn the discipline of doing what needs to be done when it needs to be done, whether we want to or not. This best self is compassionate in the sense of knowing that when you encourage my best self and I encourage your best self, our best self gets better.

One final thought: Maurice Taylor said we are “chasing our best selves.”⁷ Our best self is elusive. It challenges us to chase. It plays tag with its unfair advantage. It hides behind self-preservation and self-interest. It gets dissolved in the “we” when the real problem is me.

Here at the 2021 Juniata College Awards Convocation, you are the best. As last year’s recipient of Juniata’s teaching award, I’m the best, just for today. But my best is never good enough. My best self is still evolving, growing, failing, chasing. May our best be better today than yesterday and not as good as tomorrow because our best is never good enough.

I hope this speech helps us. After all, I did my best.

NOTES

1. Maurice C. Taylor, “Chasing Our Best Selves: Finding Blind Spots and Doing Great Small Things,” *Juniata Voices* 18, May 19, 2018, https://www.juniata.edu/offices/juniata-voices/past-version/media/volume18/Taylor_Chasing_Our_Best_Selves_Juniata_Voices_vol_18_pgs_165_171.pdf; 165.
2. Sabrina Ionescu, “Kobe Bryant Memorial: Sabrina Ionescu Talks about What He Meant to Her,” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 24, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/sports/story/2020-02-24/kobe-bryant-memorial-sabrina-ionescu-talks-about-what-kobe-bryant-meant-to-her>.
3. Cheryl Truman, “UnCommonwealth: Nationwide Jingle Was Written by Versailles Musician,” *Lexington Herald Leader*, February 17, 2016, <https://www.kentucky.com/living/article60481911.html>; Mitch Reames, “Why Farmers Insurance Broke the Fourth Wall with Its Catchy Jingle,” *Adweek*, January 10, 2020, <https://www.adweek.com/agencies/why-farmers-insurance-broke-the-fourth-wall-with-its-catchy-jingle/>, and the audio can be heard at “Farmers Insurance Jingle,” *Memes 4 You*, “December 14, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tajKXiSWS0g>; Marc Hogan, “The Contentious Tale of the McDonald’s ‘I’m Lovin’ It’ Jingle,” *Pitchfork*, July 14, 2016, <https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/1227-the-contentious-tale-of-the-mcdonalds-im-lovin-it-jingle/>.
4. “Gene Stocker Subaru Ad,” January 26, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HXLMKpL18y4>.
5. Gene Scheer, “American Anthem (1998),” *Gene Scheer: Composer, Librettist, Songwriter*, <https://genescheer.com/project/american-anthem/>.

6. LeBron James and Michael Jordan, basketball; Tom Brady and Joe Montana, American football; Serena Williams, tennis.
7. Taylor, "Chasing Our Best Selves," p. 165.