

Seton Swimming Awards '20-'21
Coach Koehr's Talk

Climate Change for the Mind

- Integrity
 - I was very excited to hear that the Seton Musical this year was “**Suessical**”, because one of the leading characters is also one of my favorite philosophers,
 - **Horton the Elephant**
 - In my favorite Dr. Suess book, **Horton Hatches the Egg**, Horton famously says,
 - ***“I meant what I said, and I said what I meant. An elephant’s faithful one-hundred percent!”***
 - That is one of the best **one-line definitions of “Integrity”** I have heard,
 - Which is why I like the book so much.
 - But I have an even better one.
 - When I say, “I have”, what I really mean is that “I stole” this from an Opus Dei Numerary named Jim Stenson, who was the Director of Northridge Prep in Chicago.
 - It is beautiful in its simplicity.
 - and dare I say, in its integrity.
 - it all fits together so nicely which is why I like it so much
 - Courtesy of Mr. Stenson, I think of integrity as a triangle with “Word”, “Intent”, and “Deed” on each corner.
 - Geometrically, the triangle is the most stable of the polygons
 - It is the only polygon whose shape does not shift under pressure
 - Which is why you see it in architecture so much.
 - Or why stools often have three legs
 - It maintains its integrity, even under stress.
 - So, let’s stress our Integrity Triangle a bit.
 - Imagine this triangle is you.
 - For you to be a person of “integrity”, you have to keep all three (3) sides of the triangle unbroken.
 - Said another way, you must

Align your Word, Intent and Deed

- Word and Intent
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- What is it called when you don't say what you mean?
- Isn't that usually called a "lie"?
 - Or maybe we soften it up a bit by calling it a "deception".
- Do people of integrity lie?
- That one was pretty easy.
- Word and Deed
 - How do we describe a person who does not do what they say they are going to do?
 - Don't we say that he is not a "man of his word"?
 - Do people of integrity keep their word?
 - That one was pretty easy too.
- Intent and Deed
 - Ah, now here's the hard one.
 - To keep this side of the triangle unbroken, you must do what you intend to do.
 - It means that you complete what you set out to do.
 - When you set a goal, you do everything in your power to achieve that goal.
 - First of all, that means that you never quit.
 - People of integrity don't quit, even when things get tough.
 - It's why your parents probably tell you when you want to quit a sport or dance or anything else you start,
 - "You don't have to do it next year, but you're going to finish the season this year."
 - I make part of my living
 - Selling to very large national accounts, and
 - as a Venture Capital and Private Equity investor
 - In sense, you could say that I make a big part of my living making deals,
 - So, I get the opportunity to see people break this side of the triangle all the time.
 - I have noticed in life however, that the importance of integrity is so widely recognized, that calling someone's "integrity" into question generally does not elicit the best response
 - So, I have my own little code words for it.
 - Don't give up my secret, but
 - If you ever hear me accuse someone of "re-trading the deal", then you now know what I am really doing is calling their integrity into question.

- I want all you swimmers to look around you at the 47 parent volunteers we honored at the beginning of the night.
 - These are people of Integrity.
 - Not just because we did not lie
 - We all told you the truth about our situation, including what it would take to have a chance at a season.
 - And not just because we kept our word
 - We told you all along that we could get shut down at any moment.
 - But because we intended to have a swimming season, and when it got hard, we got more determined.
 - We couldn't use the locker rooms, and families stepped up.
 - We couldn't have spectators, and Mr. Fifield and Mr. Dealey stepped up.
 - We had to practice for both ends of the pool and ten (10) volunteer swimming coaches stepped up.
 - Even the snow conspired against us for DAC Champs, and we all had to step up.
 - Thanks to so many of the people in this room, WE were definitely successful in doing what WE intended to do.
 - In the words of another great philosopher from a galaxy far, far way
 - **“There is no try, just do.”**
- **Changing the Climate of our Minds**
 - Clearly, Yoda's admonition is easier said than done.
 - After watching so many people in this room strive to live up to this seemingly impossible Jedi code, it got me thinking some more.
 - I know there were a few school administrators and coaches who were genuinely fearful of this COVID thing, but
 - I bet there were a lot more who were more fearful of the myriad of problems that quickly surface when you start trying to have a sports season in this environment.
 - Why do some people look at the **obstacles** first?
 - And why do others look at the **opportunities** first?
 - I don't think anyone in this room would disagree with a word I said about Integrity, so why do so many people find it so easy

- To rationalize quitting, or
 - To rationalize not finishing something they intended to finish, or
 - To become a victim in order to rationalize their own lack of integrity.
 - When we break the Integrity Triangle, why is it so easy for so many of us to rationalize it away as something different?
- For the answer to that question, I am gonna turn to an unlikely place
 - Russian literature
- I would never admit this is in public, but I am a sort of closet fan of Russian literature.
 - Yes, it is so dark, and yes, it makes me so happy I grew up in this country,
 - but the deeper meaning really resonates with me.
- Most historians, and most of us, act as if the things that have the biggest impact our lives, and on history for that matter, are the dramatic events and irresistible social forces.
 - Leo Tolstoy, the author of War and Peace and Anna Karenina, did **NOT** believe that.
 - He argued that what really shapes our individual and social lives,
 - and even what really shapes great events,
 - are usually countless little events that, by themselves, often go unnoticed.
 - He called them “prosaic” events
 - I doubt he actually used that word since he spoke Russian, but it’s a pretty good 50-cent SAT word
 - It means “commonplace or unromantic”.
- My favorite Russian novel is **Crime and Punishment**, written by Fyodor Dostoyevsky in 1866.
 - In the first part of the book, the main character, named Raskolnikov, commits a heinous murder of an unscrupulous old pawnbroker.
 - The next five (5) parts plus the Epilogue of the book are spent with his mostly self-imposed punishment.
- Although the book is much more about the punishment than the crime, Tolstoy chose to focus on the crime.
 - To Tolstoy, Raskolnikov doesn’t kill the old woman because of some grand theory or because of some grand event.
 - As Tolstoy described it, “
 - Raskolnikov’s crime was made possible

- *“when he was lying on the sofa in his room, deliberating not about the old woman, nor even as to whether it is or is not permissible at the will of one man to wipe from the face of the earth another....*
 - *but whether he should live in Petersburg or not,*
 - *whether he ought to accept money from his mother or not, and*
 - *on other questions not at all relating to the old woman.*
- *The question was decided When he was doing nothing,*
 - *When only his consciousness was active:*
- *And in that consciousness tiny, tiny alterations were taking place....*
 - *Tiny, tiny alterations – but on them depend the most immense consequences.”*
- As Tolstoy said so eloquently concludes,
 - *“Boundless results of unimaginable importance may follow from minute alterations occurring in the domain of consciousness.”*
- **Swimming Ain’t About Swimming**
 - Believe it or not, I try to think of these sorts of thing when I coach swimming.
 - As you’ve heard me say before:

Swimming Ain’t About Swimming

- I can tell you all ad nauseum:
 - Work hard
 - Never quit
 - Don’t play the victim
 - Joy comes from sacrifice

- Or I can put you in a position where a constant stream of small experiences in your life permanently alters your way of thinking in some imperceptible way.
 - Like when you've gotten up early when you didn't want to,
 - when you worked hard in practice and felt good about yourself,
 - when you swam a PR at a meet and felt the sense of joy that comes from doing your best.
 - when you did something that you thought you couldn't do
- Then you start to understand how God's world works.
 - With enough of these tiny alterations, I won't need to tell you to always do what you intend to do,
 - because somewhere deep inside,
 - if you have had enough of these imperceptible experiences
 - you will have altered what Gary Saul Morson, a Russian literature professor at Northwestern University calls,
 - "the **Climate of our Mind**".
 - You will do what you intend to do,
 - no matter how hard it is,
 - because it makes you feel too badly not to.
 - Your conscience will require it.
- I think of swimming at Seton like "**Climate Change for your Mind.**"
 - I always chuckle inside when I hear you kids at Seton say "I'm not a morning person".
 - Or when you parents tell me that "she's not a morning person."
 - Who under 60 years old is a morning person?
 - I will tell you parents a little secret:
 - I regularly have parents tell me how you have to fight with your kids to join the swim team.
 - I do not fight with my kids about this.
 - I just assume it is going to happen – I just expect it.
 - It's not optional so we don't even discuss it.
 - I know how it is going to turn out, even if they don't.
 - There is going to be some suffering, and in the end, they are going to be happy they did.

- You will also never catch me letting my kids depend on me to wake up for swimming practice either.
- When you parents tell me that I need to take your child out of 100 Fly or 500 Free because they don't think they can do it
 - I usually tell you to let me handle it
 - You know how I handle it?
 - I just expect them to do it, and I make sure they know that I expect them to do it.
 - Many times, I don't even say anything to them at all.
 - Maybe, I'll have an assistant coach say something encouraging.
 - You know why?
 - It's not just because I am already 100% sure that they can do it.
 - It's because I am trying to change the "climate of their mind"
 - I am just trying to make each little event in their swimming lives another prosaic experience to alter their consciousness
 - When we set out to do something, we are going to do it.
 - Period.
- When we do the CF swim-a-thon and we're swimming 200 lengths of the pool, do any of you recall me having a big discussion with you about it?
 - Nope, I just expect it's going to happen.
 - The only discussion we had was how to do it, not whether you could do it.
 - Amazingly enough, more often than not, you actually so it.
 - **And the climate of your mind has been slightly altered forever.**
 - We've had many beginning swimmers do it – it is definitely doable

- **I Experienced This Climate Change Myself**

- This somehow must have happened to me as a young man
 - I don't even remember when
 - Which I suppose is not surprising if you believe, as Tolstoy does, that it happened as a result of many imperceptible and prosaic events.
- But what else could explain the determination that I felt this season?
 - I simply could not imagine the failure to have a season this year.
 - Failure, even if it were not my fault, would have devastated me.
- Let's go back to Russian Literature for another example of why I believe that the "climate of my mind" was somehow altered during my life.
 - Russian Literature was not always a favorite of mine at all.
 - In fact, I did not even read "Crime and Punishment" when it was assigned by my high school AP English teacher, Joan Lawson.
 - Mrs. Lawson either had great intuition or a wonderful sense for retribution though
 - In class, she had us put on a trial for Raskolnikov, the perpetrator of the heinous murder of the unscrupulous old pawnbroker at the very beginning of the book.
 - And she decided that I was going to play Raskolnikov!
 - I survived the assignment by interviewing my Ivy-League-College-bound friends
 - And somehow even got an "A".
 - But just like in the book, I was my own worst punishment.
 - 35 years after the assignment, I finally read **Crime and Punishment**
 - I decided that, like Raskolnikov, I had suffered for my crime long enough.
 - My conscience could take no longer.
 - How ironic that, in a sense, I had lived Raskolnikov's journey.
 - And somehow, also like Raskolnikov, I felt the need to get caught
 - So, I tracked down Joan Lawson.
 - She lives in Roanoke, VA now.
 - Her husband was not going to hand the phone to her because he couldn't believe that a former student from 1980 was calling.
 - When I finally got her on the phone,
 - I realized that I had a very happy woman on my hands.

- She had a happy boy on her hands on her hands too.
- And no, she did not realize that I had never read the book.

- **Conclusion**

- Integrity, and the perseverance that it requires, are ingrained in each of us through the natural revelation that we experience in its daily practice.
 - Once you experience the Truth enough times, your consciousness adopts it without even knowing.
 - It becomes a habit that you cannot break.
- Swimmers, look around the room at the 47 parent volunteers that we honored to start off the night
 - They have Integrity as I have defined it here.
 - Together, we all decided that we were going to have a season
 - And we did.
- “There [was] no try, just do.”
 - And in the climate of my mind right now, it feels like a perfect spring day.