

**My first day of high school was in August 2003. I walked into Mr. Pedroni's English class and took a seat. Mr. Pedroni was standing wordlessly at the front of the room, waiting for quiet; I remember the inexplicable seriousness of the moment. He uncapped a marker and wrote a brief sentence on the board, a quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson. "Character is higher than intellect."**

**"Character is higher than intellect." It is a striking line in its truth and its humanity. The words are bare and literal. But today, the bitter irony of that quotation makes me cringe. I'm here tonight to tell you all about a kid who was sitting in that class on that day, and who embodies Emerson's words like no one I've ever met. His name was Daniel Siegel. He was a dear friend of mine. When he was a sophomore at Yale, he was diagnosed with brain cancer. He died in November 2010. He was 22.**

**I'm here tonight to talk about Dan because he is simply the best example of how to be. If you've heard about him before, you've surely heard the legends—they are all true. He was without a doubt the most brilliant student I have ever laid eyes on in my 23 years of life. He was an absolute force of nature in school. He aced every test. Every single test. He was articulate, insightful, athletic, handsome, and witty; he was everyone's friend. Most of all, he was humble, and always kept his ferocious intelligence tucked behind his compassion and generosity. We loved him, respected him, and looked up to him.**

**Yet while famous for his academic prowess, Dan was better known to his family and friends for that squinty, wry smile. His father, Everett, told me the story of when Dan got a biopsy of his liver, to see if the cancer had spread there. "Your son's liver is pristine," the doctor told Everett, who relayed the message to a recovering Dan. Minutes after having his midsection cut open and probed, Dan's response was trademark: "I get that a lot."**

**I can't emphasize it enough: Dan was no one trick pony—he was a black belt student in Kung Fu, he could quote Charles Dickens by day and Tupac Shakur by night. He was best (and only) lefty catcher in Wellwood Little League baseball history. His clear passion was in the social sciences, but he gave every intellectual challenge the same treatment with his quiet charisma and gentle way of inquiry. Many have theorized as to what Dan would have been had he grown up—nothing would have surprised us, but my vote was**

always on secretary of state. But astrophysics wasn't out of the question, nor was best selling author.

It should come as no surprise to you that to his dying moment, Dan clung to his dignity. Facing a disease that was worse, then better, then still worse, his resolve never wavered. I looked through my correspondence with him from when he was sick, and was re-amazed at his poise amid a brutal, senseless and senseless threat. He straddled the mind blowing line between fighting for his life and finding happiness in the people around him. His mother Janet told me an incredible story: It was near the end of Dan's life, he couldn't walk without assistance and even the mildest bruise could have caused him fatal internal bleeding. Janet was performing the precarious task of walking Dan across the house, from the living room to his bed. In the kitchen, she and Dan slipped. Sure losing his balance could have spelled death, but Dan shot out his hand to catch his mother and righted her. He hadn't moved that quickly in months, but no cancer could have stopped Dan's willingness to protect his family. Even sick Dan was superman.

Last year I graduated college, and at every college graduation there is a commencement speaker. It's usually someone famous or smart or both that imparts some wisdom of the real world to the sea of caps and gowns before them. So I guess that's me, right? But it's good that I'm here, because I have one singular piece of advice for you all that is the key to life and success. It's extremely simple too, and will solve all of your problems. Ready? Here it is: Be more like Dan.

Be more like Dan. After everything I just told you about him, that probably sounds like a tall order. And sure, Dan had a lot of talents—physically, academically, socially—that were truly peerless, but his greatest talent was something that everyone in this room can have if they want. Self-discipline. Holding yourself to a standard and sticking to it until the end. You know that kid in class who does all the reading? That was Dan. He was that kid who took notes on every chapter, even the stuff you learned last year. He was the kid who made everyone feel appreciated and important—he really did!—because it was the right thing to do, that was his way and he was sticking to it. And you couldn't possibly hate him for it or call him a goody goody, because he was just wasn't. He was so damn sincere. When I was still in college and had a long night in the library ahead of me, I went into what I called Dan Siegel Mode. That meant no facebook, no distractions, pure diligence. Still though, Dan was driven by more than a robotic will to get an A, you will meet

hundreds of people in college with that. Dan had an insatiable interest in the world and how to make it better. He sought complete and total understanding of everything. In Kung Fu, Dan's athleticism could only get him so far, because true mastery of the forms and movements required endless repetition and boundless commitment. You can't do it unless you really love it. So Dan went into Dan Siegel mode, and willed himself to brilliance. If you ever saw him deftly swing a sword around in his annual Kung Fu display at Beth Tfiloh cultural arts night, you know what I mean.

Perhaps, Beth Tfiloh class of 2012, I should revise my message. Not only should you be more like Dan, but you CAN be more like Dan. We can all be more like Dan. It doesn't matter how smart you are, because character is higher than intellect, right? Being like Dan is a question of how willing you are to stick to your guns. Anyone can write down a list of their goals, but how willing are you to see them through? Dan was. I've learned through him that it comes down to the little decisions you make each day. In themselves, their consequences usually don't matter. A white lie that it wasn't you. Taking your friend's answers and rephrasing them instead of doing it yourself. Telling mom you called grandma when you didn't. Dan would never have done any of that.

There is one last story I have about Dan that speaks for itself. I have shared it with some of you—my apologies for the repetition but there is nothing more Dan than this. The story is about free throws. On the BT basketball team, Dan and I were eternal shooting partners in the free throw drill. I can't imagine how much time he and I logged at this. It was simple: after a grueling practice, everybody would pair off at a basket and shoot 10 free throws. Afterwards, we would gather at the baseline and report our scores to Coach Hubbard. However many you missed—that was how many sprints you ran.

In the moment on that baseline, lots of kids on the team would inflate their scores in order to run less, would say "8 out of 10" when they only made 6. But not Dan. And because of Dan, neither did I. I swear to you all, that moment of honesty every day in that drill made me a better person. Class of 2012, that is character. That is something we can all do. Thank you.