

On Modeling the Best

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I have an eleven-year-old daughter—I'll call her Dee here—who lives across the continent from where I live with her mother, Margaret for this writing. I'm hearing impaired and can't use a phone, so Margaret and I communicate about Dee via email.

A recent message from me to Margaret got into some things about learning and personal growth, or development, that I think have general applicability. Below, in smaller type and with wider margins, is a section of my email to Margaret. I see myself as having some credibility in this area after a long career in education, first as a secondary school teacher and then as a professor of education.

Some background:

Dee loves to do pencil drawings. I had recently mailed her a book of the pencil drawings by the American artist Andrew Wyeth (1917-2009).

Dee is very interested in golf. She plays frequently, works with several coaches, one more than the others, to the point that Dee sees him as her golf coach, and she competes successfully in kids' golf tournaments. She uses video in some of her practice sessions to monitor and improve her form. The week before this email, Margaret and Dee had attended two days of a major women's professional golf tournament near where they live: a Wednesday practice session, where Dee had the chance to meet and have her picture taken with some of her golfing heroes, and Sunday, the final day of the four-day

tournament.

The edited email from me to Margaret:

I especially like the Wyeth pencil drawings because they are detailed, and I think that's where Dee is currently with her artwork, exactness rather than quick sketches. Detailed drawings tap Dee's strengths as an artist, and they help her learn to focus for an extended time; plus, I believe they are calming, meditative experiences for her, lessons in how to slow down and calm down all the while staying aware and focused and engaged.

Besides the pencil drawings in the Wyeth book, there are dry brush drawings—or paintings, I don't know whether they are called drawings or paintings--that look to me to maintain the complexity of pencil drawings. In a note to Dee, I suggested she check with her art teacher at school about what is involved with dry brush drawings/paintings. [My message to her: be purposeful, proactive, don't just wait around to be told what to do]. If she didn't do that, perhaps you could Google the process and figure out what it is about and what equipment Dee needs to do it. You don't have to know how to do something yourself to get Dee started with it.

It was uplifting to hear that the LPGA [Ladies Professional Golf Association] tournament went well and that Dee's golf lesson the next day was really good. [Margaret had reported that Dee was greatly inspired by meeting some of the star golfers during the practice day and seeing the championship level competition on

Sunday.] Fine idea to get Dee there for the practice day on Wednesday. Nine hours on Sunday, plus travel time, must have been really tiring for you, but I can't think of anything that could have been better around golf for Dee. The tournament looked excellent to me on television, the caliber of play and that wonderful, challenging course.

It's motivational for Dee to see the best of golf, or whatever else. Besides being an enjoyable experience, it's also a good way for her to learn how to do it herself. People learn by modeling, taking in what someone superb at something is doing, and then doing it themselves.

Golf coaches, and teachers generally, are fine, breaking down a process into its component parts and directing students in what to do. But another, and more powerful, way to learn is through modeling. I think of how Gates and Allen [Bill Gates and Paul Allen, the co-founders of Microsoft] learned about computer technology. It wasn't from taking classes. It was from observing how the best did it and then doing it themselves. Steve Jobs [the founder of Apple] said the challenge for him was to learn from what the best had accomplished and then to go beyond that in his own unique way. That's what he did with Apple.

Schools, including [Dee's school--she's in the sixth grade], operate on the basis that kids learn by showing up every day to class and exposing themselves to the teachers' lessons, and then doing the work the teachers assign at night and on the weekends. If you look at anybody who

is really accomplished at something, while they probably took some classes at some point, and may still take them, essentially they learned, and are learning, by noting how the best do it and then purposefully doing it that way themselves and seeing how that goes, and then correcting it, making it better.

Writers read good writers and then write themselves with the intention of getting better at it. Their referents are the very best writers, not students in their school or their teachers, who likely aren't dedicated, active, and admirable writers. In writing or any other area, teachers may be capable at pointing the way for students, but, so often, they aren't themselves the way, they aren't models of exemplary commitment and achievement.

Dee's reference group in golf should be golfers like [two great women golfers] Lydia [Ko] and Brooke [Henderson], and she should be committed to becoming as good as possible at golf, and propelling herself forward, taking responsibility for that, in contrast to getting someplace on time for a lesson with [her main coach] and reacting to what he does.

If I may say so, I had a beautiful baseball swing. Coaches constantly remarked about it, from the kids' leagues, to army baseball at Fort Lewis [an army post in the state of Washington], to the university team. Now that I look back on it, I didn't realize it consciously, but I learned that swing by modeling.

From the time I was seven, eight years old, my dad took me to professional baseball games. I watched those fine players swing the

bat. Without thinking much about it, without breaking it up into pieces, I formed an overall mental image and kinesthetic feel of a good baseball swing. In the backyard, I tried to outwardly replicate that gross, inarticulate, inner mental/kinesthetic reality. As it turned out, I was coordinated and able to do it well.

My suggestion that Dee watch YouTube golf swings of the best golfers—Dustin Johnson [the 2016 United States Open Championship], whoever it is—and then emulate them is along this line of modeling. I see this process as having applications beyond golf—it's an effective way to get good at anything.

The result of early in my life modeling myself after the best was that I had no problems in my swing I subsequently had to remedy--catches or hitches or unnecessary movements in my swing, a shortened, abbreviated bat rotation, improper hip movement or weight transfer, anything like that, that would limit the quickness I needed to hit fast pitches and to hit with power.

If you take on bad habits early—this applies to anything, a basketball shot, bowling form, anything—it can be very difficult to remedy later on. Some athletes learn to compensate for early-developed deficiencies, but often their ceiling of accomplishment remains low.

Lydia, Brooke, and Rory [McIlroy, a great men's golfer] are doing it right. That's why I'm making such a big deal of what seems to me to be recent problems in Dee's swing. If, say, she is compensating for oversize equipment, which I suspect she is, by shortening her swing, or flattening it (the swing plane more parallel to the

ground, not high over her head), prematurely shifting her weight forward to her front side, etc., those problems can persist because they become the physical “feel” of a golf swing for her.

Whether they realize it or not, kids like Dee also model the attitudes of those they encounter. If early on in life, they develop an OK-is-OK approach to life from being around people, including teachers, who come at life this way, that too can be difficult to turn around later on. Lydia and Brooke aren’t kidding around; they are *doing it*. They shoot for maximum achievement. If Dee is exposed to a low-key, easy-does-it, things-will-be-alright attitude from [her main coach], that’s a problem that needs to be addressed.

I’m given pause by your reports that coaches are, in effect, saying to you, “Oh [whatever it is] is not a big problem.” *All* problems are big problems! There are no small problems. True excellence in anything involves attending to every problem, every detail, no matter how seemingly minor it is.

People who are exemplary at anything—Lydia Ko, Andrew Wyeth, any of them—have a sense of urgency: I need to get to that *now*. If you want to play weekend golf, or maybe teach like [Dee’s coach], fine, bring a casual, “get to it later,” “it’ll work itself out” approach to golf. But if you want to be on a par with the very best, that orientation is deadly bad.

The perspective we should be promoting, I believe, in Dee is that every practice session is a big deal, take it seriously, and have a “let’s get to it” outlook. Have goals, focus on the activity in

fine detail, get done the most you can accomplish in the time, and at the same time, have fun, enjoy it. Things need to be pleasurable for Dee or she'll turn to filling her free time mindlessly tinkering with Facebook, Instagramming, tapping out chatty text messages, and letting CDs and summer movies wash over her until it's time for bed.

Among all the wonderful things you are with Dee is imparting the value of being responsible to and doing your best in your involvements in life. I pick up that Dee is taking [school], Chinese [she takes private lessons in Chinese], golf, dance [she's taking classes in modern dance], art, all of it, seriously, and that's coming from you, and, I hope, long range from me. Dee is coming to understand that doing things that way is the best she can do for herself—it gives her the best shot at being happy and productive, of seeing life as a good time; can't wait for tomorrow to get at it. The best way to be truly happy in the sense of experiencing a pervasive feeling of satisfaction--yes, my life is good, right for me--is to *really* do things, not *merely* do them. If you are going to do it, *do* it.

I think the reason that your fitness program [Margaret has been on big health kick, with great success] is so gratifying to you is you are *really* doing it. You are doing more than showing up at the health club a few times a week. Trust me, Dee is watching you do this, and taking stock of its results and the way it makes you happy and proud and motivated, and learning from it, even if she isn't completely aware of it.

In physical talent, Dee is in Lydia Ko's and

Brooke Henderson's league. I reviewed Dee's last [online] video—Dee's physical talent jumps out. But Lydia and Brooke are much more than just physically talented. They have worked on the mental side of the game, they have top of the line encouragement and support from their parents and coaches, they have state-of-the-art equipment, and they have had rich golfing opportunities.

What you are doing around supporting Dee, being there with her, on her side, arranging opportunities for her is crucially important. And what you are doing with the mental side of the game [of golf] is so outstanding: a positive mental attitude, a success orientation, toughness and resiliency, an analytical and self-corrective posture, daring to be great, all of that, is vitally important. And not just around golf.

Back to the point I was making before about modeling as a way to get good at something. In golf, Dee should watch Lydia Ko play. In art, she should look at Andrew Wyeth's work. She wants to be a writer? Then she should read good books, absorb that excellence, get a feel for what good writers do, and then write herself, and fix that, get better and better.

A big problem with [Dee's school] and is that [Dee] is never given the opportunity to model exemplary accomplishment in anything. The teachers don't exemplify it, the other kids don't. The books she's assigned to read aren't well written. Dee is told what to do and when to turn in the assignments, and the school lets her know that if she just dutifully does what she's told to do, everything will be fine, we'll give you an A.

What is so terrific about Dee's golf involvement at the LPGA tournament is that it is in such stark contrast to that. Brooke Henderson [who won the tournament] isn't about getting the assignment done competently on time, she's about flying, you know?

That's my email to Margaret. What do you think?