

There Is No Try: Lessons from a Little Green Man

Opening address to the 2000-2001 DHS Forensics team by coach Steve Meadows

Long long ago in a galaxy far far away, rebel forces aided by the remnants of the Jedi Knights overthrew an evil empire. Led by Commander Luke Skywalker, the rebels used a mystical energy field called “the Force” to fight and defeat horrible weapons used by the Empire. Using this “Force” to defend themselves from these weapons, the Rebels created an era of peace in the galaxy.

Long long ago, in 1986, in fact, I wrote those lines to begin the speech I gave my senior year in Persuasive Speaking. My speech was about the Star Wars technology system for missile defense President Reagan, yes, President Reagan, was suggesting would defend our country from the Soviet Union (that’s a country that used to contain Russia, the Ukraine, and several other places with harder names to pronounce). My speech the year before had been a call to disarm, to rid the two superpowers (we had two then) of their nuclear weapons. I began with Bob Dylan’s song, “Blowin’ in the Wind,” for that one. Chris, he was a folk singer who was kind of famous for a while. Neither speech won state, though I did make finals a lot (I knew my speech by heart). But I learned something from these two speeches. It took me a while to get it, but it’s my job to pass on what I’ve learned. It’s a story about me; it’s a story about them; it’s a story about all of you; it’s a story about a little green man.

You see, I had my own demons to confront in high school. I was a new kid in school my junior year, and since I’d just started fitting in at the end of my sophomore year, I was incredibly frustrated that I had to start all over. Some of you have had similar experiences. Still, I wondered sometimes whether or not anyone liked me. I wondered

whether or not I mattered. I wondered whether or not it was worth bothering about anything, and sometimes I just didn't.

In speech, though, I found a home. To me, there was nothing more exciting than getting code numbers, finding rooms, seeing other kids my age relive their brothers' deaths, join the army and die, bang on the door and scream while Jessi blew her brains out -- for a while I competed in DI and Prose -- and to tell you the truth, I still get excited about code numbers and introductions and finals postings and bus rides. To me, forensics was and is a place where you are safe to be who you are and to try on different people who you are until you find the one who fits, until you emerge from that closet fully dressed and ready to shine, much like all of you are today. I found my feet in forensics, and I can stand before you today because I still wear the same size shoes I did then, no matter how much else the rest of my body has changed.

That's just me, though. I need to tell you about them, for the Force I speak of, that of forensics in your life and mine, flows all around us, and you have many ancestors. While I was in college, for a couple of years, I got to coach with my own former coach, Terri, and it was great fun. The kids called me Pa because I fussed over them so much, and I missed them when I didn't have time to go work there any more. My senior year I got to go to KHSSL State with them. Well, I got to drive through a tornado by accident (I'll tell you about it someday) and go to KHSSL State with them. It was amazing. They had seven kids, and they came in sixth or so because they all made semis and finals. I hadn't done much other than judge, but I loved getting the feeling again. When I took my first teaching job at Beechwood High, I had a combined speech and drama class with eight kids in it. I made up each lesson every day in class, and we ended up wandering into speech tournaments because the college professor who was working with me on my internship, a man named Butch Hamm who is now the coach at Boone County, said I should, and I said Okay. I guilt-tripped kids into coming to practice, and we won almost

no trophies, but we gave it all we had, and we all learned a lot. The next year, we had a state champion on our team and tried NFL Districts the first time. The year after that, we sent four kids to CFL Nationals and one to NFL, and we placed 3rd at KESDA and KHSSL. I saw forensics work its magic in kids' lives. One kid and I got to be very close, probably closer than I've ever been with a student. In April of my first year of teaching, he tried to kill himself, and I nearly lost someone who like many of you is in my heart. But he pulled himself out of what was troubling him, and speech helped him find his feet. He's 24 and okay now; I spoke with him last night. I love him very much, and I'm happy he changed his mind about living. He stopped just trying to get by. He started to do, to live.

You see, there's a lesson to be learned from *Star Wars*. In *The Empire Strikes Back*, Luke Skywalker is attempting to perform a task for his teacher, Yoda, which he believes is probably impossible. Still, he'll do it to please his teacher and keep the peace; he says he'll try. Yoda stops him and says our famous phrase: *Try not. Do, or do not. There is no try*. What he means is that if you're going to do something, GO FOR IT. If you fail, fail big. Make a huge fool of yourself rather than a mediocre one. Find your feet and stand, but don't be afraid to leave the ground and try to fly. If you give it your all, you've done all you can do. The results will take care of themselves.

This is what I, someone who's not little or green, really want to say to you today. I have seen this activity do so many things for so many people. Former students of mine are now teachers, business people, researching deadly diseases, working with Koko the sign language gorilla, TV reporters, spies (we think), newspaper reporters, and debate for Harvard and study abroad. All of these people found their feet in speech and they stopped doing things half-heartedly. They stopped saying, *I'll do this so I don't get in trouble* or *I'll do this so he'll stop hassling me*. They either got in or got out because

standing in the doorway, eventually someone's going to hit you with the door while they close it, and you may or may not end up on the side of it you want to be on.

I want to say this to you too. Part of learning the lesson of *There is no try* is being willing to be taught it over and over again by a stern master who has been through the process and knows that this is indeed the way toward the light. I need to say this to you; I love you. Part of that love will be accepting no less than who you are and who you can be. If you sell yourself short, I will call you on it, not for me but for you. It doesn't mean I don't love you. It means I won't let you just try. In or out. Do or do not. So if at some point we have our own Star War, please try to remember where I am. I'm doing my best to follow the lessons taught me by the little green man.

And so, not so long ago, in a galaxy very much like this one, in a room very much like this one, a forensics team set out on its own quest to vanquish the evil empires of doubts that filled them. They were worried that they might not be good enough, that their inclination toward laziness might make them less than what they could be, or that it just might be hard. I have a message for them, for you. Give this activity your very best effort. Make of it what you can, but don't sell yourself short. Practice more than you think you should and understand this. You matter to me -- not if you win or lose, but if you do what you can do. If you do that, the results will take care of themselves. If enough of you do that, we'll probably be state champions or close to it, and many of you will win individual fame of your own. What it really comes down to is the lesson Yoda teaches us. Trying is saying *I'll attempt, but if it fails I didn't give it my all so it's not my fault*. Don't do anything else; just do. There is no try. And may the Force of your convictions be with you.