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Every fall, like leaves tumbling exhausted from branches, admissions officers follow the winds to the corners of the country to talk to students and hawk their school.

I recently returned from my travel, which took me from Raleigh, North Carolina to Atlanta, Georgia and a dozen places in between over the course of a few days. I visited big high schools and small high schools, cities and villages, and performed what amounted to a thousand-person MIT revival in an Atlanta auditorium.

Whenever I speak to students or their families, be it on travel or during a campus information session, without fail I am asked the same question.

This question may take many forms. *What is it that you look for in an applicant?*, some say. *What makes someone stand out in your pool?*, others ask.

But these variants - and countless others - are all just versions of the same question, which is this:

How do I get in to MIT?

And here is what I tell them:

Apply sideways.

Let me unpack that.

When folks ask me this question, it is generally because they want to come to MIT, and they want me to tell them something they can do that will get them in. Maybe they need to be an Eagle Scout with a 4.0. Or a drum major with a 2400. Maybe they need to solve an open math problem or cure cancer before graduating high school. *Just tell me what I need to do*, their eyes implore, *and I will attack each line item on the list like Ray Lewis cleaning a wideout's clock on a slant route over the middle.*

Terrifying? Yes.

Required to be accepted to MIT? No.

But it doesn't work that way.

Because here's what you need to understand:

There is nothing, literally nothing, that in and of itself will get you in to MIT.

For example:

A few years ago, we did not admit a student who had created a fully-functional nuclear reactor in his garage.

Think about that for a second.

Now, most students, when I tell them this story, become depressed. After all, if the kid who built a *freakin' nuclear reactor* didn't get in to MIT, what chance do they have?

But **they have it backwards**. In fact, this story should be incredibly **encouraging** for most students. It should be **liberating**. Why? Because over a thousand other students **were** admitted to MIT that year, and none of them built a nuclear reactor!

I don't mean to discourage anything from pursuing incredible science and technology

research on their own. If you want to do it, DO IT. But don't do it because you think it's your ticket to MIT. And that applies to everything you do - classes, SATs, extracurriculars.

There is no golden ticket.

So breathe.

Now that you are Zen calm, liberated from the pressures of not having cured cancer by your 18th birthday, what should you do if you still want to come to MIT?

- **Do well in school.** Take tough classes. Interrogate your beliefs and presumptions. Pursue knowledge with dogged precision. Because it is better to be educated and intelligent than not.
- **Be nice.** This cannot be understated. Don't be wanton or careless or cruel. Treat those around you with kindness. Help people. Contribute to your community.
- **Pursue your passion.** Find what you love, and do it. Maybe it's a sport. Maybe it's an instrument. Maybe it's research. Maybe it's being a leader in your community. Math. Baking. Napping. Hopscotch. Whatever it is, spend time on it. Immerse yourself in it. Enjoy it.

If you do these three things, you will be applying sideways to MIT.

See:

If you get into MIT, it will be because you followed these steps. If you do well in school, you will be smart and prepared for an MIT education. If you are nice, then your letters of recommendation will convince us that MIT would be a wildly better place with you on campus. And if you pursue your passion, you will have developed a love for and skill at something that helps distinguish you from other applications - something that is your "hook."

But what if you don't get into MIT?

Well, you may be disappointed. But you learned everything you could, so now you're smarter; you were a positive member of your community, and you made people happy;

and you spent high school doing not what you thought you had to do to get into a selective college, but what you wanted to do more than anything else in the world. In other words, you didn't waste a single solitary second of your time.

Applying sideways, as a mantra, means don't do things because you think they will help you get into MIT (or Harvard, or CalTech, or anywhere). Instead, you should study hard, be nice, and pursue your passion, because then you will have spent high school doing all the right things, and, as a complete side effect, you'll be cast in the best light possible for competitive college admissions.

Sometimes, you really can have the best of both worlds.