

BUILDING YOUR FUTURE

Commencement Address

Wilkes University

Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania

May 16, 2009

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President Gilmour, members of the platform party, faculty, families, friends and, above all, distinguished graduates: it is truly an honor for me to be a part of this occasion in which we celebrate Wilkes University's 2009 Commencement. I have been exceedingly impressed by what I have learned about your university, its commitment to interdisciplinary education, your Center for Global Education and Diversity. Moreover, I identify fully with your mission, vision and values, ones for which my long-time friend, your president, and I share a deep belief and commitment. I wish that more universities would concentrate on preparing their students for making a life not just for making a living. I am truly honored to be an alumnus of this distinguished and distinctive institution.

I have known Tim Gilmour for exactly thirty years. We have worked together in the State of Washington, Washington, DC and Maryland. I have known no one who has been a more loyal and supportive friend and I cannot think of a better person to lead this remarkable institution.

I am delighted to be with you but I come before you today with some trepidation, however. I know that it is a time-honored obligation of commencement speakers to offer advice to graduates, to offer "some words to the wise." But I remember that Fat Albert once said, "A word to the wise ain't necessary; it's the stupid ones who need the advice."

I am also mindful that a commencement speaker is like the body at an Irish wake. You are necessary for the occasion but nobody expects you to say much. And those of us who are chosen to speak must remember that we are asked to inform, inspire or entertain but not to sedate our audience.

I'm quite sure there are no stupid persons here who need my advice, but since I am here and still alive, I'll try to offer a few words to the wise anyhow.

A few years ago, I read an essay by Charles M. Vest, who was then president of MIT and is now the president of the National Academy of Engineering. In the essay, Dr. Vest, who was in the act of leaving the presidency of MIT after fourteen years of distinguished leadership of that institution, shared his thoughts about some of the things he had learned during the years he had served in that position. In a style all-too-seldom found in the writing of engineers, I must admit, Chuck Vest elegantly and eloquently described the principal concepts and precepts that he had come to understand, appreciate and hold dear during his presidency. They included *Excellence, Perseverance, Boldness and Optimism*. I agree with President Vest that the "four horsemen", Excellence, Perseverance, Boldness and Optimism, about which he wrote, are equally valuable lessons for each of us in this setting to learn more about and, even more, adopt for our own

lives.

A commitment to excellence is unquestionably important. You who graduate today, in particular, must recognize that the future is what you will make it to be. It depends upon what you do today and every day and tomorrow thereafter. Your destination in life will be determined by your acts and not by your intentions. The Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, reminded us that, “Character is destiny.” Aristotle similarly pointed out that, “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then,” he said, “is not an act but a habit.”

As far back as 724 BC, the poet, Hesiod, wrote about excellence. He told us that, “Badness you can get easily, in quantity. The road is smooth and it lies close by. But in front of excellence the immortal gods have put sweat, and long and steep is the way to it. But when you get to the top it becomes easy, even though it is hard.”

I ask you who graduate here today to look ahead thirty years, which is roughly the period during which most of you will make your greatest contributions, and define a world that you would like to exist at that time. And after establishing in your mind what you wish to be true at that time, project yourself back to the present to determine what you must do now to help make it come true.

There is none among us, I am sure, who will not wish that thirty years from now we will be members of a global community that is at peace—at peace with our international neighbors, at peace with nature, at peace with ourselves. We will have all wished that our world society will have conquered life-threatening diseases such as cancer, AIDS and Alzheimer’s. We will have learned to co-exist with technological advances in such a way that they contribute to our health, our comfort and our productivity rather than creating risks to our environment, our security and our privacy.

It is our hope that by 2039 the scourge of the drug culture will be far behind us and that illiteracy and ignorance will be antiquated concepts. We will have confronted the need for clean air, abundant water and inexpensive energy and addressed them in ways that make it possible for all to avail themselves of these life-sustaining sources.

Perhaps the most important thing we hope for in the future is for a world in which harmony exists among people, where apartheid, war, terrorism and slavery are dim reminders of a rapidly receding past. It will be a time in which racism, sexism and homophobia have been replaced with tolerance, understanding and acceptance.

But if this is the type of world you wish to exist in 2039, you cannot start in the

year 2038 or even the year 2019 to start building it. You must begin now, and you must begin with earnestness and a conviction that each step you take must lead toward the goal. You must have a sense of urgency and a sense of purpose. Above all you must begin with an intention to persevere. Perseverance, just like excellence, is a necessity.

For the next thirty years, at least, you and millions of your generation will be the principal players in the drama that unfolds before us. You are the ones who must take the baton in this race, and you must run more swiftly and more purposefully than those of us who have been running before you.

There is a “NO TRESPASSING” sign in a field in the Pennsylvania countryside. The sign reads, “If you enter this field you had better cross it in 9.9 seconds. The bull can do it in 10 flat.”

That is the kind of running you must do because the events of the past and the present, the foibles and fallacies of many of our policies and actions, the inhumanities that have been foisted by some on others are all catching up to us at an ever-increasing pace. Boldness and courage in leadership will be required. Winston Churchill said that, “Of all the qualities of leadership, courage is the most important because courage guarantees all the rest.” Churchill was referring not to physical courage of the type we see on the battlefield or, at times, on the playing field, but moral courage of the type that leads to decisions and actions that are just and right even though they may be unpopular and rebuked. Boldness, coupled with a commitment to excellence and a capacity for perseverance will be necessary ingredients for creating the future you envision.

And what else will be required now to launch you toward this brighter future—a future free of the afflictions and dangers of the present. Most importantly, in my opinion, is the need for a positive and constructive set of attitudes. William James once wrote, “The greatest discovery of my generation is that human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitudes of mind.” In his essay President Vest wrote, “In the end, I believe that knowledge and skill trump ignorance, and that optimism trumps pessimism.” It is the belief that “optimism trumps pessimism” that must govern our actions, I believe, if we are to have a future where people of all races, cultures and nations live together and prosper in consonance with the laws of nature and the moral tenets of humanity. Yes, Chuck Vest was right. All of us must learn about and appreciate the value of *excellence, perseverance, boldness and optimism* as guideposts for our own lives.

Oh yes, the task ahead is a strenuous one! But the value to be derived is worthy of the effort to accomplish it. Equally important, it can be a joyous journey just as it promises to be a joyous destination. Each new day offers us an opportunity

to move a bit closer to the future we perceive and to which we aspire. No less a philosopher than Winnie the Pooh reminds us that “Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery. But today is a gift. That is why we call it—the present.”

Of course it will be hard. Fatigue will set in. But the belief that you are needed to accomplish it must transcend the investments in time, energy and intellect that will be required. Your Wilkes education has prepared you well for what you will face.

Hard work and aspirations will also carry you a long way, just as they did for your fore bearers, who, most likely, were not blessed with the formal educations you have received. There is a story about an elderly, black junk dealer who had become a millionaire who was asked how he had managed to do so well despite the fact that he never got beyond the third grade in school. He replied, “Well, it ain’t hard really. I just buy things for a dollar and sell them for four dollars. You’d be surprised how fast that three percent profit adds up.”

Yet, there is also room for idealism, idealists and ideals. Just as I challenged you earlier about heeding the sign in the Pennsylvania countryside, I now ask you to listen carefully to the words of the late Benjamin E. Mays, eminent theologian and educator who served long and admirably as president of Morehouse College in Atlanta and who was the mentor of Martin Luther King, Jr. Mays offered this admonition: “It must be borne in mind that the tragedy in life does not lie in not reaching your goal. The tragedy lies in having no goal to reach. It is not a calamity to die with dreams unfulfilled, but it is a calamity not to dream. It is not a disaster not to be able to capture your ideal, but it is a disaster to have no ideal to capture. It is not a disgrace not to reach the stars, but it is a disgrace to have no stars to reach for. Not failure but low aim is a sin.”

Dr. May’s words capture so very well the essence of living a purposeful life—one predicated on the belief that life is not a problem to be solved but a gift to be enjoyed. It is that motivation that we look to you to instill in our efforts to produce a better world in which all of us might live in peace and safety.

My challenge to you is to use your time wisely and well. And don’t just do well—all of us, your families, friends and professors expect that of you. Make sure you also do good! This is a time of great opportunity despite the many challenges we face as a nation and as a member of a global community.

My best advice to you is to keep learning. Today is not the end of your education. Remember, this is your commencement; you are at the starting line. This is the time to start applying that which you have already learned and to open your hearts and minds to those things that are yet to be learned. Only in this way can you contribute to a future of abundance and accord rather than one of

devastation and despair.

I take great comfort in the words of the poem Dr. Mays would invariably use to conclude the chapel service on the Morehouse campus. The poem, "God's Minute," points out the urgency we must feel if we are to address the critical issues being confronted throughout the world. The urgency he demands is stated much more sublimely than that on the "No Trespassing" sign but its meaning is just as clear.

I have only just a minute, only 60 seconds in it,
Forced upon me, can't refuse it.
Didn't seek it, didn't choose it,
But it's up to me to use it.

I must suffer if I lose it,
Give account if I abuse it.
Just a tiny little minute-
But eternity is in it.

Peace be with you, buena suerte, good luck!