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GEORGE H. CONRADES '61 COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

Sunday, May 12, 2013

2013 OHIO WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

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Congratulations, graduates!

Look at you! All these excited faces! You made it! A big milestone in your lives!

Think back to your first day on campus. Show of hands: Does it seem just like yesterday? Of course it does. And the ensuing years will go just as fast.

This year, Patsy will return to campus for her 50th reunion and just two years ago, I celebrated mine – Class of 1961.

The luckiest thing that's happened to me was to marry Patsy 50 years ago. I can still remember the first time I saw her across those counters at the Hamburger Inn. Three of our four daughters are here today including Laura, Class of '88, and Anna, '03. When I get to the preachy part of this commencement address – there always is one, you know – they will be rolling their eyes and saying, “Here we go again.”

Fifty years from now, most of you will return to campus for your 50th reunion – another major milestone in your life.

These milestones are like bookends. Today, you're focused on the immediate – like a video game. At your 50th, it will be more like unfolding a map, tracing the pathways that you've taken, recounting life's blessings, sharing stories of heartbreak and, yes, loss. But for sure, you'll all be saying, “What the heck just happened? It all went by so fast.”

So here's another question for you: Did you get the most out of your time here at Ohio Wesleyan?

Did you study as hard as you could? What about the courses you wish you had taken? Or the tough ones you avoided? Or that professor you would have liked to spend more time with? Did you make the most of extracurricular opportunities?

Well, there's no re-do. You can only focus on what's ahead. To make the most of what's ahead by “showing up ... on time ... dressed to play” every day.

You face some challenges. When Patsy and I started out in the early '60s, the economy was booming. Jobs were plentiful; the middle class was thriving; company recruiters were everywhere on campus. It was a good time to enter the workforce.

We weren't entitled to that. We inherited that from the generations that went before who made huge, personal sacrifices for our country's sake, especially in WWII.

Unfortunately, you inherit severe economic headwinds. America is not the best it can be, in part, because the generations before you have not been. We have allowed entitlement and complacency to inhibit your prosperity.

The relentless forces of technological change and globalization are wreaking havoc on our under-educated youth because we've let our K-12 education system fall so far behind. We rank an embarrassing 17th in the world, 14th in reading, 22nd in science, .27th in math. One study says we rank 45th in the world in sciences and math combined. One in seven Americans is deemed illiterate; one in six is on food stamps.

Many U.S. companies are seeking to hire skills from outside the U.S. to fill their needs for qualified workers. This inability to compete for jobs not only increases the divide between haves and have-nots, it threatens economic prosperity for everyone. Worse, we are denying these young people the opportunity to earn their own success in their lifetimes.

As students, you already have earned national recognition five years in a row for your dedication to serving the less fortunate, so I know that you care!

One way to dramatically improve K-12 education is to allow – the operative word is “allow” – students and their parents more choice in their public schools. Charters are a good example. You don't have to be in the NCAA/NCAC playoffs – as many of you have – to understand the benefits of competition!

Our government spending is out of control: \$4 trillion per year – close to 25% of it borrowed – piling on debt, growing at over \$2 million per minute. Borrowing from you, your children, to pay for people my age and other so-called entitlements. We cannot continue to borrow from the future if you are to have economic prosperity in your lifetimes. You don't have to be one of you economics majors to understand that! We need an honest budget that forces us to make the necessary choices to live within our means and find new ways of doing things.

Frankly, our politics are pathetic. With extremism on left and right – no common ground, no common sense. Lots of rhetoric about the “what.” No honest debate about the “how.”

Want an example? Google “Simpson Bowles” – a bipartisan plan to balance the budget that stalled for lack of political leadership and the courage to make the necessary choices. It gored everybody's ox. And no one was willing to make the sacrifices for you.

Why am I telling you all this? As soon-to-be leaders in our society, you have a critical role to play. Less than a third of Americans have a college degree – and you have one of the best. As leaders, you can make things better not only by showing the way (the “what”) but by helping to get us there (the “how.”)

By now, some of you are saying, “OMG, what a buzz-kill on my special day,” and “Who asked you to speak?”

Well, Zeke Brechtel, your senior class president invited me, but he thought I was going to talk about the future of technology. LOL, Zeke!

Even Patsy says I need to lighten up. She says I'm like the fellow who went to the psychiatrist repeating wigwam-teepee, wigwam-teepee, wigwam-teepee. He said I know exactly what's wrong with you: You're too tense! OK, that was awful.

I am actually pretty optimistic about you and your generation. You see value in one another. You are much more open to new ideas from anywhere in the world than my generation. You have eagerly embraced the opportunity to turn theory into practice with international experiences. You live in a hyperconnected world with instant access to vast amounts of information – a world that promises more transformational change every day than we experienced over the past 50 years after the widespread introduction of the computer.

You have enormous opportunities in the private sector, the engine of America's prosperity. That's where sustained economic growth is generated. That's where real value is created whether you are helping to grow a business, expanding the reach of a nonprofit, or creating "the new."

Trust me: The competition that's now coming from all points on the globe will spark new ideas – energy – that will demand the very best of you and benefit us all.

Here's the issue: When the goal is to be the best you can be, there are no time-outs. You have to show up ... on time ... dressed to play ...every day.

But to do what? Blessed with your cognitive skills, what do you exist to be? What are you committed to be? Think hard about it; then write it down. For example: "I exist" ...

- To help others, as the best teacher, doctor, nurse, volunteer, first responder, leader in a nonprofit (government or the military).
- To improve people's lives, as the best musician, artist, college professor, philanthropist, mother, father.
- To create value, as the best entrepreneur, researcher, engineer, venture capitalist.
- To expand jobs, as the best manager, leader in business.

At IBM, I wanted to be the best manager I could be, to work with people toward common goals. After 26 years, I became a senior VP and group executive before leaving to become a CEO at two high-tech companies. It's not the titles; it's the joy of getting things done together.

At Akamai, we began 15 years ago with a handful of believers. Today, we are a fortune 500 business employing 3,000 people delivering up to 30% of global web traffic. Competition? To be sure. It's hockey, not golf – but it's so much fun!

Whatever you exist to be, you'd better love it or you won't be very happy, and you won't be very good at it. You won't be the best you can be. You get the idea. Write it down. Commit to it!

By the way, you can create two “exist to be’s”: one for your professional life and one for being a partner and parent. For each you’ll want to include your values, but save those for a separate sheet titled “Things I’ll always do” and “Things I’ll never do.” “Always do’s” have a lot to do with others.

Do you know who said, “Only a life lived for others is worth living”? Albert Einstein – who knew he was such a liberal arts kind of guy!?

Speaking of energy, how about: “Always be a giver of energy, not a taker, infecting others with your passion”? Rock Jones does that.

What about, “Inspiring others, where the measure of their success will be your own”? Professor Burt does that.

Or, “Always be open to new ideas, seek the truth, pursue innovation in all you do”? Paul Schimmel does that. He’s the name you can actually read on the Schimmel/Conrades Science Center from a distance. Well, he is a world-renown scientist!

How about, “Always be nice”? It costs nothing. Just think about the Golden Rule, then go first!

Sheryl Sandberg, chief operating officer of Facebook, says this to women: “Lean in” – always believe in yourself! I’m with her. Believe in women! Until just recently, four of the nine members of Akamai’s board were women – asking the hard questions, getting to the point.

How about things “I’ll never do”? Never do’s are often about things you’ll never do to yourself! What about:

- “Violate another’s trust”? It takes a long time to get that back, if ever.
- “Sacrifice your integrity”? In the short run, only you may know, but it can haunt you.
- “Diminish your potential with drugs and alcohol”? These can sneak up on you, and you’ll never know what might have been.

You already know about all these. We all have been there.

Here’s one: “Never dismiss an idea from any source without consideration.” Never let your prejudices get in the way! Never let political correctness, or the insistence on equal outcomes, menace your liberty! There is nothing wrong with individual ambition! Whether at home or work, the team needs you to be the best you can be.

A few days ago, Patsy was helping a woman who had just lost her job, already lost her husband, and was living with three grandsons in her trailer. That wonderful woman said to Patsy, “You know life is not always fair, but you make your own life, and I keep trying.”

“You make your own life.” She could have given my talk. Never give up. Never take yourself out of the game – persistence, tenacity. That’s what showing up is all about! It does take an optimistic attitude. Charles Swindoll wrote some wonderful lines about that:

“The remarkable thing is we have a choice every day regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day. We cannot change our past. ... We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have, and that is our attitude. ... I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me and 90% how I react to it.”

Show up on time. What does that mean?

On time shows you care about others, that you're eager to get things done together! It takes practice to do that well. Excellence is a habit, and you can always get better. Neuroscientists tell us that it takes about 10,000 hours of practice to be world class at something. That's three hours a day for 10 years!

But we all don't need to become surgeons, or concert pianists, or professional athletes. No matter what you exist to be, fundamental to being the best you can be is practicing world-class relationships with others. I'm not talking about your 800 friends on Facebook, Twitter, or the unending connections on LinkedIn. I'm talking about relationships that matter – face-to-face relationships built on mutual respect and earned trust with the people who help you get things done.

Work on building your “golden Rolodex.” Half of you may not know what a Rolodex is! It's your contact file, and “golden” means it's filled with the names of individuals you know you can count on, and vice versa. Those relationships are essential to becoming what you exist to be – they were for me. Today I use them to help young entrepreneurs early in their journey.

It's not easy to build world-class relationships. Here's why: It takes confidence to admit what you don't know, to listen, to learn from others, to find common ground. You have to have the confidence to be humble.

It takes courage to expose your ideas to others, to test your ideas, and courage to debate your assumptions. I can't tell you how many times I learned what I didn't know, sometimes embarrassingly so. But, in the words of that popular country song, “You ain't a cowboy if you ain't been bucked off”! (Now I've got the faculty rolling their eyes!)

This does not mean holding back. To paraphrase Marianne Williams: Your playing small does not serve the world. Let your light shine and, in doing so, liberate that of others! Our far-sighted alum Branch Rickey says to Jackie Robinson in the movie “42” – in response to Robinson's question, “How do you want me to act?” – “Show the world you're a fine man and a great baseball player.”

Show up ... on time ... dressed to play.

This means you've done your homework and worked hard at getting the facts. That you are eager to pursue common ground, to get things done together with infectious energy, passion, courage, and confidence. Show up, on time, dressed to play. That's all that's expected of you, whatever you exist to be.

One final thought under the heading of “always do”: Stay close to God. If you do, over the next 50 years you’ll be drawn closer and closer. And your “always do’s” and “never do’s”—your values – will have a richness, a depth, an integrity that will truly inspire others and absolutely define you as being the best you can be.

Thanks for listening and Godspeed.