PUSHING EAGLES

I consider this a unique privilege and opportunity to have been extended an invitation to address such a distinguished group of citizens who represent a region of one of the most important institutions of higher learning in our country. And, I hope my comments today will underscore why.

I grew up in a working class home, and my parents had great faith in the promise of education to enable their children to have a better quality of life than they did. They saw education as the path for their children to participate in the American economic mainstream. And, in fact that is what happened. My memory of the importance of educational opportunity in my family continues today to be a beacon for me in my work at Wayne County Community College District. I want to create the same opportunity for individuals and families through the Wayne County area to achieve their career and life dreams through education.

I have wonderful and warm memories of those teachers who lifted my vision from the poverty of the commonplace, who set my curiosity afire, who launched me on a life of learning, who touched my life with nurture and challenge. I truly believe that we should celebrate the nobility of teaching and learning as the most constructive force in our nation.

It is my objective to share the knowledge and wisdom gained from my life’s experiences with the hope of encouraging others, particularly young adults who are making key choices that will shape their search for meaning and significance and their lifelong journey of self-discovery.

Allow me to read a couple paragraphs found in chapter one of my book, A Journey of Conscious. A favorite chapter in my book is entitled, “Lessons From The Sandbox.” I am very aware of the importance of education, starting at the earliest age, in shaping the course of one’s life. I mean education in all its forms, from positive learning experiences in the home and school, to negative learning experiences that may result from watching inappropriate television programs, or life on the “mean streets.”

We are all on a personal journey of self-discovery from the earliest age. We discover who we are through all life experiences, especially from our interactions with others. I recall as a child my deeply felt reaction when a family member, neighbor, teacher or coach would give me a word of praise and encouragement. This simple gesture made me feel more like the real me. In spite of my awkward immaturity and self-doubts, someone thought I was OK. I was valued and loved. Of course, I also recall being criticized in ways that I took as an attack on my fragile sense of self. As I grew to adulthood, I began to sense from these experiences that being an encouragement to others could define my life’s work, and that my vocation could center on shining the light of hope, love and encouragement onto and into the lives of others. That is the path my life has taken.

Just as journey of 1,000 miles is undertaken one step at a time, so is the lifelong journey of learning, achievement, setbacks, and healings taken one step at a time. At each step, the encouragement and mentoring of others further along in the journey can be a source of inspiration and support. An old Oriental axiom says that “when the learner is ready, the teacher will come.” At each step, the readiness of the learner to take the next step of self-discovery makes him receptive to the teachings of a mentor suited to the needs of the moment. Different mentors will appear at different stages of a person’s growth and development. Some of these mentors will appear in educational settings, but many will also appear in family, church, business and community settings.

Those of us who may serve as mentors must realize that all forms of communication make an indelible mark that is permanently etched in another’s psyche. We must pay attention to whether that mark will be one of discouragement or encouragement, hurt or healing.

Our lifetime journey is made up of numerous turns and twists. Sometimes that journey is a smooth one, filled with joy, excitement and promise. At other times that journey is filled with pain, recrimination and regret. Those who experience a successful journey have learned how to take the bad with the good. They have an optimistic, hopeful outlook. They do not look at life through rose-colored glasses in a
Pollyanna sort of way. They know what their objectives in life are; they look in a clear-eyed way at the obstacles that stand in the way, and then they gather their inner spiritual resources, their talents and the support and mentoring of others needed to take the next step in the journey: Lessons learned during the good times and the bad times are added to their knowledge base as they move forward.

As we look to the future and consider the journey before us, the call for unity becomes more critical with each passing day. The call for unity is the vital essence of success. The call to unity has been the precursor to many great endeavors.

The call for unity provides strength. Never has there been a greater need for unity as a community as we look to the future. Together, we have an open invitation to write a new script for a new generation. A continued reliance on past practices will result in our institutions not being equal to the current demand for training and educated individuals. Everywhere we see the impact of world competition, which brings the reality of our current setting into laser-sharp focus.

For just a few more minutes I want to talk with you about a subject that I have become fascinated with—“pushing eagles.” This term is taken from a book that I read recently by David McNally, entitled “Even Eagles Need a Push (Learning to Soar in a Changing World)”.

The only thing constant in life today is CHANGE. Whether it is scientific change, the technology that boggles our minds; or societal, the increased societal pressures of drugs, poverty, the breakdown of family life, the chaotic changes in the educational process, the decline of morality and values in our society; or intensely personal, through illness, job loss, or the greater yet, the loss of a loved one—we sometimes are so overwhelmed by what is happening to us that we want to crawl in a hole, or bury our heads in the sand—withdraw from the world.

McNally says that in today’s rapidly changing world, we can learn from the mother eagle ... who one day leads her little eaglets from her nest to the edge of a rocky cliff. Her parental mission is all but complete. There remains but one final thing for her to do – to teach her little ones to fly. It is their purpose for living. For an eagle if there is no flight, there is no life. The little eagles pause at the edge of the rocky cliff, afraid to move. So, in faith, the mother gives each of the eaglets a gentle push off the ledge. And for a moment the fragile, untested wings will flutter; but then at last, in sheer joy, the wind catches their wings. And the little eagles fly. The PUSH is the mother’s supreme act of faith and love.

Sometimes like the eaglets, we need to be PUSHED. Sometimes we need a shove!

For just a few minutes I want to be the “pusher,” in the best sense of the word. Let me share three great ideas that I gleaned from McNally’s book and the breadth of my life’s journey. Hopefully, these three points will give you a push, or maybe help you when you need to offer encouragement to someone else.

We all know the “altitude is determined by attitude.” How high we go in life (outwardly) is largely dependent upon our inward reactions, our response – our attitude. Life is not so much determined by what happens to us, but rather, by what happens IN US.

A great author once said that life is 10% what happens to us and 90% how we react to it. So the three ideas I want to share with you might be called “attitudinal approaches to achieving altitude – like an EAGLE!

1. The first great idea is “There is Nothing More Blessed Than the Burden of Becoming.” We must always seek to improve, to become better. We constantly need to challenge ourselves to live in an IMPROVEMENT MODE. Ask yourself, “Who am I becoming.” Becoming is such an exciting word … a beautiful word. It fuels our fantasies, ignites our dreams. Lucy in the cartoon PEANUTS, tells Charlie Brown one day, “there is no greater burden than a great potential.” We are never more alive than when we accept the challenge to improve, to become better than we are, to reach our potential - - - or when we become the catalyst, the agent of change and growth for someone else. It is exhilarating – exciting. In a word, it is magic!
Throughout my life, I have been indebted to mentors who have been behind me, giving me a nudge, helping me to improve … to grow … to BECOME.

But perhaps our greatest mentors are not persons, but the experiences that we confront in life. The experiences, the obstacles, the barriers, the adversities, the struggles we face – also help us to grow – to become.

I think of the story of the little boy and girl, climbing up the long bumpy trail toward the top of the hill. The little girl complains about the bumps in the road … but her older brother says, “Honey, don’t complain about the bumps. It’s the bumps that we climb on!” And so it is true, in our work, as in our life, we grow through confronting resistance, adversaries, adversities, problems. In the process of finding a solution, in the struggle, comes the growth. And we become someone better; someone more efficient; someone more effective.

This is excitement! This is the joy of living – to be challenged to be more than stoic – to be heroic. Instead of merely accepting or acquiescing to one’s lot, to be inspired to be heroic, and adjust, advance, and ascent because of our adversity.

True, not always does adversity or suffering make us better. Here again, attitude determines altitude. It depends upon how we face our adversity. It can hurt us or help us. It is the reaction that determines the result. Remember the old axiom. Someone throws a dagger, a knife, at you. Catch it by the handle and it will cut you or hurt you. Catch it by the handle and it becomes a weapon for your own defense. Life’s experiences can cut us or hurt us; but properly reacted to, properly handled, can become a source of strength, growth, the blessed burden of becoming.

Think of the oyster and the grain of sand. The grain of sand works its way into the inner lining of the oyster. Does the oyster cry and say “I’m ruined for life.” No, the oyster turns its irritation into an inspiration. It exudes a nacreous substance around the grain of sand, layer after layer, and soon the problem has become a pearl … the grain of sand transformed by the oyster into a thing of beauty. So it is with our lives. We are called, challenged by life to turn our problems into pearls … the BLESSED BURDEN OF BECOMING. The process of turning our BURDENS into BLESSINGS.

The Second Great Idea is: There is Nothing More Timeless Than the Treasury of Time.

Every day I realize this more and more. And as the years pass by, you will too.

Stand by the grave of a loved one … or by the bedside of a terminally ill loved one; and you will realize the precious value of time. Often we find ourselves uttering those words, “Only if I had a little more time to tell her how much I loved her” or “If only I could call him back.” We all live in the interim, the interim between the “now” and the “no more.” When we find ourselves in this situation, we know how infinitely precious is every fleeting second.

My favorite poet, Robert Frost, reflected on life in his beautiful poem, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.” You remember, and perhaps have been nurtured by the power of these words:

“The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go
Before I sleep!”

We all remember the words about “promises to keep” – but, we sometimes forget the first part of the sentence – “The woods are lovely, dark and deep.” This is life’s journey.

It was years before I realized that Frost was talking about LIFE. “LIFE,” he is saying, “is like woods, lovely with possibility, dark with pain and perplexity, but deep with purpose!” This is life’s journey.
I must take each moment and stay awake to POSSIBILITY ... to PROMISE ... to POTENTIAL ... to PURPOSE.

In each new day as the morning sun rises ... or in the night-time of my agony, my adversity, or my challenge, I must reach for unreachable stars, dream impossible dreams, beat unbeatable foes, and bear the unbearable pain ... and do it, with all my heart! And so must each of you.

Yes, there is nothing more tremendous, more timeless, than the treasury of time. I must use it wisely.

The third great idea is: There is Nothing More Gainful Than the Glory of Giving.

My friends, somewhere along the journey of life, there emerges the third great idea. Life is empty without “utility.” Life is useless until we are useful.

We hear the expression often these days: “Get a Life!” It is usually an admonition to someone to wake up to reality, “get with it,” “Wake up to the real world.” But in a deeper sense, we are all challenged to a more gainful, greater life. And the third idea is simply this: You get by giving. You receive by giving away. A go-getter is a go-giver. As one poet says, “All that we give into the life of others comes back again into our own.”

Let me share this story with you that I first heard from John Dvorak in the El Centro Toastmasters Club. The story is about a businessman who was touched by a Bishop’s sermon on “the glory of giving.” This is the businessman’s story.

“One day this past week, I left my office to catch the bus to take me home. Night had fallen. As I was standing at the corner by a drug store, I saw a little boy crying as if his heart would break. I went to him and asked him what was the problem. And through his tears, he said ‘Mister, my Dad gave me a dollar to buy him some medicine, and when I got here I reached in my pocket and it was gone. Now I’m afraid to go home.’ The businessman tried to comfort the boy. He said, ‘Just go home and tell your Dad what happened. He’ll understand.’ Then the little boy said, ‘No, my Dad’s been drinking and he always beats me!’

Finally the businessman did what any of us would probably have done, touched by the child’s tears. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a dollar bill, and said to the little boy, ‘Sonny, go into the drug store, buy the medicine, and go home just like nothing happened.’ The little boy took the dollar and ran into the drug store, purchased the medicine, and started to run home ... But then came the magic moment! He turned and ran back to the businessman standing at the corner, and reached up to tug at this coat ... looking to the man’s eyes ... his eyes welling again, with tears – but now tears of joy rather than grief – he said, “Gee Mister ... I wish you was my DAD!”

When the rich businessman concluded his story, he told the Bishop, “You know sir, I didn’t go home that night ... Not then, at least. I spent the rest of the night walking through the streets of Pittsburgh, looking for other boys who had lost a dollar and needed a Dad!”

And I believe you all know that feeling – when we have met someone’s need. There is nothing in all the world more gainful than the glory of giving!

So I leave you then this day, this legacy: three great ideas, three approaches ... three thoughts that might nudge you ... or that you might use to nudge someone you know ... to a more meaningful and purposeful life.

- There is nothing more blessed than the burden of becoming
- There is nothing more timeless than the treasury of time
- There is nothing more gainful than the glory of giving
I close with the words of the German philosopher, Goethe: “Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it.”

FLY EAGLES – FLY INTO THE FUTURE. AS YOU PROVIDE CONTINUED GLITTERING SERVICE TO THE ELK ORGANIZATION.

THANK YOU.