

THE WIZARD OF OZ: THE TRIUMPH OF SIMPLICITY

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SALUTATION

Distinguished representatives and friends of Holy Cross and the many parents, relatives, and friends of the graduates – to you I extend a warm “good evening” and a hearty welcome.

To the members of the great Tiger class of '83 – to you I offer a sincere “where y’at?”

PREFACE

As soon as I got up here, I detected a subtle chill in the air, and I noticed the tassels moving ever so slightly on those silly-looking hats y’all are wearing. It seems as though a “cool breeze” just blew into this place.

Gentlemen, I’m genuinely honored to be standing here at this moment. I like to think that you asked me to speak to you tonight NOT that you simply wanted me to SAY SOMETHING but that perhaps you thought I HAD SOMETHING TO SAY.

I’m hopeful that my presentation will prove worthy of your trust.

INTRODUCTION

One second after Mr. Ferran had offered me the invitation on your behalf, I knew the focus of my address: the greatness of THE WIZARD OF OZ.

Ever since I first saw the movie, which of course is an adaptation of one of the forty OZ books, the first of which was introduced by L. Frank Baum in 1900, I’ve been excited by its magic, overcome by its sentiment, and inspired by its truth.

The special appeals of THE WIZARD OF OZ are that it underscores the notion that the really important things never change and that it so fundamentally and so beautifully highlights the nobility of the human condition: the SCARECROW in his search for a brain; the cowardly LION in his search for courage; the TIN WOODMAN in his search for a heart; and of course Dorothy in her odyssey over the rainbow and back home to Kansas.

Since this evening marks your emergence into a complex society, a world wherein good and evil and right and wrong linger as paradoxical mazes, the simple yet profound lessons of THE WIZARD OF OZ become even more critical.

Let us journey down the yellow-brick road and witness the triumph of simplicity.

The SCARECROW – he received his diploma signifying intellectual achievement just as you will this evening. I think that the scarecrow would want you to know that knowledge, per se, is imperfect; that, as a great thinker once said, “Knowledge is sterile unless it leads to action and ends in charity”; and that it isn’t so much knowledge that you want but WISDOM.

What follows are ten principles – SCARECROW – ISMS if you will – designed to strike the distinction between overrated knowledge and underrated wisdom:

1. Don’t be too quick to judge a man. Usually, if you’re patient enough, you can find a degree of decency in the most despicable and depraved among us.
2. My Aunt Rita, a great aunt who is long since deceased, once told me that “MAMA” is the most beautiful word in the English language. I tend to agree with her. Perhaps “DADDY” is the second most beautiful.

Throughout your lives, combine these two beautiful words so that a one-time poem results: “HONOR THY FATHER AND THY MOTHER.” Realize as well that the miracle of parenthood is accompanied by the obligation of sacrifice.

3. In view of the “technocracy” in which we live, use the technology to bolster your humanity, not to substitute for it. Don’t become the computer! Don’t become so “programmed” on “high tech” that you share the desperate disillusionment of the man in the Robert Penn Warren poem who crawled around his yard frantically searching for a stone upon which to bruise his hand.
4. Don’t take yourself too damned seriously; avoid delighting in an inflated sense of your own importance. In the broad scheme of things, each man’s singular function is relatively insignificant. Have a sense of your own futility....and maintain a viable sense of humor. Don’t agonize over circumstances beyond your control and don’t become a “basket case” by failing to realize that there’s absolutely nothing in this world that can’t wait until Monday.

5. Have the wisdom to understand that GOOD is BEST'S worst enemy. Therefore, commit to excellence in all that you do....you must learn to tolerate defeat while never quite accepting it.

6. Success for some depends on becoming well known. For others it depends on never being found out....Real success includes the consistency of sincerity of purpose; the salvation of one's personal honor, pride, dignity, and self-respect; and one's achievement of his ultimate deliverance.

7. The great Albert Einstein said flatly: "Imagination is more important than knowledge." Thus, have the wisdom to let yourself dream. Any of life's realities was first a flight of fantasy over the rainbow by someone who was wise enough to use his imagination, to let himself wonder.

8. Treasure the richness of friendship – as the Oz characters did. They exemplified that true friendship is rooted in unselfishness; that is, you must consider your friend before you consider yourself.

They showed that real friendship is based on truth; a friend is one with whom you dare to be yourself. They revealed that true friendship defies expedience or convenience; that is, you should never compromise an established friendship in order to generate a new one.

9. Be faithful to your philosophy of life, the value system or perception of truth, which, at least in some measure, HOLY CROSS has helped to shape.....be your own man....

10. And finally, a quote from Oliver Wendell Homes: "It is the province of knowledge to speak, and it is the privilege of wisdom to listen."

THE LION – let us be wise and listen to the advice of the lion...

The lion received his medal of honor just as many of you will receive your medals of honor here tonight. I think that the lion, who incidentally is my personal favorite, would want you to understand the quality of courage on three levels: the courage of righteousness, the courage of honesty, and the courage of the soul.

There will be times in your life when you will humiliate yourselves – and those shameful occasions will occur....you must find the courage to rise from the despair of mortification like the legendary Egyptian phoenix which rose from its own ashes in valiant splendor and with renewed resolve.

When you are confronted with a moral crisis, a situation wherein, in an instant, the strength of your character is challenged, yes, be capable of the courage to do the right thing.

Out in the marketplace, hypocrisy, larceny, and deception exist – even the Wizard of Oz himself proved to be a fraud....the honest man is one who, fortified with courage, rises above the slime of mendacity. In the final analysis, it is only he who proves to be trustworthy....and the finest tribute one man can pay another man is to trust him.

The courage of the soul: when William Faulkner won the Nobel prize for literature in 1950, he delivered a short speech that has become a classic statement on the role of the writer -- “I feel that this award was not made to me as a man, but to my work – a life’s work in the agony and sweat of the human spirit, not for glory and least of all for profit, but to create out of the materials of the human spirit something which did not exist before.....”

THE TIN WOODMAN – “Two things stand like stone: Kindness in another’s trouble; Courage in your own.” On behalf of the Tin Woodman, who, you’ll recall, did receive his heart, I offer a story about a man who exemplifies the thrust of those lives, a man who personifies the greatest of the virtues: Charity. He’s simply known as “the man in the water.”

The Man in the Water - Roger Rosenblatt - Time Magazine - January 25, 1982.

As disasters go, this one was terrible but not unique, certainly not among the worst on the roster of U.S. air crashes. There was the unusual element of the bridge, of course, and the fact that the plane clipped it at a moment of high traffic, one routine thus intersecting another and disrupting both. Then, too, there was the location of the event. Washington, the city of form and regulations, turned chaotic, deregulated, by a blast of real winter and a single slap of metal on metal. The jets from Washington National Airport that normally swoop around the presidential monuments like famished gulls are, for the moment, emblemized by the one that fell; so there is that detail. And there was the aesthetic clash as well – blue-and-green Air Florida, the name a flying garden, sunk down among gray chunks in a black river.

All that was worth noticing, to be sure. Still, there was nothing very special in any of it, except death, which, while always special, does not necessarily bring millions to tears or to attention. Why, then, the shock here? Perhaps because the nation saw in this disaster something more than a mechanical failure. Perhaps because people saw in it no failure at all, but rather something successful about their makeup. Here, after all, were two forms of nature in collision: the elements and human character. Last Wednesday, the elements, indifferent as ever, brought down Flight 90. And on that

same afternoon, human nature – groping and flailing in mysteries of its own – rose to the occasion.

Of the four acknowledged heroes of the event, three are able to account for their behavior. Donald Usher and Eugene Windsor, a park police helicopter team, risked their lives every time they dipped the skids into the water to pick off survivors. On television, side by side in bright blue jumpsuits, they described their courage as all in the line of duty. Lenny Skutnik, a 28-year-old employee of the Congressional Budget Office, said: “It’s something I never thought I would do” – referring to his jumping in the water to drag an injured woman to shore. Skutnik added that “somebody had to go in the water,” delivering every hero’s line that is no less admirable for its repetitions. In fact, nobody had to go into the water. That somebody actually did so is part of the reason this particular tragedy sticks in the mind. But the person most responsible for the emotional impact of the disaster is the one known at first simply as “the man in the water.” (Balding, probably in his 50s, an extravagant mustache.)

He was seen clinging with five other survivors to the tail section of the airplane. This man was described by Usher and Windsor as appearing alert and in control. Every time they lowered a lifeline and floating right to him, he passed it on to another of the passengers. “In a mass casualty, you’ll find people like him,” said Windsor, “But I’ve never seen one with that commitment.” When the helicopter came back for him the man had gone under. His selflessness was one reason the story held national attention; his anonymity another. The fact that he went unidentified invested him with a universal character. For a while he was Everyman, and thus proof (as if one needed it) that no man is ordinary. Still, he could never have imagined such a capacity in himself. Only minutes before his character was tested, he was sitting in the ordinary plane among the ordinary passengers, dutifully listening to the stewardess telling him to fasten his seat belt and saying something about the “no smoking sign.”

So our man relaxed with the others, some of whom would owe their lives to him. Perhaps he started to read, or to doze, or to regret some harsh remark made in the office that morning. Then suddenly he knew that the trip would not be ordinary. Like every other person on that flight, he was desperate to live, which makes his final act so stunning. For at some moment in the water he must have realized that he would not live if he continued to hand over the rope and ring to others. He had to know it, no matter how gradual the effect of the cold. In his judgment he had no choice. When the helicopter took off with what was to be the last survivor, he watched everything in the world move away from him, and he deliberately let it happen.

Yet there was something else about the man that kept our thoughts on him still. He was there, in the essential, classic circumstance. Man in nature. The man in the water. For its part, nature cared nothing about the five passengers. Our man, on the other hand, cared totally. So the timeless battle commenced in the Potomac. For as long as that man could last, they went at each other, nature and man: the one making no distinctions of good and evil, acting on no principals, offering no lifelines; the other acting wholly on distinctions, principles and one supposes, of faith.

Since it was he who lost the fight, we ought to come again to the conclusion that people are powerless in the world. In reality, we believe the reverse, and it takes the act of the man in the water to remind us of our true feelings in this matter. It is not to say that everyone would have acted as he did or as Usher, Windsor, and Skutnik. Yet whatever moved these men to challenge death on behalf of their fellows is not peculiar to them. Everyone feels the possibility in himself. That is the abiding wonder of the story. That is why we would not let go of it. If the man in the water gave a lifeline to the people gasping for survival, he has likewise giving a lifeline to those who observed him. The odd thing is that we do not even really believe that the man in the water lost his fight. "Everything in Nature contains all the powers of Nature," said Emerson.

Exactly.

So the man in the water had his own natural powers. He could not make ice storms or freeze the water until it froze the blood. But he could hand life over to a stranger, and that is a power of nature too. The man in the water pitted himself against an implacable, impersonal enemy; he fought it with charity; and he held it to a standoff. He was the best we can do.

Tennessee Williams said that "hell is yourself." And the only redemption he knew of was "when a person puts himself aside to feel deeply for another person." In that context, 'THE MAN IN THE WATER' serves as a kind of redeemer for us all.

What have we learned from our adventures with the SCARECROW, THE LION, and THE TIN WOODMAN?

We've learned that knowledge commands respect but that WISDOM commands admiration; that, as Andrew Jackson said, "One courageous man makes a majority"; and that the golden rule – "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" -- that most precious of precepts – is a kind of blessed sacrament in and of itself.

But what about Dorothy? Dorothy was a kind of teacher. She helped the Scarecrow, the Lion, and the Tin Woodman to come to terms with themselves. She taught them that the solutions to their problems were not outside, but within themselves....Ironically, she learned the same lesson....Yes, Dorothy flew over the rainbow only to realize that there was no place like her home in Kansas.

Gentlemen, your journey over the rainbow begins tonight. Always remember that you have a Kansas too – and your Kansas is HOLY CROSS.....