

## COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

Westminster College

Fulton, Missouri

May 11, 1997

### Sinews of Attitude

Dr. Traer, faculty and administration, trustees, members of the 1997 graduating class, family and friends!

It is a great honor to be able to address you on this special day. For nearly 150 years Westminster College has been educating young people to take their rightful place in the world. Over those years the school has become distinguished in many ways, but especially in the success of its graduates and association with world leaders.

So, graduates, I can say to you without any concern of contradiction that you are fortunate to be receiving your degrees today from one of the great institutions of learning in America. In your years at Westminster you have learned specific things about particular disciplines. But, more importantly, you have been schooled in how to study, how to learn and how to approach problem solving.

I salute you. I congratulate you and I wish you the very best in the years ahead. My prayer for each graduate is that you will be open to God's guidance and that you will be guided by the very highest religious values and principles in whatever paths in life you choose.

Life will not always be easy. You are fortunate in so many ways. Most of you are Americans. You can be grateful for the affluence, freedoms and opportunities this great country affords. Graduates from other lands are fortunate to have the benefit of an excellent education from a prestigious college. You also have many valuable friends and associates who will be of help to you in the future. You, too, can be grateful for the opportunities your respective countries afford to you. Most of you have the vigor and energy of youth and robust health. You have options. Even so, all is not a total bed of roses. Beneath the surface of optimism and positive forces there are dark and foreboding things, either existing or which will appear, often very unexpectedly.

Some of you will be disappointed in romance. I'm sure some already have been!  
Promising job opportunities will not always pan out. Friends will sometimes disappoint you.  
Accidents happen. Health fails. Such are the vicissitudes of life.

The question is, how do you respond to these disappointments or setbacks? How do you react to various events in your life?

The secret is attitude. That makes all the difference.

When I was growing up in the small east Alabama cotton mill town of Lanett, I had a school teacher, Miss Lucy Meadows, who was always talking about attitude. My recollection is that she talked about it nearly every day. And, I remember thinking how stupid I thought she was. My reasoning at that time was something like this: Attitude is totally irrelevant. It's whether or not you know the answers to the test questions. That's what's important. But, over the years I have come to see the awesome wisdom in having the right attitude. It does make all the difference in the world.

A few years ago I traveled with my wife, Linda, in Alaska. While at Glacier Bay, I saw a little poem on the wall of the inn where we were staying. It spoke eloquently about attitude.

One ship drives east and another drives west

with the selfsame winds that blow.

'Tis the set of the sails and not the gales

which tells us the way to go.

Like the winds of the sea are the ways of fate,

As we voyage along through life;

'Tis the set of a soul that decides its goal

And not the calm or the strife.

This poem suggests wisely, I think, that we should set our souls on a right course and, to me, that right course or orientation is the Lord. Then, with that orientation or attitude firmly in place in our lives we are able to deal successfully with whatever comes along.

Attitude is also important in dealing with the issues beyond your personal lives.

You graduates are going out into a world of a plethora of serious problems. Obviously, in the short time allotted for this commencement address, I cannot explore very many of them. Even so, I do want to mention a few.

Former President Jimmy Carter, who is so involved in our work with Habitat for Humanity, recently wrote in an article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* newspaper that, "the greatest challenge for our nation today is reversing the tide of despair that plagues so many of our citizens, especially those in low-income urban areas." The article was written in connection with President Clinton's Summit on Volunteerism. I was privileged to be in attendance at that Summit which set a goal to recruit an additional two million volunteer mentors for at-risk young people, many in the inner cities, by the year 2000.

The attitude among the 3,000 or so people in Philadelphia was that we should not simply bemoan the problem. Rather, we should seek solutions, and we should seek them together, government and private sector, church and secular agencies, corporate and non-profit.

Another serious concern is our country is the state of our social well-being. In the 1996 Index of Social Health, published by the Fordham Institute for Innovation in Social Policy, Tarrytown, New York, it is reported that the social health of America is currently at its lowest point in the twenty-five years since the study began.

What is meant by social health? Simply stated, it is combining in one measure sixteen social problems, such as infant mortality, child abuse, teen suicide, drug abuse, high school dropouts, access to affordable housing and the gap between rich and poor.

Especially bothersome is the growing gap between the rich and the poor. This gap widened more than ever during the 1990's. Salaries and other income of corporate leaders continue to grow at phenomenal rates while workers' pay goes up only at a modest pace and social services provided by various levels of government for the poor are being cut more and more.

Just this week I read that the highest paid executive in America is the CEO of the company named, appropriately, I think, The Gap. That one man made \$104.8 million last year.

The National Center for Children in Poverty at the Columbia School of Public Health recently wrote in one of their publications that "Increases in the young child poverty rate are intertwined with growing income inequality. Such disparity threatens the social cohesion of a nation built on the principles of equal opportunity and universal access to the American dream of a comfortable middle-class lifestyle."

A challenge of gigantic proportions confronts not only the United States, but the whole world in the growing urbanization of the world. That was the theme of the United Nations Habitat II Conference held last June in Istanbul, Turkey. I was privileged to attend that gathering and to be a plenary speaker.

When Westminster College was founded in 1851, and even as late as 1900, most people lived in rural areas. By 2000, most people will live in cities. And, many of them will be huge. By 2015, when most of you students here today will be about 40 years old, Lagos, Nigeria will have a population of nearly 25 million people. Tokyo already has a population of over 26 million. By 2015, that city will add another 2 million.

Mexico City will grow to 18.8 million. And, problems abound with such growth. For example, the streets in Mexico City have sunk 35 feet over the past 70 years due to withdrawal of ground waters.

How do we deal with such problems? What attitude should we have in regard to these and other such matters?

I suggest the following:

Be willing to risk. Don't play everything totally safe. Willingness to risk is the sine qua non of a truly successful life. The poet Carol Sapin Gold wrote this about the importance of risk taking.

To laugh is to risk appearing the fool,  
To weep is to risk appearing sentimental,  
To reach out for another is to risk involvement,

To expose feelings is to risk exposing your true-self,  
To place your ideas, your dreams before the crowd, is to risk their loss,  
To love is to risk not being loved in return,  
To live is to risk dying,  
To hope is to risk despair,  
To try is to risk failure,  
But risks must be taken--

Because the greatest hazard in life is to risk nothing.

The person who risks nothing does nothing, has nothing, is nothing.

He may avoid suffering and sorrow--but he simply cannot learn,

feel, change, grow, love....live

Chained by his certitudes, he is a slave

He has forfeited freedom

Only a person who risks is free.

So, take risks, reasonable risks, and then work hard, and seek to surround yourselves with others who share your dream, whatever it may be. No great work was ever done alone and no great accomplishment was achieved without hard work.

Always have the attitude that change is possible. That attitude will give you hope and will engender hope in those around you.

Fill your hearts and minds with a sense of urgency. People in a hurry get things done. In 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and exclaimed, "We have come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now." Today, three decades later, we are still beset with problems that cry out for people filled with a sense of urgency to find solutions.

Set goals in your life. To get things done, you need great goals. In our work with Habitat for Humanity, we have one overarching goal to eliminate poverty housing and homelessness.

But, we have interim goals. Establish a Habitat affiliate in every town and city in the United States. Form a campus chapter of Habitat for Humanity at every college and university in the country. Set up a national Habitat for Humanity organization in every nation on earth. Complete the 100,000th house by 2000. The 50,000th was dedicated last September and we are currently building a new house every 50 minutes.

Never be dismayed or cowered by the cynics or naysayers. F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote that the measure of a first rate intelligence is to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise.

Realize that change is usually very slow. Goals can and should be established, as I said earlier, and they should be bold. But, progress usually comes in small increments. Eighteenth Century poet William Blake had a vision for a new world, but he said that progress would always be slow. He said change would come about through what he called "minute particulars", defined as singular acts of service that enhance the common good and enrich the lives of both giver and receiver.

My high school teacher, Lucy Meadows, who taught me the importance of attitude, also drilled into my head a bit of poetry about the nature of slow progress and the importance of tenacity, perseverance and hard work to achieve goals in life. I can hear her even today as she paced to and fro in our classroom, "The heights by great men reached and kept were not attained by sudden flight, but while their companions slept, were toiling upward in the night."

Finally, give back more than you take--from life, from your employer, from your mate, from your friends and associates, from the world. Jesus said it best, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." That attitude is life giving, joy giving, meaning giving. It makes sense and it works.

In closing, let me say again what a joy it is to be here today. Now graduates, right now is the time to have an attitude of great joy and sheer delight. Kick up your heels. Hug your friends. Cry a bit. Thank mom and dad and whoever else made it possible for you to arrive at this point

in your life. Savor the moment of this great milestone in your life. And, be in an attitude of thankfulness for this and other blessings.