

Lamar University
Commencement, School of Fine Arts and Communications
May 18, 2019
James L. Holly, MD

At this commencement of the Lamar University College of Fine Arts and Communications, we celebrate Art, Communication & Media, Deaf Studies and Deaf Education, Music, Speech & Hearing Sciences, and Theater and Dance. If you have any doubt of the value of the degree you have earned in fine arts, study the history of World War II.

As a student with under-graduate and graduate study in history and philosophy, I learned how music kept men and women alive during the worst days of war and I learned how often men and women gave their lives to preserve great art treasures from destruction by war. It may be government and armies which preserve our culture, but it is fine arts which give provide our *raison d'être* (our “reason for being”).

My personal roots at Lamar are deep. My son graduated from Lamar in 1996 with a BS in Political Science and Philosophy. My oldest granddaughter is currently a student at Lamar. However, my roots go back to 1938 when my father enrolled in Lamar. Unfortunately, after his first day, he became home sick and returned to Central Louisiana and never returned.

Each of you, who today receive your degree, stand upon the precipice of the rest of your life. A ‘precipice’ is “a very steep side of a mountain where danger, trouble, or difficulty begin. This imagery is not often used in this context. More often, we would say that you stand on the ‘threshold’ of your life, which means, “the point at which something begins.” In actuality, both ‘precipice’ and ‘threshold’ apply to a university commencement. ‘Threshold’ speaks of opportunity while ‘precipice’ warns of the risk of wrong choices, yet, it is from the ‘precipice’ that you can see the clearest and the farthest. At this moment of commencement, I adjure you to choose wisely, I challenge you to cross the “threshold” with the solemnity that it is also a “precipice”, for as this day foreshadows great promise, it also harbors great risk.

Remember, the words of Minnie Haskins poem which stated:

“And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.” And he replied: ‘Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.’ So I went

forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night.” (*The Gate of the Year*”, Minnie Louise Haskins, 1908)

My personal introduction to the Fine Arts began at the Don Theater in Natchitoches, Louisiana when I experienced the performances of Maestro Tom and his Virtuoso companion Jerry. As Tom and Jerry conducted the orchestra and played the grand piano, I loved the hijinks, but I also learned to love the music. When I was nine, my fifth-grade class went to the Fine Arts Auditorium at Northwestern State College where I experienced my first live, symphonic orchestra performance. The Conductor was Dr. Joseph Carlucci; that was 1953. Twenty-two years later, in 1975, my wife and I attended the Beaumont Symphony for the first time. The Conductor was Dr. Joseph Carlucci, Professor of Music at Lamar University.

My first academic experience with communication was in a speech class when I was eighteen as a college sophomore at Northwestern. In that class sat a young woman whom I had not met but which three years later I would marry. This August we will celebrate our 54th Anniversary. We both remember that speech class.

In September, we were assigned a speech with a visual aide. Knowing that there were seven people ahead of me in the alphabet, I attended class in my usual state of unpreparedness. However, I made one strategic error. I had nothing in my hands, which alerted Mr. Graham, our professor to the fact that my not having something he could see meant I was not prepared.

In that he and I had a love/hate relationship, I loved him, and he hated me, he skipped the first eight students and called on me. My options were something or nothing, choosing something, I stood up. He looked a little surprised when I walked to the front of the class, desperately looking for something which I could use as a visual aide. The only thing I saw was a piece of chalk, but we were specifically prohibited from using the blackboard.

When I picked up the chalk and turned to the class, Mr. Graham had his hand up to tell me I could not use the board. Before he could say anything, I took three strong steps toward the class, ceremoniously tossed the chalk into the air, watched it crumble to the floor, and said, “What made that chalk hit the floor?” I had a visual aide, now all I needed was a speech.

I answered my own question saying, “You think it was gravity, but it really was the little green people. They live in the air and they are cleaning their homes.” “Of course,” I said, “you can’t see them because you don’t believe in them,” as I took one out of my shirt pocket and introduced him to the class. I then gave a fifteen-minute speech on the “little green people.” At the end of the class, Mr. Graham would give us our grade. Mine was an “A-.” I asked what the “minus” was about and he responded, “Oh, it was excellent, I just want to know when you prepared it.” I shrugged my shoulders and walked out of class.

My Communications education continued when three weeks later, we had to give an extemporaneous speech. Each student would in turn stand in front of the class and Mr. Graham

would assign a topic on which we had to give a ten minute speech off the top of his head. As you and I know, I had already done that. When my turn came, I was assigned the topic of “alarm clock.” Before “-ock” was out of Mr. Graham’s mouth, I said, “In 1786, in Philadelphia, John Smith first conceived of combining an alarming device with a timing device to create an ‘alarm clock.’”

At this point, Mr. Graham interrupted me and said, “Stop, stop, stop. You know too much about alarm clocks,” whereupon I began to laugh.” Red faced, Mr. Graham said, “You made all that up!” My answer was a nod of my head. He was furious. He added, “OK, Mr. Smarter-than-your-pants, give me a speech on the hole in the doughnut.” Things did not get better when, beginning instantly I said, “I was just reading about that hole this morning.” I then gave my speech.

I have spent my life giving speeches but with considerable more preparation than in 1962, when I was 18.

The value of Fine Arts education and of communication skills were affirmed in the movie, “Mr. Holland’s Opus.” When budgetary constraints resulted in the elimination of the music, drama, art and dance programs, in the John Kennedy High School, Mr. Holland, a music teacher, argued, “If you eliminate the fine arts, in favor of reading and writing, the time will soon come when students have nothing to read or write about.” I agree.

The academic disciplines you have pursued, perhaps more than the sciences, liberal arts, engineering and others help define who we are as human beings. Your careers will engage the participation of almost all people, giving meaning, beauty and joy to their lives. You are a unique group, often uniquely possessed of and by passion and heart. Nurture your skills for the benefit of your community.

As you transition from being students to being alumni, I place before you four admonitions:

1. Make a life
2. Pay your debt
3. Join a team
4. Prepare to be measured

Don't forget that tomorrow you will join those like me, who are in their autumn years. Without thoughtfulness, you may then lament, "Where did the years go?" Each morning, when I arise and walk into my study, I see two pictures: one is a framed copy of my November 22, 1968, letter of acceptance to the UT Health San Antonio Long School of Medicine; the other is an original watercolor presented to my wife and me November 29, 2018, upon my retirement from the practice of medicine for 43 years in Beaumont.

It is sobering to have in the letter the promise for the future of a lifetime and in the watercolor the memory of that life now spent. More than a lamentation, this remembrance is that each day must be filled with gratitude and with thanksgiving for having had the blessing of a life of meaning.

The diploma you receive today will be your beginning. How you fill in the next fifty years is up to you. I bid you do so well.

Make A Life

Sir Winston Churchill is credited with having said, "You make a living by what you get; you make a life by what you give." Sometimes, we are so focused on the former that we fail to achieve the later.

"Giving" is not just related to money. And, the impact of what you "give" is not judged by the monetary value of the gift; it is judged by its cost to you. The commendation of the widow's mite was not assessed by its economic value, but by the fact it was all that she had. Second, don't wait until you have wealth in order to learn the art and the discipline of giving. Begin now, today, and maintain that "giving" spirit as long as you live.

When I was a sophomore at Northwestern State College, I was 18. I met a freshman who was shy and who never smiled because his teeth were rotten and filled with cavities. I went to a

dentist in Natchitoches and asked him what he would charge for a full-mouth extraction and to fit this young man with dentures. He gave me a price, and I asked if I could pay him the next summer when I would have a job. He agreed. I saw this young man's life transformed and I took my first serious step toward making a "life" out of the "living" I earned that next summer. My wife and I taught school in Golden Meadow, Louisiana, our first year out of Northwestern. You would not believe how little we earned. The brightest young girl in my class was very poor and only attended school irregularly, but always made hundreds on tests. That year, Carolyn and I took Vivian shopping and bought her clothes including a red dress. That was 1965; in 2005, I was given her current address and I wrote her. I did not hear from her for a year.

When her response arrived it brought tears to my eyes. She said, "It has taken me a long time to write back. I have had a difficult life but things are better now. My children are doing well. When I was in the seventh grade a teacher and his wife bought me a red dress. Was that you? I wore it until it fell apart. It is the only dress I ever had." Be a giver.

Third, give more than your resources, give your heart. A smile, a greeting, or a handshake often will do more for others than money. Recently, I entered a nursing home, where, as a physician, I have a prominent role. As I rounded a corner, I encountered a new janitor. I greeted him, stopped and shook his hand. This small gesture, done as a genuine affirmation of the value of our joint contribution to the health of the residents, was a great gift to him. But, as always, the giver receives the greatest return.

Opportunities to be a "giver" will abound in your life. Several years ago, my wife and I were having lunch at our regular Friday-noon restaurant. A new waitperson took our order and served us. She did a poor job but we were kind to her. And, though her performance did not

warrant it, we gave her a gratuity. Ten days later, we saw this young women walking down the mall. She had two children with her. They looked at their mother as if she were the Queen of England. I said to my wife,” Aren’t you glad we were kind to her?” Always treat people the way you would hope they would be treated by their closest loved one.

Pay Your Debt

In his Letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul counseled, “Owe no man anything but to love one another, for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law.” Throughout your life, you will incur “a debt of love.” In the context of your college graduation, you may say, “But I paid my tuition and my room and board, how could I owe a debt to Lamar University?”

First, your education cost more than you paid and second your professors gave you more of themselves than their salaries required. In addition, your fellow students invested in your life each day of your education. In the past four years, you have accumulated a “debt of love” toward the institution and the individuals of Lamar.

A year ago, when my wife and I endowed a Distinguished Professorship and two scholarships at NSU, I asked the University not to announce the cost of the endowments. Why? Because more than a gift, they were installments paid upon a “debt of love” owed for fifty years and because the example was for others to be motivated to become “givers,” and the monetary value of the endowments was not the point.

Join A Team

In his remarkable book, *The Fifth Discipline*, Dr. Peter Senge, addressed the value and the power of a team; he said:

“Most of us at one time or another have been part of a great ‘team,’ a group of people who functioned together in an extraordinary way - who trusted one another, who

complemented each other's strengths and compensated for each other's limitations, who had common goals that were larger than individual goals, and who produced extraordinary results. I have met many people who have experienced this sort of profound teamwork - in sports, or in the performing arts or in business. Many say that they have spent much of their life looking for that experience again. What they experienced was a learning organization. The team that became great didn't start off great - it learned how to produce extraordinary results." If you are fortunate, you will be part of many teams in your life - some will come and go, some will be for a lifetime. Your marriage will be by its nature a team, as will your occupation, but today, you join a team which is called, "The Alumni of Lamar"

If, as an alumnus, you contribute to this new team your commitment to "making a life," "paying your debt" and "being part of a team," you should begin your career as an alumnus by giving \$10 a year to the Lamar student fund. As a part of the alumnus team, If you add \$10 a year, in ten years you will be giving \$100 dollars a year. Continued until you are here for the fiftieth anniversary of this commencement, you will have given \$4,540 to your university. You will never have missed this money, just as today Carolyn and I do not miss the cost of dentures or the cost of a red dress.

If today's new alumni do the same as you, in fifty years, the Class of 2019 will have contributed \$4,540,000 to Lamar without accounting for interest. And, what if the vision and commitment you begin today spreads to other classes, some older and some newer than yours? The potential is enormous. That is the power of a team.

Prepare to be Measured

Remember the lyrics to *The September Song*, "But the days grow short when you reach September, When the autumn weather turns the leaves to flame." Do you remember, the spring

time of your life; yes, it was yesterday? It is in the autumn, which is only tomorrow, that we look back and measure ourselves.

How do you prepare to be measured a success? Winston Church said of himself, "Every night I try myself by court martial to see if I have done anything effective for the day. I don't mean just pawing the ground; anyone can go through the motions; but something really effective." A life cobbled together with days of "effectiveness" will produce a life of worthiness.

Tremulously, in the movie *Saving Private Ryan*, Ryan, now in his seventies, approached the headstone of Captain John Miller who had given his life that Ryan might live. In perhaps the most poignant moment in a great film, tears stream down his face, as Ryan plaintively said to his wife, "Tell me that I have lived a good life; tell me that I have been a good man." The sacrifice of others imposed upon Private Ryan a debt only a noble and honorable life could repay.

Everyone owes such a debt to someone. The circumstances of that debt may not be as dramatic, but it is just as real. Years ago, a man asked me, "Aren't you proud of what you have accomplished?" I said, "I have worked hard, but what I am is a result of the contributions of many. And, there are at least seven turning points of my life, in which it is obvious that without the providence of God my life would have been much different. Proud? Yes, but more grateful and humble than proud. And, ultimately, I am responsible for the gift of life given to me.

When Kent Keith was a sophomore at Harvard College in 1968, he said,

"I saw a lot of idealistic young people go out into the world to do what they thought was right, and good, and true, only to come back a short time later, discouraged, or embittered, because they got negative feedback, or nobody appreciated them, or they failed to get the results they

had hoped for. I told them that if they were going to change the world, they had to really love people, and if they did, that love would sustain them. I also told them that they couldn't be in it for fame or glory. I said that if they did what was right and good and true, they would find meaning and satisfaction, and that meaning and satisfaction would be enough. If they had the meaning, they didn't need the glory.”

To encourage students and to sustain them in their journey, Keith wrote the *Paradoxical Commandments of Leadership*, which I commend to you today. They are:

1. People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered. Love them anyway.
2. If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives. Do good anyway.
3. If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies. Succeed anyway.
4. The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway.
5. Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. Be honest and frank anyway.
6. The biggest men and women with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest men and women with the smallest minds. Think big anyway.
7. People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs. Fight for a few underdogs anyway.
8. What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway.
9. People really need help but may attack you if you do help them. Help people anyway.
10. Give the world the best you have, and you'll get kicked in the teeth. Give the world the best you have anyway. (© Copyright Kent M. Keith 1968, renewed 2001)

These realities may sound cynical, but they are only a reflection of reality. Take these Commandments, make them your own and you will live a life of service and significance.

At this, your own commencement, you begin your future. As a young person, live in such a way that when you stand in my place, over 75 years of age, you can remember a life filled with joy, peace, thanksgiving and satisfaction.

I bid you Godspeed. I bid you farewell in the trust that in your life you will fare well and that you will enjoy the speed of the power of God.

With your life, honor your family, your university, your community and yourself.