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**Northwestern State University
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Class of 1965**

Today, you stand upon the precipice of the rest of your life. Precipice, “a very steep side of a mountain where danger, trouble, or difficulty begins,” is not often used in this context. More often, one would choose threshold, which means, “the point at which something begins.” In actuality, both precipice and threshold apply to commencement.

Threshold speaks of opportunity while precipice warns of the risk of wrong choices, but, 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, as this day foreshadows great promise, it also harbors great risk. Today, your number includes you who are just beginning your journey, but also includes many who are in the autumn of your lives, as you began your journey, in this same place, fifty years ago.

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)

In this setting, 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 those of you who begin today, will tomorrow join those who are in their autumn years. Without thoughtfulness, you will then lament, “Where did the years go?”

Make A Life

Some of you chose a degree program in order to make a “living”; you may be at the greatest risk as your ultimate task must be the making of 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 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 Northwestern State 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 NSU.

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.

In a moment, we will return to these first two principles but let me tell you that there is an alumnus of NSU, and it is not me, who has a vision of soliciting two pennies from every person in the United States of America for healthcare. What value could that be, you ask? It costs more to mint a penny than the face value of the penny. If two pennies cost two and a half cents to produce, how can a gift of two cents be a gift of value? It is the power of geometric progression. The reality is that if everyone gives two cents a day, \$1 billion dollars a year would be collected.

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 others’ strengths and compensated for each others’ 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 NSU” or “The Long Purple Line.”

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 by giving \$10 a year to the NSU’s student fund. By being 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 almost 1,000 new alumni do the same as you, in fifty years, the Class of 2016 will have contributed \$4,540,000 to NSU 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

Those of you here today for your fiftieth anniversary are in the autumn of your life. 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 just yesterday? It is in the autumn 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 *Saving Private Ryan*, Ryan, now in his seventies, approached the headstone of Captain John Miller who gave 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.

At the conclusion of the 1969 version of *Good-bye, Mr. Chips* (the earlier version was 1939 for which Robert Donat won the Academy Award for his role as Mr. Chips. He won over Clark Gable in *Gone With the Wind*) Peter O'Toole reviewed his life with the following words:

"I wonder if we were any use to them at all? I mean, What did we ever teach the boys? How to parse a sentence in ancient Greek? Was that going to help them today? Was it? I suppose we did teach them one thing; how to behave to each other. Yes, we did try to teach them that. Is there anything more important to teach people than that?"

Then walking from his lodgings to Brookfield School where he had taught for 64 years, remembering his beloved wife who had been killed in WWII, he sang:

"In the evening of my life I shall look to the sunset and a moment in my life when the night is due, and the question I shall ask, only you can answer, 'Was I brave and strong and true, like you?'"

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.

Congratulations and *bon voyage*.