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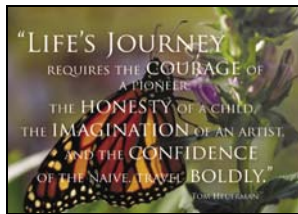
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A speech to honors graduates at the Business Honors Breakfast at Concordia College, Moorhead, Minnesota.

## THE CALL TO EXCELLENCE

**Every institution in our society should contribute to the growth of the individual. What is your institution doing to foster the development of the individual within it?**

John W. Gardner

Good morning.

I congratulate each of you on your outstanding scholastic accomplishments at Concordia College.

And I compliment the faculty and administrators who have created the conditions necessary for your excellence.

I salute your focus, your sacrifice, your discipline, your tenacity of purpose, and your ability to endure the loneliness of excellence.

When I sat in your chair more than a few years ago, I was graduating from the University of Minnesota with a degree in sociology and psychology.

I was married after my freshman year, had a child soon after, worked, paid my own way, graduated on time, and was elected a member of Phi Beta Kappa. Fear can be a powerful motivator.

As I recall, tuition was \$115.00 a quarter/class, and my job paid \$.95 an hour.

Those are among the favorite years of my life. Today those achievements are among the proudest of my life.

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I hope you feel proud of your achievements. However, you are not finished. You've just begun. Many more hills need to be climbed. The quest for excellence requires life-long learning.

Since graduating from the University of Minnesota in 1968, I've been a secret service agent, a carpenter, and a nature photographer.

I had 9 leadership positions in 18 years at the Star Tribune newspaper and returned to academic life at age 49 and completed my Ph.D. in organizational development at age 52.

I lived on the side of a mountain and photographed beautiful Colorado for 14 months in 2001/02, and have been a writer and consultant in three markets over the past twelve years.

With the caveat that I have consistently been unable to hold a job and frequently fall short of excellence in my life, I would like to speak to you briefly about excellence.

Excellence is not about celebrity, how much money you make, or how fancy your job title. I admire an excellent uneducated landscaper more than a mediocre politician. It is an insult to Americans and to immigrants for our president to say that we need people to do jobs that Americans won't do. Every job well done is worthy of respect as is every person.

Excellence according to author and researcher Marcus Buckingham is about "...making the greatest possible impact over the longest period of time" in whatever you do.

I recently took a two week **photography trip** out West.

In Jackson Hole, Wyoming I visited nature photographer Tom Mangelsen's *Images of Nature* gallery. I am in awe of his talents and photographs. He inspires me to be a better photographer.

Some say that greatness is thrust upon people. I think that is true. However, Mangelsen demonstrates that excellence is not thrust upon us; it is achieved one choice at a time.

He understands that the essence of excellence is to do things you love to do and to not do things you hate to do—as much of the time as is possible.

Mangelsen spends 9 months a year in the field taking photos. That is what he loves to do. He also has a massive marketing machine—he leaves that to others more talented in marketing than he is.

How much better I feel around excellence like Tom Mangelsen than when in the presence of the mediocre, arrogant, and incompetent that are so common in our society today.

I meet many people in my work, and you will meet them in the organizations you join, who make poor choices and persist in jobs not large enough for them and grow bitter.

Others are mediocre, in jobs not suited to their talents.

Many will not study and learn in order to be excellent.

Others live unethical lives in actions small and large.

Countless are dysfunctional in their relationships.

Many in leadership positions are not aware of their harmful impact on others.

Many good leaders are sabotaged by those threatened or envious of good leadership.

I feel disheartened in the presence of mediocrity and irresponsible people.

I also meet, and you will too, many people in jobs large and small who strive to be excellent in all they do; hang out with those people. I hope you choose to be like them. Based on your record at Concordia, I am sure you will.

Being around excellence affects us inside of ourselves.

When in the presence of excellence, like being around you, I feel hopeful.

I feel good when in awe of someone, humbled by their level of development, and I appreciate the model they are that I can emulate.

I am inspired in the presence of such people whether celebrities or everyday people—students or professors. Excellence expands my imagination of what is possible and motivates me.

So please be aware that by being excellent you help others be better without even knowing it.

Life calls us to make excellence the norm in our society.

Excellence not just in our chosen professions but in the quality of the lives we live and in our relationships with others.

I urge you to strive to get a little better every day in every way.

I think I know a few things about your future that you may not be aware of:

I think I know:

1. You will face more dramatic change in your lives than any previous generation. You will have to creatively meet massive crisis after massive crisis. Yesterday I received *U.S. News & World Report (March 27, 2006 edition)*. The headline reads: "The Fight For The Future." Your careers will not be spent creating the America of the past 230 years; it will be spent reinventing the America of the next 100 years.

In addition, you will deal with technical advancements that threaten our very humanity. There is great opportunity in the challenges you will face and great risk.

2. Your lives will not unfold as you plan or as you expect them to, all you can be sure of is the unexpected. Life is hard, as you've probably discovered. Life is messy, life is non-linear. Don't feel guilty about that—it is how life is supposed to be. You will go forward like great artists; you will create your life as you go.
3. In twenty years, statistically speaking, some of you may well be chronically depressed, disappointed, disillusioned, and cynical, one of the walking dead of our organizations and institutions. It doesn't have to be that way.
4. Others of you, and I hope all of you, will learn how to navigate life's natural cycles and will be renewed, refreshed, responsible, and reinvented, over and over again as you take your unique life journey.

Which group you find yourself in twenty years from now, will depend not on luck, but on the choices you make every day between now and then.

For excellence and maturity do not come to all just by the fact of getting older—they come to those who do the hard work of being aware and responsible people.

I coach people in each group—those who are alive and those who are in despair. I've spent time in each group myself.

They've taught me a few things about being alive and energized that I want to share with you. (You didn't think I could resist giving you a little advice did you?)

I suggest that if you want to feel alive and energized and want excellence throughout your life:

1. Know who you are: why are you here? What is your purpose in life? Where are you going? What is your vision for your life? What values will guide you along the way? Remember that happiness comes not from leisure but from the pursuit of noble goals—some of them unachievable.
2. Develop your talents; not your weaknesses, do what makes you feel alive and get better at the things you are already good at.
3. Take time to think: no one will give you that time; many prefer that you not think for yourself. Demand that time for yourself. Do not mindlessly allow the organization or institution to replace the parents of your childhood—become independent and become your own person in your adulthood.

When you take that time to think, reflect on your thoughts, feelings, and experiences in life and become your own best teachers. Research shows that outstanding people take time to think.

4. Stay connected to your humanity—nothing is more important to our collective community: know your impact on others, develop your empathy and your compassion for others, for the endangered natural world, and for yourself,
5. Take action. Be bold. Aristotle said that we become brave by doing brave things. You will make mistakes, I promise you. Face them head-on. You'll have failures and disappointments as all of us do. I've yet to meet any perfect people with perfect lives. Besides, we learn the most and find the most meaning in our pain

and suffering. You can recover from most of your mistakes. Some are fatal or cannot be repaired so be thoughtful. Others are too much fun to make only once.

6. Get comfortable with ambiguity, uncertainty, and change for they will be with you throughout your life. Resist simplistic black/white answers to life's complexity and mystery—the more you do the more successful you will be. I once told a consultant when I was in the middle of a leadership challenge, "I've grown comfortable feeling scared and inadequate much of the time." You need to gain that same comfort with being uncomfortable.
7. Finally, live creatively and create with love, only work for enterprises that expand human potential, and be who you are—life demands nothing more and nothing less of you.

Robert Greenleaf the author of the seminal book "Servant Leadership" wrote that "caring" is the essential motive to lead. And we must care about people and about our organizations and institutions if we are to live in a good society.

Caring, Greenleaf wrote, is an exacting and demanding business. It requires not only interest and compassion and concern; it demands self-sacrifice and wisdom and tough-mindedness and discipline—just as you have shown at Concordia.

If you always care, including taking care of yourselves, I predict that you will be just fine twenty years from now.

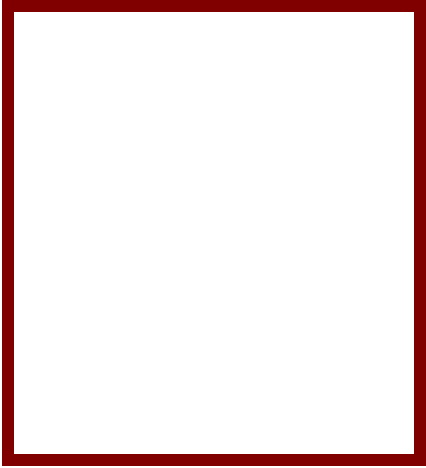
I wish each of you a grand journey in life. Life is about climbing hills: enjoy the climbs, glory in reaching the summit, and understand that time in the valleys is just as much a part of life as the climb of a hill is.

Your time will go fast so follow your heart and spend time doing what you love to do with people who bring out the best in you.

Stay hungry, be a little foolish, be bold, and be real.

Thank you.

NEW PHOTOS:



The Red River flooded its banks at our home:

**FLOOD REFLECTIONS**

Beautiful wild turkeys come up from the Red River

**WILD TURKEYS**