

Chapel Talk
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I turned fifty years old today. Thanks to a few good souls, I guess that's not much of a secret. And I would like to start by extending my appreciation to all of you for the kind words and thoughtful deeds that have enriched my day accordingly.

A half century. WOW. When I was born Harry Truman was in the White House; cars all had big fins and ran on four cylinder engines; Elvis Presley was nowhere to be heard of; McDonald's was not even a glint in Ray Kroc's eyes; and a maul was something you used to split wood in your back yard. It would be almost a decade before the Russians would launch the first man-made projectile through the earth's atmosphere.

By the time I reached your age and was contemplating going to college, a lot had changed. The culture of this country had been turned upside down by rock music, drugs, the Vietnam War, and heart-wrenching political and racial assassinations. Yet we were planning to put a man on the moon in the next couple of years. It seemed anything could happen -- though frankly only ten-year olds like Mr. Speers, who didn't know any better, could even dream that the hapless Mets would ever win a World Series. Amazingly, a year later they did.

Still, fifty seemed impossibly old to me. Well now that I'm here, I assure you it seems a lot less so. And I'm still experiencing firsts. I'm told, for instance, that this is the first time a Business Manager has been privileged to offer you his thoughts from this pulpit; I hope it won't be the last! In fact, it seemed to me the most notable way I could think of to launch my second half century.

According to sociologist Gail Sheehy, this is a significant passage in my life. And indeed, I have spent a fair amount of time in the last year and a half or so, trying to evaluate, understand and process this milestone in my life in some meaningful way. The fact that the whole world was at the same time making such a fuss about the new millennium has been both helpful and distracting.

Adlai Stevenson, the noted statesman, is credited with observing that "the difference in the measure of a man at twenty and the measure of a man of fifty is largely intangible." I came across that quote somewhere in my mid-thirties and for whatever reason it's stuck with me. I've given it

a lot of thought recently. Being quantitatively-oriented, I've tried to comfort myself by trying to define my progress in that regard. What clear wisdom had I gained that set me apart from my twenty-year old self? Surely, I must have learned *something* in that time frame, something *meaningful* and *profound*.

On the one hand, I've observed that Mr. Stevenson was wise, diplomatic one might say, in injecting the adjective "largely." I can assure you that there are indeed some *tangible* differences in me since I was twenty, actually especially since I was forty, and they're generally not good. I fear Mr. Zendt would be compelled to corroborate that (at least now, after his bumpy summer, if not last spring when he passed the same milestone).

On the other hand, I believe Mr. Stevenson was right. But that hasn't given me great comfort on the whole as I searched to quantify the progress I'd made personally on those all-important intangibles.

Happily, I did come up with a few things, more than a few actually; but in the process of doing so, I was reminded of the old saying, "The more you learn, the more you realize how much you don't know." So even more happily, for both you and me, I'm not going to try to share those with you this evening. Instead, somewhat ironically, given my background and that of my colleagues here, I'd like to spend the next few minutes talking with you about teaching.

Popular folklore to the contrary, *teaching* is actually the oldest profession. When you think about it, that should be obvious -- assuming, of course, that you give me the license to not define profession as something you get paid for, for clearly the first teachers were volunteers -- as most remain today, particularly in the context I wish to share with you.

Teaching is at the heart of everything. In what I would call a true Olympic moment, courtesy of one of the Games' commercial sponsors, a young adolescent is pictured relating a conversation he had recently with his father: "I told my dad that when I grow up I've decided to be a teacher. He said to me, 'Why not a doctor, son? It's a noble profession and you'll likely be a lot richer.' I responded, 'Without teachers, where would all the doctors come from?' " Indeed.

In "The Miracle Worker," Annie, Helen Keller's tutor, spends untold numbers of long, agonizing days and months trying to connect with her pupil. When she finally breaks through, Helen,

realizing the power just released in her, desperately seeks to learn how to sign one word in particular: “teacher.”

Think for a moment about all the neat stuff you can do: read, write, brush your teeth, tie your shoes, defeat alien forces, find your own way around a real mall, maybe even find the cosine of pi. Somebody, actually most likely a group of people, taught you how to do those things. Even the stuff you “figured out on your own” -- somebody helped you learn how to do that.

On a loftier note, consider for a minute those who inspired the world’s great religions: Jesus, Moses, Mohammed, Buddha, Confucius. What did they share in common? They all took the great mysteries of life and the great truth we call God and explained them to others in clear and compelling ways: they were great teachers, and remain among the most revered people in human history.

So we can agree, I trust, that teaching is special. That’s easy to say in this environment, and it is indeed my intent, partially at least, to extol the virtues of your teachers and remind you how fortunate you are to be here. But that is actually not my primary intent.

What I hope you will take away from this talk is this: **we are all teachers.** Every one of us. Some more actively than others; some more thoughtfully than others. We are all teaching those around us by our thoughts, words, and deeds. We are all learning from each other all the time. This is not just a peer phenomenon. In my discussions with some of the most respected teachers at a wide variety of schools one refrain keeps coming up: “I’m constantly learning from my students.”

An important note of caution here: teaching is not just those wonderful moments when something clicks or when one experiences an epiphany such as Mr. Caldwell described last week. Teaching happens all the time, and it can also spread fear, prejudice, disrespect and other destructive and negative forces. Hitler was a good teacher of terribly misguided ideas. We must remain constantly vigilant and strive to see that the teaching power within all of us is used to uplift and inspire our friends, colleagues, mentors, and even relatives, in constructive and positive ways.

So if teaching has the potential to have so much impact on humanity, then isn’t it worth doing well? In this regard, I strongly encourage you to go beyond your normal attentiveness to your teachers and notice how they practice their craft. Great teaching is an art, but like all great art, there is also a

science underlying it. Study it. Benefit from it. Learn from it. Grow from it. Share your abilities and knowledge with others. Get as good at teaching as you can.

One last story. When I moved into my office two summers ago, one of my first tasks was to become familiar with its contents and settle in. In doing so, I was moving a bookcase around and heard a little “clink” in back of it. I looked behind it and noticed a small black picture frame; nothing special, the kind they sell for \$1.99 at K-Mart. Appearances can be deceiving though, and often good things happen to you when you least expect it: as I pulled it out, I was delighted to see that it contained a still frame of one of the classroom scenes from “Dead Poets Society.” Not only that -- it was personally inscribed by Robin Williams: “Make your life extraordinary” it read, signed Robin Williams. As you might imagine, I found that to be both inspiring and daunting, especially given the big “passage” I was facing. I’ve spent a lot of time since that discovery pondering that entreaty and its challenge: just how are regular folks like me supposed to do that, make our lives extraordinary?

Fortunately, now that I’m fifty, I know. And if you’ve been listening you do too. ***Be a good teacher.*** Teach good. Teach it every day. In all that you do. ***Teach good well.***

So perhaps I have indeed learned something through this journey, though keep in mind I still root for the Red Sox. Take Chapel talks for instance: Make it personal. Tell a few stories. Keep it brief. The person who is largely responsible for my learning that, and a whole lot of other valuable and useful stuff, is right here in this room. And to her I am deeply indebted and eternally grateful.

Let us pray. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be always favorable in your sight, O Lord; and may you strengthen us to use the gifts you have bestowed upon us to foster light and truth in others. Amen.