

Chapel Talk
Wednesday, December 10, 2008
Michael Schuller

Good evening! It did indeed take a lot of faith, hope and love to get me here tonight, and for that I am deeply grateful.* It is so very good to be here.

Many people and events have inspired me in life. One of several that has stood out for me in particular became even more meaningful this past summer. It occurred on July 4, 1939. Lou Gehrig stood in front of a hushed capacity crowd in Yankee Stadium, clearly dying of the disease that would thereafter bear his name. Overcome by the outpouring of support and affection directed at him, he uttered the memorable yet seemingly inexplicable phrase, given his tragic illness, "Tonight, I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth." Such courage, such grace, such humility have inspired countless others facing life threatening challenges. This summer I had the undeniably sobering and yet uplifting privilege of experiencing a real sense of what Mr. Gehrig must have felt.

Last May, I went to the doctor's to see what might be done to rid me of a minor but chronic cough I had been experiencing the past couple of months. He checked me out, didn't seem too concerned but said we should run a few tests, "just to rule out a few things." He wanted me to get a CT scan of my chest along with some blood work in the next couple of days; as it was almost noon and the MRI office was just down the road, I decided I'd see if I could squeeze it in before lunch and get it checked off right then. I got in with no wait and was told they'd send the images to Dr. Covell's office. So far so good; very efficient (only 12:15 p.m.), no problems. I was feeling good. Ten minutes later just as I was leaving Subway I got a call on my cell, "Hello, this is Dr. Covell. (hesitation) I took a look at your CT scan, and..." He didn't need to say another word. Like, what doc calls you during his lunch hour ten minutes after you leave a lab? Suddenly something I hadn't even given a thought to hit me like the proverbial ton of bricks, and turned my world upside down. "I didn't like what I saw." He repeated that phrase like three times -- "I didn't like what I saw" and I knew, right then and there: "It's cancer, isn't it?" I said. "Well we can't be sure;" he said, "we'll need to get a biopsy, but I'm afraid it's quite likely..."

Well, I know now that what he was looking at was a mass about the size of a racquet ball in my right lung, with a whole lot of satellite activity around it; a first year med student could have diagnosed it from across the room. A few weeks later it was official: I had stage 4 lung cancer and my only option for treatment was chemotherapy, which my oncologist pointedly told me could not cure the disease but could possibly help manage it and prolong my life. How long? “On average, a year, give or take.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” I screamed in my head. “This is surreal. You must be talking about somebody else.” But no, it was me... “But everybody’s different,” he stressed, “we can’t really predict these things.” Damn right, I’m different, I thought, I’m going to be the one in 1,000 or 10,000 or 100,000 or whatever the heck it is to prove you wrong!

And you know what -- so far, so good. We’ve got a ways to go yet, but we’re making solid progress: after three chemo treatments, by early August, the primary tumor had shrink to the size of a squash ball and after six, at the end of October, it was less than 30 mm across, about half the original diameter, and for those of you up on your geometry, the pi factor, as you know, makes the reduction in the mass considerably more than that percent. That kind of progress qualifies one for the term “partial remission,” which pleases my doc (and a lot of other caring folk) to no end, but which just evokes for me another famous phrase by a determined battler, John Paul Jones: “[We] have not yet begun to fight.”

I say “we” because from day one, I have not been alone in this journey, and that brings me back to my “Gehrig-like” experience this summer. My words will not do justice to the feelings I experienced as people learned of my situation. Mrs. Schuller was, of course, the first to get the news. She went through the seven stages of separation and grief in about 7 ½ minutes, and then just flatly stated, “To hell with their odds, we’re going to beat this.” And I agreed; and she gave me a big hug, and she’s been a rock ever since. My kids have also been amazing, and I know this has been harder on them than it’s been on me: chemo is uncomfortable, disruptive and draining at times, but it is a breeze next to helplessness, which I contend is the toughest human condition. At least I could be doing something about trying to change the situation; watching without being able to help is agony.

But you know, I kind of expected that response from my family. What I didn't expect (but perhaps should have) was the outpouring of support, encouragement, prayers and good wishes I received from what seemed like practically anyone who'd ever known me -- led, of course, by Mr. Roach, who you may already know is the best head of school you could ever have. My colleagues here on the faculty and staff, especially in the Business Office and most notably Mrs. Simendinger -- a two-time cancer survivor herself, who keeps me centered in so many ways -- have been remarkable. Other friends, family, friends of friends ...it's been simply amazing. I got notes from high school and college friends of my kids -- do you know what it takes for a Gen X'er to sit down and write you a handwritten letter? Astounding! It really has been amazing journey; the joy of pulling through something like this together is indescribable. Perhaps you can get a sense of why I experienced Gehrig-like moments this summer; I just may be the luckiest man on the face of the earth!

Life often comes down to one thing -- ATTITUDE. Attitude can make all the difference: if you are in a car accident and come away with a broken arm, do you think, "Man, how unlucky can you get?" or do you think, "Well, how fortunate am I that it wasn't worse." "Making lemons out of lemonade," or whatever metaphor you like, the world is blessed with people who can look a challenge in the eye and say, "OK, what good can come of this?" I just happen to be lucky enough to have several of them in my corner.

When Winston Churchill, a man with a decidedly checkered academic and early career, was asked to give advice to a graduating class, he summed it up in six words: "Never, never, never, never give up." I have that on my refrigerator door. When Patrick Swayze was faced with a terminal diagnosis of pancreatic cancer, he said "What do you do to nurture a positive attitude when all the statistics say you are a dead man? You go to work." Such people and many more have helped lift me up and inspired me, and I am doing my best to follow their example and advice.

I have continued to work through this and work has indeed been therapeutic for me in many ways, and in large part that is because of you all. You provide me with a sense of purpose, direction and meaning that is nothing short of inspirational, and I am most grateful and thank you deeply for that.

One other thing I wanted to touch on with you tonight is “time.” No surprise, I’m sure, that my situation has caused me to be a lot more conscious of how I use my time -- after all, I might only have a finite amount of it left before moving on. All our time is precious, and I encourage you to use yours wisely.

By this, I do not mean to suggest that you sharpen your time management skills, though those are undeniably handy at times. No, rather I want to suggest that you thoughtfully consider how you apportion your time and think about what’s really important to you. You might want to be sure you’ve adequately studied and prepared for class or a test, or you might want to use time to go to the Library and learn about things not covered in class. You might want to use time, as Mrs. Hutchinson would suggest, to take care of yourself, and be healthy. You might be well served to use time, as Mr. Speers suggested in his Chapel talk earlier this year, to slow down to appreciate the beauty of both the natural world and the humanity that surrounds you; or you might, as Mrs. Fritz suggested in her talk, use time to build relationships and perform random acts of kindness. You have, despite what no doubt appears to you to be a very structured schedule and day, many options for how you spend your time -- make sure they are yours; own your choices.

A wise boss I had many years ago when I was not much older than you all, listened patiently as I explained to him why I hadn’t had time to complete the assignment he’d given me a couple of days ago. He looked at me and somewhat unsympathetically and simply said, “Young man, time is a matter of priority,” and walked away. And I thought about that, and you know, he was right -- and I’ve never forgotten that: time is a matter of priority. So next time you’re late handing in Mr. Austin’s paper remember that it was your prioritization: you may have prioritized preparing for a chemistry exam, or getting some dinner, or going to practice, or getting some sleep or helping out a friend -- and those are all very good priorities, perhaps even the best ones under the circumstances, but they were yours – because we all have 24 hours in a day, and how we use them is up to us.

One last observation on time and how you use it: Time makes up the fabric of your life. We are all largely focused on how we use time on a day-to-day basis, but in the long run how we use our time determines who we are and what the story of our life is. Your life is like a novel, something new, different, unique. Like a novel, it is built line by line, page by page, chapter by chapter: it all adds up -- and good novels have solid, common themes.

I have a phrase taped to the top of my dresser; it's been there for so long I can't remember its origin and my kids can't remember life without it. It's a daily reminder of the daunting challenge and privilege of determining how you use your time; it says "It's time to start acting on what you want to be known for." It's time to start acting on what you want to be known for...

My time may or may not be running out; God willing, it is not, but regardless I am counting my blessings. I recognize that every day is a gift, and I try to use it wisely. It's always "time to start acting on what you want to be known for." Many of you are already doing this, and doing it well; and I commend you. Others may want to reflect on their story to date and make changes in the plot line. It's up to you.

My novel is coming along nicely, thank you very much; while I may not quite be the luckiest man on the face of the earth, clearly I have indeed been truly blessed. So next time you see me walking across campus, I don't want you to think "Oh, there goes Mr. Schuller; he's got cancer." No, I want you to think, "There goes Mr. Schuller; he's truly blessed – what a lucky guy he is."

I wish you all the very best and Godspeed as you work on your life novel and the prioritization of your God-given time on this good Earth.

* Reference to the reading immediately preceding, I Corinthians 13

