

Commencement Address
by
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at
Cleveland State Community College

Cleveland, Tennessee
May 13, 1995

Dr. Cargol; members of the faculty; members of the graduating class; and your parents, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, children and friends, we are all here today because of the value we place on education, both for ourselves and for those who are dear to us.

We are here today either because we have worked hard to earn our place as members of the graduating class, or to join with these graduates, as family and friends, in celebrating their accomplishment.

We are here because we believe that education benefits us as individuals and as a community.

We are here because we have taken to heart the advice in the Proverbs of King Solomon: "to know wisdom and instruction; to perceive the words of understanding; to receive the instruction of wisdom, justice, and judgment, and equity; to give subtlety to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion. A wise man will hear, and will increase learning; and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels . . ."

We are here because we believe that education enriches our lives.

No one places a higher value on education than I. Rarely in my adult life has a day passed when I have not thought about how my education has shaped my future. I grew up in small towns not far from here and attended public schools, mostly in Tennessee, through high

school. I went to college and graduate school on scholarships. I have never forgotten that my educational opportunities did not come by chance or by accident. My mother and father sacrificed to assure that I -- and my sister and brother -- received a sound education.

Others sacrificed as well and I benefitted.

In fact, the sacrifices for me and other Tennesseans started in the fairly recent struggle to build a modern system of public education in Tennessee.

Before the turn of the century -- only ninety-five years ago -- there was not a single public high school in the state of Tennessee, not one. Public schooling ended with the eighth grade. Further, the length of the school year was -- by law -- set at five months and even that requirement was not enforced in many counties. Statistics show that fewer than half of the children who were eligible to attend school in Tennessee did so regularly.

There were no state colleges for training teachers.

It was not until 1903 that the University of Tennessee received its first funds from the state treasury.

Early in the century, the illiteracy rate for Tennesseans was twice that of the national average. Nearly 15 out of every 100 voters could not sign his name. At the same time, out of a population of two million Tennesseans, there were fewer than 3,000 college students -- less than the enrollment of Cleveland State today.

Then there came a Great Awakening. Popular demand for public education caught fire and swept the state.

One historian has written of those years, and I quote: "Public rallies were held repeatedly in practically every county in the state, and in election years efforts were made to induce every candidate for the legislature, in the enthusiasm of the moment, to pledge support" for education.

This fervor produced bipartisan support for state spending. In 1909, under the leadership of a Democratic governor, the state legislature dedicated 25 per cent of the state's gross revenue to building up the state's educational system. In 1912, under a Republican governor, the legislature increased the funding from 25 per cent to 33 per cent and provided for compulsory school attendance and transportation.

The people's hunger for education -- for themselves and their children -- pulled Tennesseans together in a way that few other issues could.

Tennesseans at that time looked ahead and decided that -- for their children -- the future

should not be one of finding a way to make a living, but one of giving their children the means to learn a living. Education was to become what the farm had been: the legacy we pass on.

Before the First World War, county high schools were built throughout the state -- about 200 at the war's close. Three "normal" schools were established: one in Memphis, one in Johnson City, and one in Murfreesboro -- in my home county. These normal schools would advance to the status of teachers' colleges, and eventually to that of state universities.

Against this historical background, it is easy to understand what led the Tennessee General Assembly in 1963 -- the year I was graduated from high school -- to pledge to place an institution of higher learning within 50 miles of every prospective college student in the state. It was the faith that legislators -- and other Tennesseans -- had that education could transform our lives and it was the belief that the doors of educational opportunity should be open to everyone. This beautiful college is built on that faith and that belief just as surely as it is built on its concrete foundations.

There are people today who say that education is not worth what it used to be. I cannot understand their way of thinking. Let them come to Tennessee.

Can they not perceive that, in our economy and in our society, education is a decisive shaper of individual destiny? Let them come to Tennessee to see what education offers.

Can they not understand that, as much as anything else and far more than most things, education today determines, not just what we have, but what we become? Let them come to Tennessee to see what the zeal for education among our forebears produced.

My mother, Sue Martel, has taught at Cleveland State for more than 20 years. When I visit her here in Cleveland, former students often come up to her in the street to thank her for the difference she has made in their lives. I am always impressed -- no, awed -- that she has touched so many people, and has helped them to build a future of wider opportunities for themselves.

I know others on the faculty have helped many of today's graduates as well.

Those of you who are graduating today, I am sure, share a faith in education, for you would not be here if you did not. My message for you today is simple: Do for others as they have done for you.

What has been invested in you, invest in others.

What has been given to you by way of new opportunities, give to others.

What has been passed to you, pass on.

Remember that you are here not by chance or accident, but because of decisions -- and sacrifices -- made not only by the people you are close to, but also by people you have never met, nor will ever meet. You can thank them only by following in their footsteps and creating footprints for others to follow.

There was in ancient Persia a wise man who was famous throughout the land. A few young men in the city in which he lived thought night and day about how they could trick him.

One day one of the young men said: "I think I have it. I will put a small bird in my hands and we will go to the wise man and ask him 'Is the bird in my hand alive or dead?' If he says 'Alive,' I will crush it and show him the dead bird. If he says 'Dead,' I will release the bird alive."

So they found a bird and went to the wise man.

The young man asked, "I have a bird here -- is he dead or alive?"

And the wise man said: "The answer is in your hands."

To today's graduates I would say, whether those who follow you have a better future depends on you. The answer is in your hands.

I congratulate each of you on your graduation -- and wish you great success in all you accomplish in the future for yourselves -- and for others.

Good luck, and may God bless you.
