

MESSIAH COLLEGE

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS – MAY 15, 2010

Those of you that know me well will realize that being a somewhat introverted person, if I had my choice today it would NOT be for me to be standing here in front of this rather large crowd. To be honest, being up here with this academic gown and somewhat unusual hat on, really does push my comfort zone to the limit. I suspect that some of you in the audience today would also probably prefer to be somewhere else instead of here. But for some reason I am here - and you are here - so I guess we should all make the best of it.

As we celebrate the college's centenary, it has been interesting to think back and imagine what the college was like 100 years ago. With the help of Glen Pierce in the College archives, I was able to look through some of the original documents published by Messiah. In the bulletin of Sept. 1910, Volume 1, No. 1, I saw that tuition was set at \$6 per term, with Room and Board at \$3.50 per week. You could get a 25 cent discount on that weekly rate if you were willing to have two people in each room instead of one. More interestingly there was a statement that said "bed clothing must be submitted for fumigation upon arrival." By the time I arrived for college in 1967 they had stopped doing the fumigation part, and the fees for both tuition and room and board had risen somewhat.

I graduated from Messiah College 40 years ago this month. That graduation day was somewhat like today because in 1970 we were having commencement outside for what I understand was the first time in the history of the College. In that year our class size was the largest to ever graduate from Messiah since its' founding in 1909. There were 116 of us graduating, while the year before in 1969 there had only been 71 graduates. I must tell you that I do not remember a whole lot from that day, and I must also confess that I had to go to the college archives and look up those figures I just gave you of how many graduates there were. But I am quite certain of one thing. If they would have taken a vote on my graduation day, I would NOT have been voted the MOST likely person to ever give a commencement address. In fact, on the contrary, I would probably have been voted as the LEAST likely to ever give a commencement address. So how did I get here, you ask?

Well, I am not really sure, but as we celebrate this 2010 commencement marking the end of the college's centenary celebrations, I believe I am here as a symbol representing many others who could have been here instead of me. I am here as symbol of something that the college wants to emphasize in this special 100th year. That 'something' is the commitment that the college has to developing and producing graduates who will have a service-oriented approach to their careers. Since I, like many Messiah graduates down through the years have chosen that career path, I am here to represent them and to speak on their behalf - and to also give tribute to the College for its unwavering commitment for 100 years to produce graduates that will change the world in one way or another.

As you have already noticed, on a day such as this it is easy for some of us in the crowd, especially those of us with a few more years of wear and tear on our bodies, to be a bit sentimental and reflect back on our own graduation day. As I thought about graduation ceremonies in general, it occurred to me that on such a wonderful day as this – on a day when our friends, parents, grandparents, teachers and significant others are all around us celebrating with us, little of what is said by a commencement speaker is remembered. In fact being a scientist, I decided to do an experiment and formulated a hypothesis that I could prove or disprove. My hypothesis was that no one remembers anything that was said at their own graduation in the Commencement Speech address. To test my hypothesis I took an informal survey among friends and relatives and I asked them two simple questions. Number one, do you remember who spoke at your college or university graduation? And number two, what if anything do you remember from what was said in the commencement speech?

I'll bet you can predict the result of my little survey. Only two of the more than 30 people I talked to could even remember the name of the person who spoke, and only one remembered something that was said on their graduation day. Even I myself do not remember who spoke at my graduation from Messiah! Thus my hypothesis was proven to be correct, since more than 97% of those surveyed did not remember anything that was said at their graduation.

So with that knowledge, I stand before you today with the understanding that while it is tempting for commencement speakers to try and say something profound and deeply meaningful, or to give some "words of wisdom" that will bring about a life changing experience in the graduates, the truth is that for the most part, the words I say today are like dandelion seeds wafting on the breeze. Most of them fly away and are never seen again! I guess commencement speakers are sort of like the mother dandelion plant; there is hope that at least one of those little dandelion seeds will find a place to grow and make a difference.

I have entitled my talk today: "**What Characterizes You?**" It's a question I have for all of you that are graduating today – and I guess for those that are here with you today and listening as well. **What Characterizes You?**

If your character was put under a microscope and inspected, analyzed and figured out, what would the conclusion be?

What do others think of your character? How do they perceive you?

How do you look at your own characteristics? What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of your character?

My own understanding of what others thought of me and my personal character traits was brought home to me during a course I took at Messiah called "Psychology of Adjustment" – taught by Dr. Howard Landis. Towards the end of the semester, one day we did an exercise where we all sat in a circle, and a piece of paper with our name written on the top of it was passed around so that everyone could anonymously write what they thought of the person whose name was written on the paper. Then the papers were collected and given back to us by the prof for us to read in private. The sheet of paper that had my name on it came back with the majority of statements saying that I was self-conceited, proud, aloof, and generally "stuck-

up”. Wow! What a revelation! It was a little hard on the ego! But extremely helpful – because I began then to realize that my introverted shy self (one of my main characteristics), with a tendency to avoid talking to people and generally keeping to myself, made me come across to others as a person who had no time or concern for anyone else. And I did not really think that was who I was, or that it represented my basic character – a person with no time or concern for other people - but that was how I was perceived by others.

Thus began an effort to better understand my own character strengths and weaknesses, and to work to improve the strengths and overcome the weaknesses – or at least learn to live with them. That work goes on for me - as it does for many of you - as a daily effort to allow God to use me in the way He wants to, and not in the way that I think He should. In fact, it was never my intention to become a pediatrician, but after my wife Elaine and I volunteered for two years in Africa in the late 1970’s, God put a very strong burden on my heart for the children of Africa. And so I pursued training in pediatrics in order to be able to use the knowledge I gained to improve the lives of African children.

Some of you know that for the last 20 years or so, I have worked primarily in the field of malaria – doing research and running various projects – all in an effort to decrease the huge burden that disease puts on the children of Africa. While accurate statistics are hard to come by, it is estimated that over 1 million children die every year from malaria – and most of those in Africa. This is many more than the number of children that die from HIV / AIDS. For many years while working at Macha Mission Hospital in Zambia, I saw children suffer and die from malaria. Some days we lost as many as three children - in a day – from malaria.

We have now been fortunate to see the malaria case load fall dramatically in the area around Macha Hospital over the last 6 years – from over 1,400 pediatric admissions for malaria in the year 2003 - to only 46 cases last year. How did this come about when most of the so-called experts said it would be difficult if not impossible to control malaria in Africa? Well, I’d like to say that the wonderful team of people that I have had the privilege to work with over the years have five essential character traits that I believe have allowed us to be successful in our efforts, and in conclusion I wanted to share those with you.

I believe that these five character traits, when present and when utilized, will lead to a successful career and a very satisfying life.

- 1) **Commitment.** I don’t think I need to define commitment – you all know what it means. Suffice it to say that it is a lot more than just being “involved”. Be fully committed to what you do – whatever the job is.
- 2) **Passion.** We have all felt passion. But do you have a heart-felt passion for what you want to do in life? If you do then follow it - because without passion it is difficult to sustain the effort, especially when things get tough – as they inevitably will in any career.
- 3) **Integrity.** Living a life of integrity is another essential character trait for success. The dictionary defines this as “adherence to moral and ethical principles.” Or as my father used to quote from the Bible: “let your yea be yea, and your nay, nay”. It may seem at

times that people without integrity are able to get ahead, but in the long term, they will not succeed.

- 4) **Flexibility.** This is a tough one for some of us – it is tough for me. We find it difficult to adjust when circumstances change at the last minute, and it is not easy to learn to roll with the punches, and change our own well made plans. But if you cannot develop flexibility in your character, then you are going to end up with high blood pressure, stomach ulcers, and all sorts of other stress – related illnesses known very well to doctors! If you do not have a flexible character, then my advice is to learn how to develop one.
- 5) **Stamina.** My observation has been that God in his wisdom made us all different. I remind myself of that fact frequently as I work and interact with other people who are sometimes very different from me in their personality characteristics. God in His wisdom made us all different. Not everyone has the same amount of stamina - of physical and emotional energy, or endurance – to do what needs to be done. But I believe that to be successful in a service-oriented career, one has to have an extra measure of stamina.

So there you have it. My opinion of what it takes to be successful in life, summarized in five essential character traits.

- 1) Commitment
- 2) Passion
- 3) Integrity
- 4) Flexibility
- 5) Stamina

How do you stack up on these character traits? What characterizes you? If you had been in my Psychology of Adjustment class, what would your classmates have written about your character? And what would you write about yourself?

My hope and prayer would be that all of you achieve your full potential - and as a result help make this world a better place for all of us to live in, and not just a place for you as an individual to live a better life. **I believe that when we look back on our lives and our careers, what we have achieved for others will bring much more satisfaction and contentment than what we have achieved for ourselves.** May God grant you the wisdom to choose wisely as you seek His will for your life and career – and I hope to see some of you in Africa in the coming years.