

"The Kid with the Pennies"

Remarks of John L. Clendenin
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Thank you for that kind introduction, and greetings to all of you -- students, families, faculty and friends -- on this happy and proud occasion.

It is always an honor to be asked to deliver a commencement address. Today, however, the experience is bittersweet. The late Jim Campbell, who of course was chairman of the Millsaps Trustees, also was a valued member of the BellSouth board of directors. On a personal level, I had the good fortune to call him my friend.

Jim loved this college and all that it stands for. That's why it was his wish that BellSouth direct the contribution we make on behalf of our long-term directors to Millsaps. It is extremely gratifying that this gift, along with matching donations from Entergy Corporation and Trustmark Corporation, will fund the renovation and development of the Campbell Administrative Center.

And it's a special privilege for me to be a part of something that meant so much to Jim, and I thank you all for the invitation and for the warm reception you've given me.

While it has its rewards, delivering a commencement speech also presents some challenges to the speaker.

You really want to say something profound, something that will make an impression on the members of audience and stick with them for years to come. But you know that their minds are on other things -- like getting that diploma and relaxing and perhaps even starting the celebration.

The comic strip "Shoe" once captured this dilemma perfectly.

If you read the strip, you're familiar with the "Perfessor" and his nephew Skyler.

In this installment, Professor says to Skyler: "What should I say to your class in my commencement address?"

The younger bird answers: "Oh, I don't know. . .

"Draw on your years of experience, regale us with a few stories from a full and vibrant life . . .

"Speak to us of the challenges ahead, the lessons you've learned, the advice you have for our generation . . .

"And keep it around four minutes."

Well, obviously, with that kind of limitation on him, Uncle 'Fessor didn't get to do much regaling!

And although I don't believe anyone is timing my remarks today, I'll take a cue from his situation and avoid the temptation to offer a lot of advice.

What I will do, however, is share with you a few casual observations that I hope will be of some value as you leave this part of your lives behind.

I'll use as my point of departure a story told by syndicated Chicago columnist Bob Greene several years ago.

It seems that in 1987, a young man named Mike Hayes of Rochelle, Illinois, got in touch with Greene. He was a high school senior, about to go to college, but he wasn't sure where the money was going to come from. He wasn't poor, but at the same time, his folks didn't have that kind of cash just lying around, either.

So Mike had an idea. What if Bob Greene asked all his readers to send Mike a penny? After all, as he explained to Greene, a penny doesn't mean anything to anyone. It just doesn't count.

How many pennies did Mike need? Well, he figured about 2.8 million pennies -- \$28 thousand dollars -- ought to do the trick.

I suppose Bob Greene thought the idea was so crazy it just might work. At the very least, it was goofy enough that it might bring a smile to his readers. So he wrote a column about Mike. And lo and behold, the pennies started pouring in to Rochelle, Illinois.

Four years later, Mike Hayes graduated from the University of Illinois -- completely financed thanks to a few million total strangers from all 50 states, from Mexico and Canada, from Europe and Japan.

I know there are more than a few of you parents out there right now slapping your foreheads and wondering why your kid didn't think of something like that!

I can't answer that for you. And I can't tell you what put that hare-brained idea into Mike Hayes' head.

But something did -- and the darndest thing was . . . it worked.

Now, there may be some folks who would question what kind of lesson we can learn from that story. They might argue that Mike didn't really do anything to earn those pennies -- he just came up with a clever idea.

But I like this story. I like it because I believe it holds some valuable messages about the kind of attitude we ought to assume as we make our way through this life.

There are several that immediately spring to mind.

One of them might deal with a fundamental approach to problem-solving and the importance of breaking down a large task into smaller components. That's a solid technique that we all would do well to remember.

Another might be the value of believing in yourself enough to take a risk with a creative idea, even if it seems risky and unrealistic -- for self-confidence is clearly an attribute that is basic to success, whatever an individual chooses to do.

Or maybe there's a lesson to be learned in this story about the little things in life and how we should be careful not to underestimate their importance.

These are all very valuable concepts, and any of them might make the basis for a solid speech.

But today, I'd like to zero in on the real reason I like this story.

I like it because of what it says about how we ought to view the millions of people who happen to be living on this planet with us.

Specifically, this story offers us some very real food for thought about not just our faith in the basic goodness of our fellow human beings -- but our willingness to appeal to their better natures, to tap into the innate good that I believe is in all of us.

Most of us understand that the human psyche is a curious blend of positive and negative traits. I seem to recall a cartoon character with an angel sitting on one shoulder and a devil sitting on the other. Of course, both the angel and the devil have an ear to whisper into -- and therein lies one of the fundamental issues of our existence.

Which shall we listen to? And which should we appeal to in others?

Within the past month or so, we have commemorated two historically significant events which serve as compelling reminders of this essential nature of man.

In marking the 25th anniversary of the death of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., we celebrated the life of a man who knew what it meant to appeal to our sense of fairness and decency -- who, to paraphrase his own words, was able to tap into "the content of our character."

On the other hand, with the opening of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, we remember with great dismay a leader who was able to twist that dark underside of human nature to carry out his grim agenda of persecution and death -- and we weep for the millions who fell victim.

The rise and fall of such leaders -- both those who have appealed to the nobler purpose and those who have brought out the uglier side -- have determined the ebb and flow of civilization since its very beginnings.

And, for reasons that I'm not sure I altogether understand, the infamous among them -- the bad guys -- often seem to make a greater impression upon the chroniclers of history.

It's true -- there's no avoiding the bad news. Every day the headlines bring us tales of new atrocities committed by people against one another.

We've recently seen the pictures from Somalia, from Bosnia, from Waco. They make us feel frightened and demoralized.

And, most terrifying of all, somewhat hopeless, and helpless.

In the face of this much misery, it's terribly difficult to keep your faith in the essential decency of humankind. But we must. It's the only thing that keeps life worth living.

And we must not only preserve this faith in mankind, but be willing to tap into it.

Mike Hayes believed that 2.8 million strangers would be willing to put a penny in an envelope, put a stamp on it, and send it to some kid in the Midwest who wanted to go to college. He believed that people want to do the right thing.

I believe that, too.

Look at the way we seem to be able to rise to the occasion during the most trying times.

I saw some of that first hand when I visited the devastation in South Florida and Louisiana a few days after Hurricane Andrew struck. And some of the stories I heard astounded me -- stories of people who had lost everything they had, and yet summoned up the strength to help others who were worse off.

And even in the depths of the holocaust, in the concentration camps of World War II -- in the face of utter hopelessness and despair -- people were capable of great acts of courage and unselfishness and sacrifice.

We also see our humanity shine through in other ways that, perhaps are less dramatic, but no less significant.

Over the past few years, I've been involved with a lot of charitable organizations -- organizations like the United Way, the Red Cross, and the Boy Scouts. I've travelled all around the company talking to people who are involved with these kinds of groups, and I continue to be impressed with the caring and commitment they display.

And most significantly, these folks are willing to back up their feelings of compassion with action. Because it's not enough to have good intentions alone. For good intentions are just that -- they have no meaning until they are translated into action.

The good news is that a lot of those intentions do, in fact, become reality -- they do trigger action.

If you're looking for statistics to bear this out, consider this: three out of four American households make financial contributions to charitable causes. And half of all Americans report personal involvement in some kind of volunteer activity.

Interestingly enough, the surest way to get people to help is to ask them. The same survey that produced the numbers I just cited tells us that about 85 percent of people who are asked directly to either volunteer or make a contribution actually do so.

So as you enter this new phase of your life, be willing to encourage that better nature in people. Because most of us want to do what we can. We want to be our best.

You need to believe that not just of the human race in general, but in the hundreds of individuals you'll come across in your lifetimes. People like your friends, your co-workers, your spouses, your children.

Once in a while, someone will let you down. But not often. Most likely you'll find that people will rise to the level of your expectations. The more you believe in them, the more you appeal to their better natures, the more they'll do to earn that faith.

This brings me to the last point I'd like to make.

And I'll return once more to the kid with the pennies.

When I told you that Mike Hayes got 2.8 million pennies, I wasn't telling you the whole story. Actually, he got more like 2.9 million pennies -- \$1,000 more than what he needed.

That could be a down payment on a car. Or new clothes for job interviews. Or a last vacation trip before entering the real world.

I think we'd all understand if he chose to spend the money that way.

But let me tell you what he did.

Mike and his family saved about 90,000 of the letters that arrived with the pennies in 1987. And he decided to give that \$1,000 to a college student from one of the families that sent him a penny.

This is what he told Bob Greene.

"I'm not going to be very scientific about it. I'm just going to stick my hand into those letters that we saved, start calling people whose names are on the envelopes I grab, and ask if there's a person in their family who needs \$1,000 for college.

"I'm going to trust them to tell me if they don't really need the college money. If they don't need it, I'll move on to the next envelope."

Herein lies the final point that is perhaps the most important of all -- the one that I want you to carry with you.

When you think about cultivating the better side of the human spirit, begin with the one you have the most control over.

Yourself.

To put it another way, always give something back.

You, the Millsaps class of 1993, are primed for success.

Some of you will be very successful business people. Some of you will be doctors and lawyers. Others will become teachers and scholars. A few of you will be called to devote your lives to the ministry or to full-time service work.

You've received a fine education. Millsaps has also offered you tremendous opportunities for spiritual growth and community outreach.

Now is your chance to put all that together and do what you can to make a difference. You may not be able to do a lot right away. Just do something. If the story of the kid with the pennies teaches us one thing, it's that little things can and do add up.

As Mother Theresa once said: "If you can't feed a hundred people, then feed just one."

But also remember what the gospel of Luke tells us: "Where a man has been given much, much will be expected of him; and the more a man has had entrusted to him, the more he will be required to repay."

Aside from the good that you may do, your own generosity and compassion -- translated into action -- will serve as an example that may ignite in others the same kind of response.

My friend and associate Jim Campbell, whose name will be a part of this campus for generations to come, knew a lot about giving something back . . . about turning noble intentions into reality . . . about nurturing the good in others and in himself.

He had a fundamental understanding of what it meant to have much entrusted to you -- and how to repay it.

Jim set a shining example for all of us -- and it's a lesson we all should take to heart.

Thank you for allowing me to share this time with you today, and I wish you all the very best for the future.