

Pride in Performance – Focused on Excellence

Wiley College Honors Convocation, April 16, 2013

Here are some of the things I know about Pride in performance, and being focused on excellence:

1. People focused on excellence are insightful, inspired, prepared and flexible because they know that excellence is both a journey and a destination.
2. If I am extravagant in my expectations, ambitions, hopes, and dreams, nothing shall be impossible for me. If I focus on, surround myself with, and accept nothing but excellence, I land at the feet of excellence every time but I must build success into the systems that get me there. Like Abraham Lincoln said in the movie Lincoln: "I am the president of the United States, and I am clothed in immense power." I'm not the president, but I am the captain of my soul, the author of my fate, with God and that knowledge and awareness, I can move mountains.
3. Sometimes I need to focus on being: being more informed, more articulate, more on top of my game, more well read, more prepared, more polished, more conscientious; sometimes we need to think more about our dress and behavior, how we carry ourselves. I must be more alert, pay closer attention to the details, I must be smarter than the average bear and I must be reminded that my education is not just so I can strut around and proclaim to the world I'm smart because I'm college educated. I was taught that my education was for my people, to make the world better, and not be an educated fool. Martin Luther King Jr., said the function of education is to teach one to think intensively and critically. Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true education.

Here are five thoughts I want you to remember:

First, every day you have a choice about what you do. It will be your decisions, not your conditions that make the difference empowerment guru Earl Nightingale said. You can choose to be happy, you can choose to be a victim or be victorious, you can choose to succeed, you can choose to excel. Every day you must live with the choices you make.

Second, nothing you know is worth anything if you don't know how to be proud of yourself. This line from activist and educator Nannie Helen Burroughs is such a powerful reminder about who you are and all that you strive to be. Be proud of where you come from – I come from the Douglass Community and my village helped make me who I am. So did the cotton field, the okra and squash patch...it's how I have come to this place. It's the foundation on which I'm built, it's the small quiet voice telling me don't quit – it's going to get better; it'll be the echo in your head from your grandmother who reminds you: it's the gale force winds that dare you to be brave, courageous, bold, powerful and influential. It's the reality that you have rights that must be respected, and once you understand that, you stand tall and cover every ounce of ground you're on.

Thirdly, you have to give up all your excuses – Jack Canfield, co-creator of the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series, says in his book *The Success Principles, How to get from where you are to where you want to be* says if you want to create the life of your dreams, you must take 100 percent responsibility for your life. That means giving up all your excuses, all your victim stories, all the reasons why you can't and haven't up to now, all your blaming of outside circumstances. And he says you have to give them up forever. He says if you don't like the outcomes, you can blame the event and lack of results or you can change your thinking, your communication, the pictures you hold in your head, or change your behavior, but no more excuses. Don't let anyone take your dreams.

Fourth – Dream big – really big. Dream a dream that's worthy of the investment we've made in you – the faculty, staff and administrators have given you the best of themselves – they have invested their best gifts in

you – dream a dream that’s worthy of that investment. You can take us places we can only dream of – young women... young men, show us what smart, successful, thoughtful, focused on excellence looks like. I recently saw August Wilson’s *Seven Guitars* and the new Jackie Robinson movie “42”. They gave us hope, they gave us something and someone to look up to. We want to take pride in your performance, we want to bask in your glow. Young people build relationships, be a hero, mentor, and lavish your love on the world. Bishop T. D. Jakes puts it this way: pour your success into someone else. Success is not success without a successor. Encourage one another – publishing guru Michael Hyatt asked the question one week in his blog that continues to haunt me: when people leave you, do they feel smaller or taller? Only you can answer that question – do you lift as you climb, or is it your job to step on the folks on the bottom as you head to the top? Smaller or taller?

Finally, give and do your best because it matters. When every person does, this is where the pride in performance comes, this is where the excellence shines everywhere we go. You know when you’ve done good work and when you’ve thrown it together and I promise you your professors do too. Do your own work and don’t settle for less than you deserve. My friends, it is not enough to earn honors, you must live with honor and integrity.

I believe everything we need to change the world, turn it upside down and then right side up, is in this room. Let us live into our greatness. Tonight I close with the immortal words of two fairly different but distinct people: first from Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays, longtime president of Morehouse College. He says: wars may never cease, but we must continue to strive to eliminate them. We may not abolish poverty, but we must believe that we can provide bread enough and to spare for every living creature and that we can find the means to distribute it. We may not eliminate racism, but we must believe the different racial groups can live together in peace, and we must never cease to try...and now from Dr. Spock of Star Trek fame: Live long and prosper. Amen.