

National Louis University Commencement Address

June 7, 2009

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President Pappas, distinguished trustees, my esteemed colleagues, proud parents, family, and friends, and you awesome graduates. It is such a privilege for me to represent the faculty on this special occasion. Your success is so intimately tied to our own personal and professional fulfillment. We celebrate this wonderful milestone in your life. Congratulations!

Two years ago, I attended a rather extraordinary event. It was my mother-in-law's 100th birthday celebration. It was extraordinary because during the two receptions that day with over 200 people, Alice not only remembered everyone's name as she greeted and hugged them, but could recall little details about each person — their birthday, their ex-spouse's name, and even the name of their favorite pet.

With the millions of people on this planet, imagine how very few have the rare privilege that Alice did on that day to be surrounded by loved ones and hear the words of admiration usually reserved for eulogies at funerals or memorial services. Sharp as a tack, clearly the beneficiary of good genes and a healthy lifestyle, Alice's strong faith and optimistic spirit served her well. She has been a wonderful role model for me on aging elegantly.

She has also reinforced for me one of the true paradoxes of life — that we acquire wisdom by affirming our ignorance. You know, all our adult lives we strive to become knowledgeable, competent, and skilled in our professional practice. We pat ourselves on the back every time we achieve a new credential, certificate, or degree. We applaud our achievements as though filling up the shopping cart of our accomplishments is the mark of an educated mind. The irony is that true wisdom comes from the admission of our ignorance, from being open to discovering just how much we don't know, how much we still need to learn.

Well, two years ago I also marked an important milestone in my own life. Exactly 40 years younger than Alice, I turned 60. As a gift to myself I took a week off during the summer to reminisce about my personal and professional journey. I read every word in the dozens of journals I've kept over the years; I looked at photographs that captured special moments along the way; and I organized boxes of letters, cards, and assorted memorabilia from the different positions I've held. What struck me was that my most significant learning experiences over the years have occurred when I was most receptive to change, to admitting my ignorance, and embracing the discomfort that comes from challenging my assumptions.

I believe the most vibrant people I've met in my life hold a transformational view of human growth and change. They see themselves as active agents in describing, interpreting, and shaping their behavior. In other words, they are self-mentors.

The great Roman philosopher Cicero is credited with saying, “No one can give you better advice than yourself.” Well, that is the essence of being a self-mentor. Self-mentoring means taking stock of the parts of yourself you relish and want to preserve as well as those you’d like to change or toss out the window. It is a conscious commitment to move toward personal excellence by celebrating ignorance.

The Latin American novelist Eduardo Galeano put it this way:

Soy lo que hago,
Especialmente lo que
Hago para cambiar lo que soy.

I am what I do,
Especially what I do to
Change what I am.

Being a self-mentor rests squarely on our ability to be reflective and be self-aware. It means knowing our needs and values, our strengths and limitations, our passions, and our idiosyncratic quirks. It means having a deep appreciation of what makes each of us a unique specimen on this planet. On a deeper level, it means knowing how we react in different situations and accepting full responsibility for our feelings and actions.

Being a self-mentor is difficult because it involves an ongoing assessment of our assumptions, beliefs, and values, and the mental models that shape our behavior and guide our actions. It also means having a clear picture of our internal motives — those things that drive us to say what we say and do what we do. Peeling away the layers of our motivations is not always a comfortable process, but it is necessary if our goal is to become a person known for personal integrity.

The goal of self-mentoring is not merely to see who we are and better understand ourselves today, but to envision what we might become tomorrow. It is a lifelong process — a journey of self-discovery, meaning making, and identity shaping. Central to this process is gaining clarity about what we perceive our purpose in life to be and how we define success.

To be sure, we live in a culture that bombards us with messages about what constitutes success — the size of our paycheck, the label on our jeans, the hood ornament on our car, the awards and recognitions we have received, or the degrees that follow our name. In the end, though, how we define success is a very personal endeavor. It begins with an assessment of what we want to *have*, what we want to *do*, and what we want to *be* in life.

- **What we have** includes our material possessions — our house, appliances, car, clothes, electronic gadgets, or stocks and bonds.
- **What we do** includes all our activities and accomplishments — our certificates and degrees, work-related responsibilities, our roles in the community, actions as a parent and partner, and the good deeds we do to make the world a better place.
- **Who we are** includes our inner-self — our soul, our purpose and passion, and our personal values.

Most peoples' definition of success is limited to the first two categories — what they *have* and what they *do*. Some devote a lifetime to accumulating material possessions that provide status and recognition. Others are more action-oriented, directing their energies toward achieving accomplishments related to work, family, faith, and community.

Having and doing are certainly important components of one's life, but we also need to attend to our inner-self, setting the personal internal standards we want to achieve relating to our purpose, passion, and values. When we aspire to show more patience, love, compassion, or other qualities that we deem important, then we are attending to the inner core of our being. In the end, true success is the alignment between these three areas — when our purpose, passion, and values provide the benchmarks by which to evaluate what we do and what we have.

How we define success certainly impacts feelings of personal happiness. How unfortunate it is that many people live their lives built on contingency. They cling to the status quo like a life jacket because they want things to be safe and predictable. They postpone happiness, telling themselves they'll be happy once the car is paid off, the economy rebounds, they graduate from college, get a promotion, or lose weight. The truth is life will always present us with contingencies if we allow it. We can be happy right now if we learn to value the process as much as the outcome and celebrate the small steps we take toward our goals. So I ask you...

- Is there something you've always longed to do but never quite had the courage to do?
- If you had unlimited time and resources, what would you choose to do?
- How have you use your knowledge, skill, and special talents to make a difference in the world?
- How do you handle adversity? Are you quick to blame others when things don't go well, or do you take ownership for the outcome of your decisions and actions?
- When do you feel most at peace?
- What do you want more of in your relationships? What do you want less of?
- What legacy do you want to pass on?

- What deserves your precious 1,440 minutes each day?

So you see, being a self-mentor is essentially the reflective process necessary to achieve the personal and professional identity to which you aspire. It is about taking charge of your life from the inside out.

The interesting thing about self-mentoring is that the ground keeps shifting. How you answer these questions will be qualitatively different at different stages in your life. This is because the accumulation of life experiences that are a part of adulthood provide us with a different lens through which to view of ourselves.

You know the lyrics... "I wish that I knew what I know now, when I was younger." You don't need to be a superstar like Rod Stewart to understand the significance of the lyrics in his hit single. All of us have looked back on events in years past with a sense of profound amazement at our naiveté and narrow perspective. Age and experience do bring insight, however painful those lessons are sometimes. While we all take for granted that we change with age in our physical capacities and our judgment, few of us are really conscious of the subtle shifts in point of view as they are happening.

Regardless of how reflective we are, one thing is true. It is difficult to project into the future. While most people have hopes and dreams for the decades to come, few of us are able to project a future reality with any degree of precision. So in your role as a self-mentor, I invite you to think in the future tense. Virtually all the experts on adult development agree that there is a difference between getting older and aging. Heredity accounts for only one-fourth of the variation in human life spans. It is possible to qualitatively improve our lives as we get older, even as the warranty on our body parts may be ready to expire.

Thinking in the future tense means imagining that you, too, may live to be 100. You already know the recipe for healthy aging — a positive attitude, good stress-coping skills, a healthy lifestyle, and the good fortune to avoid falling victim to a pandemic disease or serious injury. Being a self-mentor and committing to self-renewal means staying at your best — body, mind, and spirit — throughout your life, each and every day.

So I ask you, what are you doing for the rest of your life? Sooner or later everyone's life gets a little root-bound. Like a drooping house plant that needs a bigger pot, fresh soil, and a little fertilizer to stimulate growth, so too do our aspirations, relationships, and careers. What we want at thirty is seldom what we want at forty or fifty. As our needs change our priorities should also change. The measure of a successful life is not what we have achieved at a single point in time, but rather our capacity to continue to grow, to evolve, and to become a more complete person.

Update on Alice. We celebrated her 102nd birthday earlier this spring. Although her mind was still active and her faith and optimistic spirit as vibrant as ever, her body was clearly feeling the wear and tear of the decades. Her frail body finally succumbed to the peril of pneumonia and she died last week. Alice has completed her journey on this earth. She has lived her life to be where she is today.

You and I may not be fortunate enough to have that culminating life experience that Alice did on her 100th birthday, but we can certainly live our lives in anticipation of this ideal. We can begin to make the changes in our life story to close the gap between what we would like to be remembered for and what we have achieved toward that end so far. This important day is the perfect time to step back and reassess your personal and professional trajectory. Being a reflective self-mentor will help you to remain proactive, to continually assess new options, and map your way into a future brimming with possibility. God bless you on your journey.