

OUR GREATEST CHALLENGE September 7, 2008

THIS TALK IS DEDICATED TO TEACHERS EVERYWHERE WHOSE GREATEST CHALLENGE IS TO SEE THE POTENTIAL IN THEIR STUDENTS - TO SEE PAST APPEARANCES AND CIRCUMSTANCES - TO INSPIRE AND ENCOURAGE THE NEXT GENERATION. I ALSO WANT TO DEDICATE THIS TALK TODAY TO MY ONE AND ONLY GRANDDAUGHTER KELLY WHO WANTS TO BE A TEACHER. SHE IS A SENIOR THIS YEAR AND GRADUATING IN JUNE IN TEXAS. I PLAN TO BE THERE TO CHEER HER ON. . . AND SINCE THIS IS GRANDPARENTS DAY, THIS TALK IS ALSO DEDICATED TO THOSE SUPPORTIVE AND LOVING GRANDPARENTS EVERYWHERE WHO UPLIFT AND SUPPORT THEIR GRANDCHILDREN IN INCREDIBLE WAYS. TEACHERS, GRANDPARENTS AND ALL OF US ARE CALLED AS EMERSON SAID: TO FINISH THE MOMENT, TO FIND THE JOURNEY'S END IN EVERY STEP OF THE ROAD, TO LIVE THE GREATEST NUMBER OF GOOD HOURS,.....

MANY CAN'T BELIEVE WE CAN MAKE MUCH DIFFERENCE IN THE OVERALL SITUATION OF THE WORLD. HOWEVER, WE ARE ALL TEACHERS AND LEARNERS, ALL KEEPERS OF THE VISION FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS WHETHER WE HAVE OUR OWN GRANDCHILDREN OR NOT. EVERYTHING WE THINK, SAY, AND DO DOES MATTER..

STORY: A VERY SUCCESSFUL BUSINESSMAN HAD BEEN FAR TOO BUSY TO STAY INCLOSE TOUCH WITH HIS FATHER. WHEN HE GOES TO HIS FUNERAL, HE IS ASTOUNDED AT THE CROWD OF PEOPLE THERE. AS HE BEGINS TO TALK WITH DIFFERENT ONES, HE GAINS A WHOLE NEW PERSPECTIVE OF HIS FATHER AND WHAT THIS QUIET, SIMPLE, UNASSUMING MAN REALLY CONTRIBUTED.

HE FINDS OUT WHY THE PEOPLE IN THIS FUNERAL CROWD LOVED HIM SO MUCH THAT MOST OF THEM CALLED HIM AS 'FATHER' - FATHER DIDN'T GIVE AWAY ANYTHING MATERIAL BECAUSE HE OWNED NOTHING OF MATERIAL VALUE, BUT HE GAVE THE GREATER GIFTS OF WISDOM, LOVE AND RESPECT. HE GAVE SUPPORT AND ADVICE THAT CHANGED THEIR LIVES IN DRAMATIC WAYS; HE SAW INTRINSIC WORTH IN EVERY PERSON HE ENCOUNTERED. HE SAID: IF WE DON'T BELIEVE IN OTHERS' WORTH, WHETHER WE REALIZE IT OR NOT, WE CUT THEM DOWN. PEOPLE SENSE WHEN WE DON'T BELIEVE IN THEM.

THEY SEE IT IN OUR EYES, OUR FACE, IN EVERYTHING WE DO OR SAY TO THEM. PRETENDING IS NOT THE SAME AS TRULY BELIEVING. PRETENDING TAKES EFFORT; BELIEVING IS EFFORTLESS - IT DOES NOT COST ANYTHING - YET IT CAN CHANGE PEOPLE'S LIVES.

WHEN THE SON WAS A YOUNG BOY, HIS FATHER TOLD HIM: MAKE EVERY MOMENT A SYMPHONY. TREAT EACH MOMENT AS IMPORTANT AND EACH PERSON AS IMPORTANT. DON'T FOCUS ON WHAT YOU SEE ON THE OUTSIDE, BUT ON THE PERSON WITHIN - SEE THE PAIN AND THE POTENTIAL.

JESUS WAS A MASTER OF THIS IN HIS MANY ENCOUNTERS. - HE SAW POTENTIAL IN MATTHEW THE TAX COLLECTOR - CALLED HIM DOWN FROM TREE TO BECOME A DISCIPLE. HE SAW POTENTIAL IN ALL THE DISCIPLES; THEY WERE SIMPLE FISHERMEN, REGULAR PEOPLE - MANY LOOKED DOWN UPON BY SOCIETY. HE LOOKED AT THEIR HEARTS AND POTENTIAL, NOT THEIR STATUS IN THE SOCIETY OF THE TIME.

A TRUE STORY

A lady in a faded gingham dress and her husband, dressed in a homespun threadbare suit, stepped off the train in Boston, and walked timidly, without an appointment, into the outer office of the President of Harvard University. The secretary could tell in a moment that such backwoods, country hicks had no business at Harvard. "We want to see the president," the man said softly. "He'll be busy all day," the secretary informed them. "We'll wait," the lady replied. For hours, the secretary ignored them, hoping that the couple would finally become discouraged and go away. They didn't and the secretary grew frustrated and finally decided to disturb the president, even though it was a chore she always regretted. "Maybe if you see them for a few minutes, they'll leave," she said to him. He sighed in exasperation and nodded. Someone of his importance obviously didn't have the time to spend with them, but he didn't like the idea of gingham dresses and homespun suits cluttering up his outer office. The president, stern faced and with dignity, stood before the couple. The lady told him, "We had a son who attended Harvard for one year. He loved Harvard. He was happy here. But about a year ago, he was accidentally killed. My husband and I would like to erect a memorial to him, somewhere on campus." The president wasn't touched.... He was shocked. "Madam," he said, gruffly, "we can't put up a statue for every person who attended Harvard and died. If we did, this place would look like a cemetery." "Oh, no," the lady explained quickly. "We don't want to erect a statue. We thought we would like to give a building to Harvard." The president rolled his eyes. He glanced at the gingham dress and homespun suit, then exclaimed, "A building! Do you have any earthly idea how much a

building costs? We have over seven and a half million dollars in the physical buildings here at Harvard." For a moment the lady was silent. The president was pleased. Maybe he could get rid of them now. The lady turned to her husband and said quietly, "Is that all it costs to start a university? Why don't we just start our own?" Her husband nodded. The president's face wilted in confusion and bewilderment. Mr. and Mrs. Leland Stanford got up and walked away, traveling to Palo Alto, California where they established the university that bears their name, Stanford University, a memorial to a son that Harvard no longer cared about. You can easily judge the character of others by how they treat those who they think can do nothing for them ----

SO THE QUESTION FOR ALL OF US BECOMES: "HOW MANY PEOPLE DO I DISMISS FROM MY LIFE BECAUSE I AM NOT WILLING TO LOOK BEYOND THEIR STATUS, THEIR AGE OR THEIR APPEARANCE? HOW MANY LIVES IN THIS WORLD DO I DISCOUNT BECAUSE I DON'T LOOK FOR THE QUALITIES THAT MAY NOT BE READILY APPARENT?"

THE SON WHO WAS SURPRISED AT HIS FATHER'S FUNERAL BY ALL THE PEOPLE WHO CAME TO PAY HIM TRIBUTE, ASKED HIMSELF: "WHY DID I DISMISS MY OWN FATHER FROM MY LIFE?" AND ANSWER HE HEARD: "I DISMISSED HIM BECAUSE HE DIDN'T HAVE THE SAME AMBITIONS I DID. I DISMISSED HIM BECAUSE HE WAS DIFFERENT FROM ME!" I INVITE US ALL TODAY TO BE MORE MINDFUL OF THE BIBLICAL ADVICE: "DO UNTO OTHERS AS YOU WOULD HAVE THEM DO UNTO YOU." YOU ARE HEARING ABOUT WHAT TO DO TODAY - THE CHALLENGE IS TO GO FORTH AND USE THE INFORMATION AND INSPIRATION. THE BIBLE TELLS US: "BE DOERS OF THE WORD AND NOT HEARERS ONLY." START BY REACHING OUT TO OTHERS - THERE IS NEVER A LACK OF OPPORTUNITY TO GIVE LOVE AND ENCOURAGEMENT TO THOSE AROUND US. AND AGAIN, TEACHERS AND GRANDPARENTS HAVE A UNIQUE AND WONDERFUL OPPORTUNITY TO DO THAT - BUT IN TRUTH WE ALL CAN FIND OPPORTUNITIES TO DO JUST THAT. . . .

I WANT TO CLOSE WITH A STORY ABOUT A TEACHER WHO TREMENDOUSLY INFLUENCED MY LIFE. . . MR. RICHARD BLANCHARD. WHEN I WAS IN HIGH SCHOOL IN A VERY SMALL TOWN IN MICHIGAN, MY ADOPTED FATHER'S ALCOHOLISM WORSENEDED AND HE OFTEN STAGGERED

DOWN THE MAIN STREET ON HIS WAY TO OR FROM THE LOCAL BAR. I FELT SHAME AND EMBARRASSMENT ABOUT THIS & TRIED TO MAKE UP FOR IT BY PROVING MY WORTH BY ACHIEVING AS MUCH AS I COULD. MR. RICHARD BLANCHARD, MY SPEECH, DRAMA & LATIN TEACHER TREATED EVERY STUDENT WITH DIGNITY AND RESPECT AND CALLED US MR. OR MISS. . SO I WAS ALWAYS MISS IRELAND.

IN THE SPEECH AND DRAMA CLASS, MR. BLANCHARD HAD ALL OF US READ A FAVORITE POEM AND MADE A CONTEST OUR OF IT. I WON FIRST PRIZE IN THIS POETRY READING CONTEST BY READING JOHN KEATS' POEM: ODE ON A GRECIAN URN. I WAS ESPECIALLY HONORED WHEN HE ASKED THE TOP THREE STUDENTS TO READ THEIR POETRY A SECOND TIME SO THAT HE COULD RECORD THEM.. MY FIRST PRIZE WAS A BEAUTIFULLY ILLUSTRATED COPY OF THE RUBAIYAT OF OMAR KHAYYAM - WHICH IS STILL A PRIZED POSSESSION. MR. BLANCHARD AND HIS WIFE HAD A BABY SON RICHARD, AND I DELIGHTED TO BE ASKED TO BABY SIT FOR THEM SEVERAL TIMES. MR. BLANCHARD WAS ONLY AT MY SCHOOL THRU JUNIOR YEAR, BUT I NEVER FORGOT HIM. I NAMED MY FIRST BORN SON RICHARD AFTER HIM. MY PHILOSOPHY OF TEACHING WAS BASED ON WHAT HE AND OTHER WONDERFUL TEACHERS HAD PASSED ON TO ME: LOOK FOR INTRINSIC WORTH, TALENT, BEYOND ANY APPEARANCES. . . .AND TREAT STUDENTS WITH DIGNITY AND RESPECT.

WHEN TEACHING AT FERRIS STATE UNIVERSITY IN MICHIGAN, I- THOUGHT ABOUT RICHARD BLANCHARD , AND THAT I WOULD REALLY LOVE TO LOOK HIM UP AND THANK HIM AND LET HIM KNOW HOW MUCH HE HAD INFLUENCED MY LIFE. . . .

BUT ALL I KNEW WAS THAT HE WAS ORIGINALLY FROM NEW HAMPSHIRE AND HAD MOVED BACK THERE. I THOUGHT ABOUT WRITING AN ARTICLE IN A TEACHER'S JOURNAL WITH HOPE THAT HE MIGHT SEE IT.

ABOUT THAT TIME THERE WAS A TEACHER'S CONFERENCE IN BOSTON WHICH I ATTENDED ALONG WITH THREE OTHER FACULTY MEMBERS. WE DECIDED TO EXTEND OUR TIME & TAKE A SHORT TRIP THROUGH NEW ENGLAND WHILE WE

WERE THERE. I TOLD THEM ABOUT MR. BLANCHARD & MY DESIRE TO SOMEHOW FIND A WAY TO THANK HIM. SOMEONE SUGGESTED THAT SINCE NEW HAMPSHIRE IS NOT HEAVILY POPULATED, - WHY NOT LOOK IN PHONE BOOKS OF BIGGEST CITIES?

MY SECOND TIME OF LOOKING PRODUCED A GREAT RESULT. DURING A REST STOP OUTSIDE CONCORD, I LOOKED IN A PHONE BOOK AND LO AND BEHOLD, A RICHARD BLANCHARD WAS LISTED!

I CALLED THE NUMBER AND RICHARD BLANCHARD ANSWERED - THE SON I USED TO BABY SIT FOR GAVE ME HIS DAD'S NUMBER. WHEN WE GOT TO OUR HOTEL, I CALLED AND LEFT A MESSAGE AND AWHILE LATER THE RETURN CALL CAME, & HIS FIRST WORDS WERE:

WELL, JULIE MAY IRELAND, HOW ARE YOU??? HE REMEMBERED ME AND MY BROTHERS - INVITED ME AND MY FRIENDS OUT TO HIS HOME FOR LUNCH THE NEXT DAY. IN THAT BRIEF TIME, I DID MY BEST TO CONVEY TO HIM HOW MUCH HE HAD INFLUENCED ME. . .& HOW MUCH I APPRECIATED HIM.

WHEN THE LUNCH ENDED, HE INVITED ME INTO HIS STUDY - 'I HAVE SOMETHING FOR YOU, HE SAID - AND HANDED ME HIS RECORDING OF THE POEM I HAD RECITED IN CLASS ALL THOSE YEARS AGO. MY GOD, WHAT A GIFT! THE RECORDING - SURELY - BUT MORE IMPORTANT WAS THE FACT THAT HE KEPT IT ALL THOSE YEARS AND WAS ABLE TO GIVE IT BACK TO ME!

LESSON FOR US ALL: WE CAN PASS IT ON AND IT IS OUR DUTY TO PASS IT ON. PASS WHAT ON? - LOVE, RESPECT, INTEREST; WE CAN LET PEOPLE KNOW THEY MATTER WITHOUT REGARD TO WHERE THEY MAY BE IN SOCIETY'S PECKING ORDER. . .& WHEN WE DO SO, WE INSPIRE THEM TO BECOME MORE THAN THEY MIGHT HAVE OTHERWISE & TO PASS THE INSPIRATION ON TO OTHERS. BECAUSE I WAS GIVEN THAT GIFT OF RESPECT BY RICHARD BLANCHARD AND MANY OTHERS, I AM COMMITTED TO SEEING THE GOOD IN OTHERS & TO TEACHING OTHERS THEIR OWN VALUE AND POTENTIAL. IN UNITY TERMS IT BOILS DOWN TO: I BEHOLD THE CHRIST IN YOU - HERE THE LIFE OF GOD I SEE. . . I CAN SEE A GREAT PEACE TOO; I CAN SEE YOU

**WHOLE AND FREE.. I CAN SEE GOD'S LOVE EXPRESSED; I
CAN SEE YOU FULL OF POWER.. I CAN SEE YOU EVER
BLESSED; SEE CHRIST IN YOU HOUR BY HOUR. I BEHOLD
THE CHRIST IN YOU;
I CAN SEE THAT PERFECT ONE, BLESSED BY GOD IN ALL
YOU DO; I CAN SEE GOD'S WORK IS DONE.
AND I CAN SEE YOU SHARING THE POWER OF YOUR INNER
CHRIST WITH EVERYONE YOU ENCOUNTER. . . .AND SO IT IS.**