

Southern Utah University

Commencement 2005

Renee West-Norton, Speaker

Well, good morning—I think it still is morning. I have to tell you, a couple of months ago President Bennion called me and said “If you’re not doing anything on May 7th, we’d like for you to stop by and speak to some of the students and their family members.” He sort of undersold this just a touch. However, it is an honor to be here today.

I want to speak to the graduates and tell you that I’m as excited as you are, your family members, your parents, all the people that are here with you today. They are so proud of you. You see, today represents a celebration of your great accomplishment and this is an accomplishment that is made up, as you heard earlier from Sheri, of years of hard work--many, many hours of dedication, homework, and studying. Your family is here to celebrate with you today. I can guarantee that this not only marks a milestone for you, but it marks a milestone for them as well. It doesn’t matter if you are the first college graduate they are celebrating or the tenth, I can guarantee that their hearts are filled with pride, joy and at least in a couple of cases, relief, over this event. You know it’s been said that timing is everything and I think this would be a pretty good time to ask for money if I were you.

When President Bennion invited me to speak today I was both honored and overwhelmed. It’s a tremendous responsibility to address an audience as distinguished as the one that’s gathered here today. Can you imagine being asked to speak at precisely the moment when everything meaningful has already been said? Well, I am here today and honored to be considered capable of addressing this audience. Being a pretty good student myself, I did probably what most of you would do in a situation like this; I went to the internet to look at examples of what people had said in their commencement addresses. You would do this, right? Here’s what I found. Almost all of the commencement addresses that I could find on the internet were delivered by really famous people. I began to imagine all of the famous people that President Bennion contacted and was turned down by before he turned to me in desperation. Then panic began to set in. I wondered what in the world could I, a middle-aged mother of three, offer this audience. Well, feeling that pressure, I plan to keep this pretty short. I know you will be happy to hear that.

I really only have a couple of points...hang on you’re not going to get off that easy. I am going to give you my key points right now so that you can be sure and take these away with you if you don’t hear anything else that I have to say today. Please remember this; the first point that I want to make today is that you can have any life that you can imagine. Any life you can imagine.

The second point is that your ability to bring leadership to your life will determine your success. You may wish I would stop right here, but I’ve been given twenty minutes and I intend to take at least ten of those minutes so bear with me if you will.

I consider myself to be a late bloomer--as a young adult I wasn't focused. I didn't know what I wanted to be when I grew up. In fact, the truth really is, I didn't even know what was possible for me to be. Some of you may relate to that. I was frightened by the weight of grown-up pressures--things like mortgages, health insurance and the reality of not having summers off. I still haven't gotten over that. I guess I am about twenty-five years into what I would call my official adulthood and if you were to look at the first fifteen years of my career, you would wonder if I was even employable. The last ten years I think I've made up for lost time. As you heard in my introduction, I am an executive with the MGM Mirage Corporation and I'm happy to tell you that it's both a company and a job that I dearly love. But, in preparing for this speech, it gave me an opportunity to really take a look at my career, as well as the careers of others, and I asked this question of myself. I'm sure this is a question that's weighing on some of your minds as well. "What is it that accounts for success?" Are there behaviors, traits or qualities that will guarantee a successful life? For example, is success a byproduct of intellect? Well, not according to studies conducted at some of the finest universities in this country. They tell us there really isn't a long-term correlation between good grades and long-term success. I know some of you are saying "Yes! There's hope for me."

It might interest you to know that in the past century some of the people that we consider great leaders haven't been the best students. For example, did you know that Winston Churchill failed Latin—twice. John F. Kennedy earned C's as an undergraduate at Harvard, and while Franklin Roosevelt did manage to pass the bar exam, he failed to graduate from Columbia Law School. So if education isn't the key, maybe success is just a byproduct of good luck and timing. Well, that could be the case, but it is hardly a reason for you to sit back and wait for good fortune to come your way. I would assert that good luck already has come your way. Listen to what Harvard Business School professor, Henry Riling, says about luck, "If you've received good genes, which you have; if you've had a decent education, which you've have; if you've had some mentors or people who cared about you and gave you some good advice, which I know this university provides in abundance; and you've lived in this country which affords more opportunity than just about any society in existence; and you were born in this era, not the middle ages; well then, you've already had more than your fair quota of good luck."

You see luck is already on your side, and as for timing, there is never a better time to be entering the job market than today. There are regional and global markets opening up every single day. Technological advances are taking productivity to record highs and unemployment, especially in our part of the country, is enjoying record lows. Las Vegas, the city that I call home, is enjoying an economic boom unlike anything I have seen in my lifetime. 5,000 new residents move to Las Vegas every single month. Real estate values in our city have doubled in the last three years. Timing is definitely on your side, ladies and gentlemen.

Now, no matter what you think of Las Vegas, it makes a really good metaphor for my next point. First of all, short term wins and losses in your life must be kept in perspective. There may be times that you're going to win a few bets and times you are going to lose a few bets. There are also going to be times when you want to fold your

hand completely. But remember this, over time the house wins. You hold the cards in your hands and no matter how far you are into the game, it is helpful to understand what factors, besides intelligence, luck and timing, do produce success. You see, success is more than how you performed academically; more than your first job--or two or three; more than being in the right place at the right time. Success, ladies and gentlemen, is in first knowing what you want.

That means that you must decide for yourself what a successful life will be for you. And while it may sound easy, this is more difficult than anything that you will have done in school--but it is the most important thing that you will ever do. There's no template to follow, no curriculum to read, and you're going to have to set aside what your friends expect, maybe even what your parents demand. Forget about the messages that the media have bombarded you with, about what it takes to be successful. Begin with the most terrifying thing of all--a blank canvas. Then answer the question, "What will my life be?" How will I be remembered? Today, sitting on my desk, I have two little stones. Each of those stones is engraved with a single word. The larger stone has the word "Imagine" on it, the smaller stone has the word "Create." Those two words have made a great difference in my life. You see, what I know now that I didn't know when I was a young adult, is simply this: "If you can imagine it, you have the power to create it." And so your task is to be the artist, to simply be yourself. Think back and remember when you were in grade school; when you could still hear the sound of your own voice in your head; when you were too young, too uniformed, or simply too fantastic to know that you were supposed to take on the ideas of those around you.

We parents forget our way sometimes too, and I say this as a deeply-committed and often- flawed mother of three. But we're only human and over the years we learn to want things for you that maybe you didn't want for yourself--the lead in the play, starting position on the field. Maybe it was the straight and narrow path that could have been right for us, but maybe would have led you absolutely nowhere. And sometimes we wanted those things because we were convinced it would make your life better, or easier, or maybe it was just us imposing our definition of success on you. So remember yourself from the days when you were younger and rougher and a little more likely to color outside of the lines, and give up the ideas that this world has sold you about what a successful person is or does. George Elliot wrote, "It's never too late to be what you might have been." And as you sit before me in cap and gown, I suppose it's appropriate to note, it's never too early either.

I don't know how you plan to spend your days after graduation--there may be all sorts of wild parties, there may be a trip planned to the beach or Panguitch Lake. You may even have some ongoing negotiations with the library about a book you didn't turn in back in 2004. But, no matter what you expect to be doing tomorrow, you will also be starting a new job. Because tomorrow, ladies and gentlemen, you take the reigns as CEO of your life. Up until now, while you have certainly been on the Board of Directors, you have probably shared your decision-making with your parents, spouses, teachers and advisors. Well, whether the takeover was friendly or hostile, tomorrow you're in control.

Tomorrow marks the beginning of a new phase of your life, a phase that requires you to demonstrate your ability to lead your life.

I believe there are qualities and characteristics that successful people possess or develop that others, even others who possess greater intellect, do not possess. These are the qualities of leadership. Leadership is difficult to define. Some people think of leadership in terms of position or power. In reality, a title or a position is only a platform to address other people. Leadership--true leadership--really rests in your ability to influence others. And I also believe that with this influence, comes a tremendous responsibility to do the right thing. I don't know if it has dawned on you yet, but while you've been at this university for the last four, five or six years, you've been preparing yourself to be a leader. The quality of your life, the success of your life, is limited only by your ability to imagine what you want and then lead yourself to it.

There are five key characteristics that all true leaders possess. Let me share them with you briefly: First and foremost, all true leaders have character. True leadership always begins with who you are. How a person deals with the circumstances of life, tells you a great deal about their character. Crisis doesn't necessarily make character, but it certainly does reveal it. What have you revealed about who you are? Are you the kind of person that other people will want to follow?

In addition to character, true leaders know how to build relationships. The ability to work with people and develop relationships is critical to effective leadership and success on a number of levels. There was a popular executive magazine that took a poll of its readers. They asked, "What are the top qualities that you look for when you are hiring candidates?" I know many of you will be looking for a job, so listen up. What they said is the number one quality that they look for was the ability to relate to others. Now I am not talking about networking. I am talking about really relating to others, knowing people. If you build the right kind of relationships, with the right people, you can be a true leader in any area of your life. If your relationship skills are weak, your leadership will always suffer.

Leaders also have passion. Your desire ladies and gentlemen, is going to determine your destiny. You have to be absolutely committed. If you have a weak desire, you are not going to have strong results. It doesn't matter how hard you think about something unless you are absolutely committed and you absolutely want it. There is no substitute for passion. If you want something badly enough, you can find the power to achieve it. Your commitment today is a demonstration of that. The fact that you are here today is a demonstration that you all have that passion.

Leaders also temper their passion with a fourth quality, and that's self-discipline. It's been said that talent without discipline is like an octopus on roller skates. There's plenty of movement, you just don't know where it is going. You see, success is going to require individual effort, and individual effort requires self-discipline on your part. It requires us to examine the conversations that we have in our head. Now I know that this has probably never happened to any of you, but it's conversations like, "Oh it's too cold to

get up and go to class,” or you know, “I really think I could pass on the gym today.” Those are the kinds of conversations, and if you’ve ever had one like that, you need to understand that those are just excuses. It will take discipline for you to find success. Anyone who only does what they must, when it’s convenient or they’re in the mood or it’s easy, isn’t going to be successful. There will always be obstacles ladies and gentlemen, and some of those obstacles will be real. It’s only with self-discipline that you will have the power to achieve your dreams.

And finally, true leaders take responsibility. You see responsible people never say it’s not my job, not my place, not my responsibility. If they believe in a vision, and if you believe in a vision for your life, you will be willing to do whatever it takes to have the life you imagine. They’re driven by excellence and they are willing to work hard to achieve it. The ultimate quality of a responsible person is the ability to finish--to decide how you define success in your life and then take responsibility for getting yourself there.

You see ladies and gentlemen, you have all been groomed to lead, and in one way or another the fact that you are sitting in the chairs that you are in today means that you’ve already demonstrated all five of these qualities and characteristics. If you accept the challenge to continue forward in your life with leadership, to imagine the life that you want, you must produce. It’s your responsibility. So today I challenge each one of you to go inside yourself and to examine two things. The first one is, “What do I want?” In other words, what is your definition of success? And second, will you accept the challenge of leadership in your life? I started by telling you that the most challenging thing you will ever do is imagine the life that you want. What success is to you, you simply imagine. That, combined with taking the steps to create that life, will take great courage.

There will be days, I guarantee it, that you will be pushed out of your comfort zone, days when you are going to want to sink into the safety of the known. Will Rogers talked about the security of hugging a strong stable tree trunk. He also talked about where the wonderful sweet fruit is, and anybody who has ever had a fruit tree in their backyard knows that the very best fruit is way out on those skinny branches. Now if you want to hang out around the trunk of the tree, the overripe fruit will eventually drop at your feet. It may be bruised, and a little bit bird-pecked, but it will be there at your feet. But, if you want to take responsibility for your life, and have the very best fruit, you’re going to have to get out of the safety zone, get out on those skinny branches of the tree and grab the very best fruit for yourself. You see, there is going to come a day in your life, when you will ask yourself the question, “Did I sing the song I came here to sing?” Linda Ellis says it better than I can in her poem titled, “The Dash.” I would like to share just a portion of that poem with you right now.

*I read of a man who stood to speak at the funeral of a friend.
He referred to the dates on her tombstone from the beginning to the end.
He noted that first came the date of her birth, and spoke the following date with tears.
He said what mattered most of all was the dash between those years.
For the dash represents all the time that she lived her life on earth.*

*And now only those who love her know what that dash is worth.
For it matters not what we own--the cars, the house, the cash.
What matters is how we live and love, and how we spend our dash.
So think about this long and hard. Are there things you would like to change?
For you never know how much time is left, you could be at dash midrange.
So when your eulogy is being read, with your life's actions to rehash,
Would you be proud of the things that they say about how you spent your dash?*

We've been talking about what makes for a successful life, really, a successful career. Well ready or not, someday it will come to an end. There will be no more sunrises, no minutes or hours or days. All the things you've collected, whether they're treasured or forgotten, are going to pass on to someone else. On this momentous commencement day, I'd encourage you to spend a little time envisioning the occasions and the accomplishments that will comprise your dash. Think big; be both general and specific. But most importantly ladies and gentlemen, be bold.

I'll conclude by confessing that today is a profoundly important day in the dash of my life, but not for the reasons that you might expect. It's a great professional honor to stand before you and speak on success and achievement, and I want to thank this university for giving me that honor. But this day is a defining day in my life, because sitting way back there, is Travis Lee West, my oldest son, and our family's first college graduate. You will remember in the beginning of my speech my assertion that achievement takes many forms. My great achievement today has nothing to do with me standing here. It's all about my son--handsome, educated, full of life, sitting there in a cap and gown. And Travis, it's more than just your achievement in graduating--it's also that I can't think of a time in history that you've listened to me this long, uninterrupted. And that being the case, I shouldn't push my luck. Congratulations Travis, congratulations to the entire class of 2005. Your dash begins today!