

Speech by Dr. Stephen R. Covey given at the
107th Annual Commencement of Southern Utah University
on May 6, 2006

Members of the Board of Regents and also members of the Board of Trustees, Commissioner Kendell, distinguished faculty and staff, distinguished guests, parents, and above all, you graduates, I congratulate you on this mighty achievement, but I want to say a word about President Bennion. I was here during his inauguration nine years ago and I cannot express how inspired I feel to have seen what has taken place in these last nine years and to feel the spirit of profound gratitude which all of you feel for this man. And for his beloved wife Margie, who has been so faithful by his side. I love this man myself. I love his father. I love his grandfather, Milton Bennion; he was also my superintendent of schools growing up in Salt Lake. I'm thrilled to hear about the name of this new education building. So deserving. I don't know if I have known a more loving personality, one who knows more people, who cares so deeply and genuinely about more people and knows them by name. I can see that, meeting these students as they walked by this morning. His father was a great mentor to me. One time he said, "Stephen, your speeches are too long, too theoretical, too complicated. Learn to make one point, illustrate it, and then shut up." So that's what I'll do this morning. This is in honor of you President Bennion. Because of my love for you and for your father, I'm going to obey your father.

My one point is, make your mind up now, that you will make a difference. No matter where you are, and what situation you are in, make your mind up now, you will make a difference. I use a metaphor in my teaching of a trim tab. It's a small rudder that turns a big rudder of an entire ship. You can become a trim tab leader. Leadership has nothing to do with position. That's management. Leadership comes from moral authority. It comes from primary greatness. Primary greatness means character and contribution. Secondary greatness is prestige and wealth and position. Few have both. The key is primary greatness. Become a contributor. Contribute in everything that you do, and you will literally cultivate such moral authority that it will spread and influence, and bless the lives of countless people. You people have achieved something very significant in graduating from this extraordinary university. These people here and the faculty back here and the staff and all of the people

that have worked so hard on the boards to support and sustain and enable this great university to achieve its greatness, these are contributors. There are achievers and there are contributors. Most achievers also contribute, but the primary thrust often is preparation to contribute. Make your minds up, you're going to be a contributor. One of my great intellectual mentors, Viktor Frankl, in the death camps of Nazi Germany was being tortured, put under the white lights, stripped naked, and ignoble sterilization experiments done upon his body. And he discovered that between everything that happened to him and his response, was a space. And in that space he had the freedom and power to choose his response. He simply learned to change one question and it totally changed his life and he became one of the most powerful, intellectual leaders in the field of psychotherapy throughout the entire world. He changed his question from, "Why should I have to suffer so as a Jew, at the hands of these Nazis?" to this question: "What is life asking of me?" He would find a fellow prisoner ready to commit suicide and he'd ask them, "Why don't you?"

"Because of what it would do to my wife." That gave his life its meaning. He saw another prisoner starving and he shared half of his meager rations with that prisoner because his conscience was asking him to do that. It kept that man alive and it gave Viktor Frankl his life's meaning and he wrote that magnificent book, *Man's Search for Meaning*. I'm now working on a project of a vision of his to build a statue of responsibility of the same scope and size as the Statue of Liberty. This would be put on the west coast in the Puget Sound area on a specially-selected island. It would show a magnificent illustration of the interdependency of life. It would show one hand reaching down and lifting another hand up. A need for all of us to realize is that all of us are in the same boat. And that we need to assist and inspire each other, affirm each other. This will be several years in the making. It will contain also an international walkway and museum, so that every nation can contribute their cultural concept of how liberty and responsibility joined together to become a whole. That we are on this earth to contribute. To make a difference.

About a month ago I had the opportunity at a personal visit with Nelson Mandela. He derived his moral authority in prison, Robben Island, 27 years. Think on that. Twenty seven years, and then President DeKlerk, the President of South Africa, saw the writing on the wall of the evils of the Apartheid system and the overwhelming power of the intellectual conscience of humanity that would eventually eliminate it. He liberated Nelson Mandela and helped prepare the way for him to become the next new president of the new South Africa

with formal authority. I asked him the question, “How many years did it take to get over the bitterness and the feeling of self pity from the inhumane and undignified tortures and indignities put upon you by your prison guards?” He said about six or seven years. I began to see the goodness in them. I began to realize that they too were the victims of an evil Apartheid system and that it would not be sustainable. And I felt compassion for them and realized that they too had to be liberated, as well as those who perpetuated such evils and those who were victims of such evils.”

The father of the largest democracy in the world, Ghandi, never held a position, never was appointed. His moral authority was so strong and deep. He brought England to its knees and liberated 350 million Indian people, creating a new independent nation. Today there are one billion, one hundred million. I just went through several cities over there. Leadership is a choice that lies in the space between stimulus and response. Between anything that has ever happened to you. Between your biological DNA, your cultural DNA, and your response, is that space. It may be very small. Because those things powerfully influence. But they do not determine. You determine. Make your mind up. Let this college’s motto ring in your heart. Leadership Never Ends. Let its basic values teach you to set up your own mission statement, your own values. To write them down, to write them into your heart and into your mind. Do it as soon as possible if you haven’t already. After having such a marvelous experience at graduation where your achievements are being honored. See your life, basically as the life of a contributor. And that your character is based on those universal and timeless principles that have enabled this kind of primary greatness everywhere throughout the entire world.

I congratulate you with all my heart. I commend you. I affirm you--that you will become powerful influences for good. That you will be leaders. Ethical, moral, powerful leaders of choice who have this moral authority. I see it in your eyes, I see it in your hearts. Believe it deeply about yourselves. Regardless of whatever the social mirror or the opinions of others or the past have ever given to you. All of these people believe in you. Make it happen. Remember that in the last analysis, life itself is not about me and mine, it’s about thee and thine. God bless you all.