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Life Lessons, delivered for GVSU's 50th Anniversary on March 15, 2011

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Life Lessons  
March 15, 2011  
by Arend D. Lubbers

The invitation for this speech was predicated on the special and poignant address delivered by Professor Randy Pausch when his death was imminent. Because he was learned, passionate; a man with a young family, what he said and how he said it attracted deserved attention and became a model for programs such as the one tonight.

Though at my age thoughts of mortality play around more consciously in my mind than previously, I don’t feel the urgency felt by Randy Pausch. In John Irving’s book the “Life of Owen Meany”, Owen Meany discovers at an early age the date he is going to die. It affects his whole life which is relatively short, and focuses his mind. Professor Pausch had an Owen Meany experience, but of a much shorter duration. I am not in the position of the fictional Owen Meany nor the real Randy Pausch. If I was, I might say something quite different from what I am going to offer you this evening. Finality is not yet driving me.

The theme is set by Professor Pausch’s experience and profundities are expected. He faced death and he had to assess who he was and what was important to him. All the people close to him, all the people who shaped him, and the most important of his beliefs were focused in the event which sets our stage tonight.

His experience set me to thinking about the making of a person. How do we become who we are and what we think and do? We inherit our genes and live among people with whom we have experiences. The exploration of the importance of genes and human environment continues, and provides thought provoking speculations. As I reflect, I have knowledge of and memories of people who profoundly affected my life. Through them I was taught and inspired, my philosophy of life was shaped. Everything I believe has antecedents in the experiences I
have had with people or what they have written or performed. As my Polish massage therapist
says after he tackles a deep philosophical subject while fixing my lower back, “Think about it.”

Yes, “Think about it.” So much of you derives from others; those who live when you do,
and those who shaped the understandings and beliefs of the culture into which you were born.
And yet, with all the infusion from beyond ourselves, and the genes we inherit from parents and
ancestors a self-conscious individual emerges, one who possess and is limited by his or her
consciousness, who hold for himself or herself beliefs and emotions, and has hers or his own
thoughts. Our individuality is intertwined with others yet separate. As Pausch was about to
surrender his individual consciousness, he decided to speak from that sensitivity, sharing what as
most important to him; importance that reflected his lifetime accumulation of human interaction
and his biological and cultural inheritance. His timing was good, if sad, and he died with a
valedictory on his lips.

I am happy that I speak to you without his motivating compunction, but as I have
indicated I am interested in the relationships that make us who we are. If we had to speak as he
did, what is there about each of us that would shape our words? I keep coming back to the
people of our lives, and the profound influence some of them have on us. Their imprint would
fashion what we say. While you think about who made you as you are, I will share a few names
with you of those who create me. I use the present tense because I think we are all a work in
progress.

I had the luck of the draw when it comes to parents. They lived positively and productively.
They lived long, and they had sadness in their lives. They were nurturers and they were
visionaries. They were close to their parents and to their extended family. What indelibility did
that leave on me? Their rock solid love gave me a sense of security that conditions my
relationships and helps me in times of failure and doubt. Their approach to life helped me find purpose in mine. They lived on an intellectual level that stimulated my mind, and a personal level that helped me understand trust. I not only loved them I admired them so much that I wanted to live my life as they had lived theirs, and I have been fortunate enough to do so.

Was there a downside? Well, in my early and more naïve years I thought everyone lived with integrity and trust was a constant human condition. One can become quite satisfied when one knows. There is a price to pay when one learns he does not, and I paid those prices on occasion.

Many have teacher stories, and I have mine. I don’t know what causes the light in the mind to be turned on, but often a teacher throws the switch.

Hail to thee, blithe spirit!

Bird thou never wert,

That from heaven or near it

Pourest thy full heart

In Profuse strains of unpremeditated art.

Like a poet hidden

In the light of thought

Singing hymns unbidden

Tell the world is wrought

To sympathy with hope and fears it heeded not
We look before and after
And pine for what is not
Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is fraught;
Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.

I was sixteen, a high school junior, in Miss Lilliam Van Dyke’s literature class. There were many treasures she revealed to me, but Shelly’s “Ode to a Skylark” is the one that remains vivid in my mind.

I was made aware of how important words are to me. The words of the poets imparted meanings that I was ready to apprehend. They made me aware of my emotions, deeper and more wide-ranging. The direction of my literary and emotional life was set on course. The reading and listening during that semester contributed to the nature and definition of my mind. It is probably too much to ascribe to a single teacher and a single course the self-awareness I have just described, but perhaps not.

While I was in graduate school my favorite professor from college days came to a nearby theological seminary to lecture. In college he was the key that opened the door to Descartes, Kant, Kirkegaard, Hegel, Heidegger, and on and on. All the penetrations of reality intrigued me. He was a person who enlarged my intellect. His lectures at the seminary, hazily remembered after fifty-five years, made a point that surprised me from this master of philosophical and theological systems. Reality is discovered in personality and relationships between and amongst individuals. I suppose he was explaining to these Christian seminarians, that their common religion had more to do with what Jesus did and expressed as a person than the historical and theological trappings that are attached to him. I was brought up on hymns such as “Living with
Jesus,” and “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” Certainly these catch the spirit of personal relationships first and belief second. The simple and sometimes simple minded faith has one interesting characteristic, Jesus is a friend. Read the daily obituaries in the Grand Rapids Press and you will see written out that many who have left us are allegedly taken immediately into his intimate circle of friends.

Whatever the truth of the matter it points to a deep subconscious understanding that we find ourselves in the personalities and relationships with others. D. Ivan Dykstra, my Hope College professor, is the antecedent of this concept in my pantheon of first concepts, and is responsible for what I am saying tonight.

I have briefly described intimacy with the second person in the Christian three-person understanding of God, but what about intimacy on Earth amongst the living? Who taught me that? After one false start I must say marriage has. Marriage offers a special opportunity for the mingling of two personalities and the best shot for growing self awareness. Many adjustments are required and oh, so many “overlookings.” There are no guarantees that it will work, but when it does, you discover how deeply bonding a relationship can be, how necessary one person can be to another, how contentment and happiness thrive. But, even when good things falter or have never flourished abundantly in a marriage, we often see a sometimes hostile dependency that is anchored in emotional concrete. All prove my point that relationship is foremost. By whatever lights that lead you to conclusion, marriage is instituted for procreation and care of human offspring. Our families emerge with more chances for happy, purposeful relationships, and we know those relationships often go bad. Whichever way, our lives are powerfully impacted. Marriage has not always worked well which the numbers who avoid it prove. I am not claiming that the self discovery which can emerge from intimacy is exclusively found in
marriage; that's where I found it. Between unmarried friends it may be found. The long standing religious and cultural disapproval of some gender intimacies should be reconsidered. If scriptures are invoked, any current mindset can be justified. Allowing people to experience and grow through commitment, long term caring, continual sharing of thoughts and goods, and also the satisfaction of a sexual activity while it is needed is as good a human condition as it gets. I don't think it should be denied to those who want it and can find it. That's what I find in the scriptures, and it coincides with my observations.

I will bring this discourse to a close with the description of a relationship that taught me in my professional years about ambition, teamwork, integrity, trust, and self-fulfillment. I will attempt to explain the relationship I had with the two speakers who preceded me and the relationship that that existed among the three of us. The positions we held when we retired started more than thirty years ago. What did we bring to the table? Each was ambitious, self-confident, dominant, intelligent, generally of friendly nature, possessed of definite opinions, and of distinctively different personalities. You will agree, I think, these are qualities of a leader. But they are not necessarily compatible with cooperative leadership. There can be a centrifugal force attached to them that accommodates only individual leadership. That did not happen to us. The three of us, each at our own time, decided to place his professional eggs in one basket; Grand Valley State University. Why were we able to do that? I answer only for myself.

These are two honest men. They don’t embarrass themselves by lying in an executive officer relationship. They gamed me from time to time, but they were honest with me. These are two highly competent men. Both did their jobs as well as anyone in the Nation. I am not exaggerating. It’s fact. The proof is what they left when they retired. These are two loyal men.
I entrusted them with my striving for success, and they never let me down. I tried to do the same for them.

In the professional/personal relationship I had with Glen Niemeyer and Ron VanSteeland, I learned and incorporated into myself some profound understandings. I experienced professional accomplishment that was dependent upon the relationship I had with each of them. Success was interdependent, and overcoming professional failure was always a team project.

We respected each other, but their honesty, competence, and loyalty elicited from me affection, too. I learned that I could be a demanding CEO with high expectations, and really like and be close to people who were helping meet those expectations. In retrospect I think that is unusual. It’s the exception rather than the norm. I think the substance and nuances of our relationship permeated the whole institution for its benefit.

The nature of our relationship transcended our individuality, and also contributed to it, and affected what really happened. Again we see in the interaction of persons reality is revealed. Explanations are often inadequate to assess the complexity and ramifications of a concept. I often said if 65% of the thoughts emanating from the minds on campus are positive, we are likely to treat each other better rather than worse, progress will be made, and the reality of our lives more satisfying. This is tough to prove, but it may contain that proverbial “kernel of truth.”

Whatever happened, Glen, Ron, and I threw in our lot with Grand Valley, mixing all our ambitions, self confidence, talents, and personality in the university’s pot, and I think we came out the fortunate ones. I think our lives made a positive difference.

There are more people who deserve a place in this narrative, but time is up. I have spoken more personally than I originally intended, but I did stay faithful to the theme. Maybe I did include some things I would say if I wasn’t going to be here tomorrow.