

Leadership Tomorrow: Valedictorian Speech

June 23, 2009, A. Pinto da Silva

I. Giving Thanks

The word “thanks” has its roots in two words: “thought” and “gratitude”. Tonight we are filled with both. For tonight, we are not just celebrating the 26th graduating class of Leadership Tomorrow, we are celebrating the successful germination of an idea – an idea filled with hope, promise and generosity. An idea that has required the active care and participation of this community for over a generation. Leadership Tomorrow is built on the idea that to fulfill the rich and complex promise of the Puget Sound region, not only was it necessary to foster a strong community of leaders, but it was essential to build a leadership community. A community enriched by diversity – of thought, background, opinion, race, gender and personal history. A community which retires “Seattle Nice” in favor of full, courageous, authentic engagement. A community in which the beacon of hope shines brightly not just for its own citizens, but serves as a guiding light telegraphing possibility for our nation and for our global community.

So to Jan Levy, Barbara Thal Schroeder, Susan Myslewski, Richard Humphries, Bob Ness, the members of Curriculum Committee, the board of Leadership Tomorrow and the many others who have made this program possible...we want to extend our deepest and sincerest thanks for the thought, care and love you have invested in this wonderful program.

But thank yous are not enough...Some might say that cash does it better... *Much* better...

As a reflection of our appreciation to the commitment and work of the LT community, the class of LT '09 wishes to present a check in the amount of \$5,430.

LT'10, watch and learn....

II. LT 2009, Our Journey

Each moment shares three simultaneous characteristics: the echoes of the past, the fleeting certainty of the present, and the magnetic lure of the future. So too did the moment we each decided to apply to Leadership Tomorrow. Forming our first initial bond, the moment reached invisibly across the diversity of our collective experience, binding us with a spark of hope and a dose of humility. The hope that we had something to offer and the humility to recognize that we did not yet have all the tools we needed to foster the richer engagement we envisioned.

We yearned for the chance to grow.

And so it was, that on our 1st day at Silverdale, we brought with us three things: our past experiences, our present willingness to engage, and our hope in a brighter future. Oh – and one more thing. Tucked in our duffel bags and briefcases was a nice, big, juicy, secret stash ofsocial anxiety.

Who were all these people? Would they see right through us? As my friend from Texas would say, would LT prove to be all hat and no cattle? As leaders, would *we* be revealed to be all hat and no cattle? How would we move beyond sizing each other up to seizing the opportunity for friendship and collaboration that lay within us? With the year stretching before us, questions loomed like headlights, propelling us down an uncertain path.

Amazing People

Throughout the year, we met some amazing, amazing, inspiring people. Although they were all deeply impressive in their own right, the most memorable were those whose work and values were inextricably linked. They each, in their own unique way, were suffused with a tangible enthusiasm and passion.

A few examples:

- **Ron Sher**, the Principal of Metrovation; Managing Partner of Crossroads Bellevue and owner of Third Place Books, with his grounded, brilliant, inventive openness, exemplified values driven leadership.
- **Jennifer Wiley**, the Principal at Franklin High School whose multivalent intelligence engages her entire school, from students to administrators to parents, like the masterful conductor of inspired energy that she is.
- **The Students at Franklin High School**, for the community they actively build by taking responsibility for creating an environment of accountability and growth.
- **Kathy Fletcher**, the Founder and Executive Director of People for Puget Sound for the perseverance, energy and commitment required to keep environmental stewardship at the forefront of this region's collective consciousness for 18 long, hard years.
- **Stephan Blanford**, the Executive Director of the White Center Early Learning Initiative (and LT grad), not only for the amazing work he is doing creating community, but for the inspired transition he made from the private sector to the non-profit sector while simultaneously completing his PhD.

But that's not all...Examples of inspired leadership also came directly from our class members. Allow me to embarrass a few of you...:

- **Jill Sheldon** for leading a fundraising drive for Franklin High School, raising over \$1,500 for badly needed school supplies.
- **David Gamrath**, for his caring, his enthusiasm and his ability to bring people together through genuine engagement, without attaching himself to outcomes.
- **Ronald Moore**, whose empathy and warmth lead us all in a campaign to give a beloved class member an important gift.
- And to **MyTam** herself, who encouraged the heart at every session as well as the moments in between, warming the room and connecting us all to each other with her intelligence and enthusiasm.
- Members of Team Two, Semester Two: **Jan Woldseth, Ronald Moore, Shane Rock, Karen Peterson, Anthony Caso, Laura McClintock and Brian Romas**, who modeled the way during our session at Crossroads, leading a brave conversation on courage and leadership within our own class.
- And to **Kyle Halmrast**, for arranging for us to be here at the beautiful Woodland Park Zoo this evening and for his generosity in extending Zoo memberships to the class of LT'09.

III. The Racism Retreat

Though each Challenge Day was compelling in its own right, the first true test for our class was January's Racism Retreat.

Addressing racism – in ourselves, within each other, within our community, within our nation – even in 2009, 45 years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, continues to be a raw, painful experience. Even with ample warning and within the embrace of a safe, structured environment, the 48 hours we spent together proved one of the most difficult periods during our time in the program. It was also the most generative.

It is easy to wax poetic about learning, but quite another thing to learn. To truly learn, we must become vulnerable. We must lay aside the comfort of our previous knowledge and open ourselves to new awarenesses that may challenge the bedrock of our self-understanding.

The retreat represented a collision of experiences. I feel pretty sure, that there is no one in this audience that has not been misjudged at some point in their lives. But the frequency and persistence of these misjudgments are experienced differently according to which identity group we are perceived to belong. For some, the cutting experience of discrimination is an occasional, perhaps even rare occurrence. For others, it is a daily experience made manifest not only as psychological and emotional damage, but also as real, physical threat.

For those of you who doubt that racism continues to weaken our community, depriving us of the energy, creativity and insight of millions of Americans, consider the following statistics:

1. As of September 2007, Washington State had 15,574 people in state prisons. Nearly 20% of those incarcerated are African Americans while Washington's total population is only 3.5% African American.
2. More than one in five blacks and Hispanics in Seattle lives below the poverty line, and the city's African American households earn about \$18,000 less on average than their white counterparts.
3. Just about any statistic that one examines related to American Indians serves as evidence that discrimination and prejudice are still prevalent today. It was only a generation ago that Indian children were still taken from their families and tribes and sent to boarding schools to assimilate into white culture. Poor health care, miserable poverty and substandard education are a daily fact of life for most American Indians. The suicide rate for American Indian and Alaskan Native youths ages 15 – 24 is 250 percent higher than the national average.

The exploration of racism required us to open ourselves to each other with a rawness that was visceral, difficult and clearly not within the comfortable boundaries of “Seattle Nice”. Did we have the courage to share our experiences? Did we have the willingness to be vulnerable? Did we have the willingness to express ourselves without the expectation of reciprocity? Did we have the willingness to accept risk? Did we have the willingness to relinquish control? Did we have the strength to enter into the unknown?

Sometimes we did. And sometimes we didn't.

There is no judgment in this. We are not always in a position to reveal or be revealed – for our identity, with its complex construction of vulnerabilities and strengths is a sometimes useful scaffold for deeper transformations and we are simply not ready to share. But to have been given the experience to try – to collide with each others’ contours – to catch glimpses of the caches and chasms of experience within us represented the first moment during the program to truly learn. We began to develop a real traction with each other based on honesty and vulnerability. We became each other’s teachers and we became each other’s students. We did not leave in comfortable peace with each other that day. There were no collective kumbaya’s of pat understanding. There was hope, to be sure, but there was also real pain, real frustration, real confusion and real anger.

But something else, perhaps more important, happened.

Through our fractures, we came face to face with America’s central challenge: How do we knit together an authentic community from the diverse threads that find themselves tangled together in the complex web of our nation’s history?

The poet William Butler Yeats wrote: “...For nothing can be sole or whole. That has not been rent.”

And so it was, that from the broken pieces of our racism retreat, the outlines of the community we were to become began to take shape.

IV. **Community**

In our modern, complex, virtualized, globalized world, what exactly comprises community? Is it defined by a geographic place? By time? By shared experience? By a brand of clothing or an alma mater? With all its component parts, the fundamental glue of any community is simply this: Our willingness to care.

Community and civic involvement require passion, sacrifice, commitment and the ability to extend beyond our center of comfort towards new learnings. It means agreeing to the hard work of change, within our communities and within ourselves. But it also means keeping an open heart to receive the joy and sheer adventure of embarking on a journey with others.

Places, like people, are in a constant state of remembering and forgetting. Framing and tearing down, tripping on the inconvenient truths of our past while propelling ourselves relentlessly forward. But if we are careful listeners, we can weave the lessons of the past with the power of the present toward a future that shines brighter than our current circumstances.

We carry within us the complexity and contradictions inherent in modern citizenship. Despite the confusing ties we share, one bond unites us. We are part of the American story. And I say this from my perspective as a 1st generation Portuguese-American. The idea of America transcends our country’s physical boundaries. To be American is to be a part of a deeply held global wish. It is a yearning for fairness, for equality, for the chance to explore the unique gift that is each of our lives, and to build community with each other without impunity. America was an idea before this land was given a name. And in the strange, inspired and sometimes shameful narrative of our nation’s becoming, the American story is unfolding. And we – each of us – are its authors, and this region is our book.

V. The Gift

A graduation represents a threshold – a moment in which we pause within the doorway of possibility, framed by our past accomplishments and look out at the field of promise shaped by the possibilities before us. Are we prepared to meet challenges ahead?

Far from providing us with a tool-kit of answers, Leadership Tomorrow provoked a series of questions.

The first set, with all their complexity and vital importance certainly require our urgent attention. How do we ensure a vibrant and diverse economy? How do we create quality education and learning opportunities for all ages? How do we promote the health and well being of our citizens without bankrupting our communities? The march of ‘Hows’ stretches on towards the horizon. Underlying them is a simple question:

Why?

Why do we do what we do?

To answer our ‘why’ is to align our actions with our values, clarifying our sense of purpose and allowing us to work together with a much deeper and more profound resonance. What do we value? As individuals, as well as individuals within a community? What do our own narratives tell us? What do they prevent us from seeing? Do we have the courage to hear the narratives of others? Do we have the courage to change?

Through our LT journey, our community became more vividly alive. The diversity of our experience made us aware of our interconnectedness. It underscored the importance of exploring discomfort, the profound and unending gift of listening, the gift of built trust, the gift of responsibility, and perhaps most importantly, it exposed us to the wealth of friendship within us. Through these understandings, we gained traction with each other. We are none of us solely right, but together, in this often complex mess, we find a rightness.

And so, we stand on this threshold together – one made more vivid and real in our current climate of crisis. What will we do with the tremendous opportunity to re-frame our values in a more productive light? Will we engage the process with courage rather than irony, with hope rather than resignation? With the knowledge that the journey to pursue change will be hard. It cannot be otherwise. But the headwinds tell us something. They speak to us like a river’s currents speak to spawning salmon. They tell us we are heading in the right direction.