



**WILLIAM JAMES
COLLEGE**

William James College Commencement Address

June 1, 2019

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Good morning and thank you to Capt Chris Bersani for such a remarkably warm introduction. Chris Bersani is one of the reasons I cherish my federal service.

First, let me offer my personal congratulations to my fellow degree recipients and to all of the graduates. Today I will offer some deliberate and hopefully not too self-aggrandizing comments that reflect who I am and what I think is important to care about in the future; using the deliberate themes of self-fulfilling leadership that I have studied and practiced along the way.

I have been working for 50 years, not counting my college jobs. I grew up in a large sheltered catholic active duty military family whose exceptional charity reflected my parents hard work ethic and post WWII belief in themselves and in America. I attended 4 grammar schools and 6 high schools and given the transitional nomadic nature of our lives, my parents deliberately sent us to parochial schools. So 16 years of education later, I emerged with a required double minor in philosophy and theology, and a double major in education and mathematics; since I intended to be an astronaut.

Then I rediscovered the basic horror of my life – motion sickness. If I even looked at a boat or plane, I turned a pickle shade of green. End of astronaut dream.

Then I fell in love and married a renaissance marine and since marines move around a lot, I taught school at the elementary and secondary levels. What I learned in the classroom was that teachers were not being prepared for their role in the central emotional lives of the individuals entrusted to them, and we needed to teach ourselves how to promote the mastery of social and emotional competencies and behavioral skills, because without them, the use of an algebraic equation was moot.

I worked on my master's degree in counseling as we turned to civilian life, became parents of my beautiful sons Matthew and Brendan, and I got the job of a lifetime. I was hired as the victim services and volunteer coordinator for the Harrisburg Area Rape Crisis center, as Pennsylvania became the first state in the nation to create community

based, feminist organizations to address sexual assault, following the horrific rampage that occurred when Pittsburgh won the Super Bowl. For 5 years I carried a beeper on my hip, responded to police stations, hospitals, courtrooms, trained hot line volunteers, and learned that searing trauma is serious, altering, nearly universal, yet conquerable. The federal grant under which we operated allowed us to hire a psychiatrist to help all of us through the professional and personal anguish of our work.

But after 5 years I knew that my rage against the perpetrators was too consuming and I needed to channel that action into advocacy. So I became a lobbyist for the statewide coalition of the states' now 36 rape crisis centers and co-founded the national coalition on sexual assault, worked with domestic violence shelters, changed laws, rewrote emergency department protocols and clinical practice guidelines to reflect respect and dignity for those individuals who were abused and assaulted. My mantra was born: the full and complete emancipation of women was now my established vision for life.

So born into a warm, tight yet disciplined environment and fanned by the liberating flow of feminism, I began to move along a path of greater visibility in the public arena. I kept reminding myself of the Churchillian charge to be courageous.....” Courage is rightly esteemed the first of human qualities because it is the quality which guarantees all others.” So my next order of business was to find and exercise my voice.....”of all the talents bestowed upon men and women, none is so precious as the gift of oratory”; so build your story, your view, your experience on ‘the scaffolding of rhetoric’ and practice, practice, practice. After thousands of public speeches, I still practice everyday.

As preparation for these remarks, I sought out the works and words of William James – every library in RI contributed to my quest and I scoured volumes on his thinking, his treatises, his family. The ponderous and profound nature of his work drove me to distill the essence of his achievement – rooted in broad artistic and scientific interests, unafraid to engage in the moral business of the world, expressing a controlled personal urgency, forshadowing the mind-body evolution, and articulating the principle of self-acquaintance. He was and is a model for all of us.

On may 15, Michael Gerson of *The Washington Post* wrote an article entitled “Can voters get fired up about decency?” The article’s premise rested in the work of William James, whose support for “the reign of peace and in the gradual advent of some sort of socialistic equilibrium” made him a standard bearer of communal merit. The article continued on “that all the qualities of a man acquire dignity when he knows that the service of the collectivity that owns him, needs him. ”where, asked James is the savage yes and no, the unconditional duty? Where is anything that one feels honored by belonging to?”

Gerson goes on to equate James' thoughts with the current environment in America and suggests that we need to carefully look at our own daily reactions and recalculate our personal and professional messages with a fighting faith – a message of civic passion, moral duty, shared sacrifice and national honor. In effect, as James put it, living a decent life that is the “moral equivalent of war.”

I found this article refreshing and reinforcing as the basis of my belief that for too long we have compartmentalized and separated specialized disciplines and James reminds us that we must unite philosophy, psychology and psychiatry in studious, simultaneous review because they are inextricably linked. To me this connection is unassailable, as the incorporation of all these disciplines results in James' goal of the consciousness of self. I relish that term as the ongoing leadership goal of personal identity, modeling the way, and achieving successful confidence.

My stalwart reminders of what continuously feeds my desire to stay competent, authentic and connected is that I read and re-read selected works... I mostly grew up on science/speculative fiction, existentialism and classic fiction; my second mantra is grounded in the writings of Robert Heinlein, through the wisdom of his fictional character Lazarus Long who famously said: “a human being should be able to change a diaper, plan an invasion, butcher a hog, conn a ship, design a building, write a sonnet, balance accounts, build a wall, set a bone, comfort the dying, take orders, give orders, cooperate, act alone, solve equations, analyze a new problem, pitch manure, program a computer, cook a tasty meal, fight efficiently, die gallantly. Specialization is for insects.”

I will also note three distinct pieces: *Love* by Leo Buscaglia; *Deep Change* by Robert Quinn, and *The Road to Character* by David Brooks. Unrelenting replenishment of my thirsty soul is the reason to absorb these and other works of art because they embed and refresh for my life the immediate and instinctual impulse to serve and to do good.

Whatever characteristics you carry, exhibit, and value have to be cultivated and renewed. Do not neglect that cultivation, but openly embrace its possibilities through reading, exposing yourself to different experiences, and refining your scope of humanity. The entire world had to recalibrate the definition of normality and the range of emotional expression after 9/11. You are the next generation of adults who will carry forward a new and sophisticated practice in integrated care, espousing the inseparability of the mind and body, and valuing the unique but common mental and substance use conditions that are experienced by many of our country's citizens and across the globe. We will see other events and individuals whose challenges will require a new and heightened level of conversation, a core understanding of individual intrinsic value, and a firmer belief that assisting others, walking beside them on their path is not a service, but rather a privilege and a blessing.

I spoke with the WJC leadership last wednesday. I will repeat what I said that night about leadership: seek leadership. In any and every sector; in any and every role you inhabit; raise your hand; say yes I want to try that; study people that you want to emulate; being an effective leader means creating and continuously strengthening an alignment , a cohesion, a coherence between who you are, what you believe, and what you do. Aristotle said “we are what we repeatedly do” and consequently he espoused that excellence is a learned habit. Leadership emanates and reverberates the seeking and realization of excellence – in thought, in work, in deed. And excellence will always reside in character. And by character, I mean the moral and ethical centrifugal force that guides you. And it is through your character and its expression that you will enjoy relationships that help you thrive and learn that the essence of caring for yourself and the rest of humanity is rooted in mutual reciprocity – exchanges of caring and respect and love as you plow the way forward.

Good luck to all of you and thank you.

Herb Brooks told his 1980 hungry olympic hockey hopefuls –‘great moments come from great opportunities....now is your time.....go out there and take it!’