

Dream the Impossible Dream

Administrator of the Year Speech 2005

By Olene S. Walker

Thank you, my friends, associates, and family. It is a great honor to receive this recognition from the Romney Institute, the Marriott School, and BYU. This is the institution that helped formulate my beliefs, my education, and my values. I majored in political science and upon graduation, I had to make choices. I considered law school, but determined I wanted to teach at the university level, so I pursued a master's in political theory. Fortunately, a marriage interrupted that, and after fifty-one years of a wonderful partnership, it was certainly the right decision to interrupt the career I started.

We have had a wonderful life together and have enjoyed many experiences, one of which occurred a few weeks ago, when we went to Minneapolis to see a granddaughter perform the lead female role in *Man of La Mancha*. After seeing the play three consecutive nights in a row, the music stuck in my mind. When I thought about writing this talk, I somehow could not get beyond the theme, "Dream the Impossible Dream."

I hope you establish an impossible dream in your life. Certainly tonight is my impossible dream. I've had the opportunity to serve in the legislature, as lieutenant governor, and as governor with such a capable, wonderful staff, and with so many great friends who have made a difference in my life.

Along the pathway to success, there is no question that many of you will come in contact with unbeatable foes, many of them of your own making- whether it is discouragement when you fail to find the perfect position in your career or the fact that a new city council is elected and you are fired as part of the political change. In the 1930s and 1940s when I was growing up, one chose to start with a company and spend a lifetime with the same organization. But, like the typewriter whose days are gone, today change is the common career pattern. Whether it is technology, a corporate restructure or political upheaval, transitions are continually taking place. You can either make such transitions of your continual vision of new opportunity, or you can fight the windmill of tradition and become victimized.

The world generally has accepted that there are many unbeatable foes- namely hunger, poverty, homelessness, and illiteracy. I hope that some of you students will have the courage to take them on, even if it is as a volunteer in your spare time or on your vacation. Many of you will find yourself in a position to make or help formulate policy. If you think only of solving the immediate crises in these areas you will always be fighting windmills, as Don Quixote did.

The world has a great need for individuals who have the vision to solve problems before a crisis develops. For example, we can make certain that every child can read, or we can continue to build prisons to house those who drop out of school because they cannot. At the Point of the Mountain, 65-70 percent of prisoners are functionally illiterate. This is why it is critical to look at

every individual child to make certain that they must master the basic skills to succeed- the future of Utah and where we will place our money depends on that. Public administrators cannot just point to schools and say, "It's your problem." Every mayor, every county commissioner has to realize that making certain that every child is well-educated is also part of their responsibility. They can encourage families to read twenty minutes a day with a child. They can do as Mayor JoAnn Seghini did in Midvale: give a book to those who are so poor that their children have never had a book in their lives. The joy you get from giving a book to a first grader who has never had a book will be something you will always remember. In Utah, with family priorities, community support, and individual dedication, we can solve any problem because people are willing to give of their time and money. There are willing to volunteer.

Contrast that with Haiti, where I had the opportunity to head a team assigned to report on the 1996 elections. I remember entering what I thought was a deserted building. Steps were missing, there were holes in the roof and floors, and there wasn't a single pane of glass in the windows. I asked my interpreter why they would hold an election in a deserted building. He replied that it wasn't deserted, it was their school. I immediately replied, "What parent would send their child to a school in this condition?" He said, "Listen: 65 percent of the parents in Haiti would give anything if they could afford the \$7 to send their children to this school." That is why there is a 70 percent illiteracy and 70 percent unemployment.

In the bay of Port au Prince is an island with more than 200,000 inhabitants. There was not a nurse, doctor, a clinic, or even a pharmacy when I was there in 1996. Certainly, those types of situations no longer affect just Haiti, but they affect the world. As we become a more global nation and know what is happening in every country, everything affects us. Eugene V. Debs stated in 1908, "I am not satisfied to make myself comfortable, knowing that there are thousands of my fellow men who suffer for the barest necessities of life." We were taught under the old ethic that man's business on this earth was to look out for himself. That was the ethic of the jungle, the ethic of the wild beast. Take care of yourself no matter what may become of your fellow man. Thousands of years ago the question was asked: "Am I my brother's keeper?" That question has never been answered in a way that is satisfactory to civilized society. Yes, I am my brother's keeper. I am not under a moral obligation to him that is inspired not by any maudlin sentimentality, but by the highest duty I owe myself.

In Sudan and Rwanda, thousands have been murdered in civil war. AIDS is killing thousands of adults and leaving thousands of children as orphans in Africa. Additionally, many children have AIDS as a result of their birth to HIV parents. It may be easy to say these are problems thousands of miles away, but they become our problems also. I hope all of you will recognize the needs of your neighbors, community, and state; I hope there are brave souls here who will also take on the global and universal problems that plague mankind. I hope, as public administrators, that some of you will have within your heart to work on some of these unbearable sorrows and will run where the brave dare not go.

In Utah, there is a rapidly increasing number of minorities. We can ignore the issues new diversity brings, or we can be visionary and determine that we must see that their children are

educated, that their families have housing and healthcare. As public administrators you will have the challenge of solving these problems.

Many of us are willing to step in to right the unrightable wrongs. When we were in Indonesia, on an assignment from the Department of State, we were told that if our driver got in a serious accident and someone was injured, just to fade into the crowd, go to the airport, and leave the country without even going back to the hotel for our belongings. We said we couldn't do that because it would not be right. The reply was, "You don't understand. In Indonesia, the rule of law is not fully developed, and justice does not always prevail. Often people take the law in their own hands and we have riots."

I hope that each of us feels the obligation to step up and right the unrightable wrongs, whether it is child abuse, domestic abuse, bullying, or corruption. We should also feel obligated to bring justice to areas where none has existed.

Justice has been a topic of political philosophers for ages. The central theme in Plato's *Republic* is whether it is always better to be just than unjust. The answer seems obvious. Of course, we always believe that the answer should be just. In Machiavelli's *The Prince* he claims there are times when those who are involved in the political arena have to do that which is popular, rather than what is best. Some of you will come to a dilemma in your political careers, where you will have to answer that basic question, "Do I do the right thing, or do I do the popular thing?" The world of politics is full of people who are willing to do the popular thing. The statesmen and stateswomen are those who continue to do the right and just thing, regardless of the political pressures involved. Machiavelli would argue that if you don't pay attention to doing the popular thing, you won't last long in government. I argue just the opposite. What the world needs, and what our state needs, are individuals who always seek after those virtues suggested by Plato: truth, justice, wisdom, and moderation. In the long term, those who seek the solution based on truth and justice will be remembered as true statesmen and stateswomen. Those who seek to be popular will be tagged with the negatives of a typical politician.

I trust all of you will have a quest to follow that star, no matter how hopeless, no matter how far. This brings to mind two BYU professors who helped formulate a new tax reform proposal for Utah, Dr. Gary Cornia and Dr. Ray Nelson. They served for untold hours. They did not get paid, and it took a great deal of time from their work and families. For all involved in working on tax reform- Keith Prescott from the private sector, Bruce Johnson and Pam Henrickson from the Tax Commission, and many from my staff who have of their time- thanks for serving, in what many would say was a hopeless cause. They fought for what they thought was right and what they thought would make the economic future of Utah more stable. We had many disagreements. We had many decisions we had to make tough calls on. We sought to broaden the base and lower the right, and we came up with a plan that will do that. Will it happen? I doubt it. Tax reform is not popular. It is not an issue that gets you elected, because any time there is a tax break, people think that's what is expected. Any time there's an increase, the public protests at your door. Because of the difficulty of this, sometimes it takes someone who follows the impossible quest with the belief that somehow, somewhere, sometime, it will all make a difference.

Being a public administrator is not always easy. Tough decisions have to be made. It is critical- whether you are in the private or public sector- to understand budgets. Norm Bangerter, who was speaker of the house when I was first elected to office, gave me good advice when I asked him what I needed to do to become an effective legislature. He replied, "Get to know the budgets." Whether you are in the private sector, a nonprofit, a for-profit, or state government, knowledge of the budget is essential. It was probably the best advice I've ever received. If I gained any respect in the legislature, it was because I understood the budget.

I hope that as you enter public service you are there for the right reasons. I would suggest to you that the right reason is to serve the public and to ensure that the community, city, county, state, or country will be a better place because you are willing to serve. I have always liked Margaret Chase Smith's statement, "My creed is that public service must be more than doing a job efficiently and honestly. It must be a complete dedication to the people and to the nation with full recognition that every human being is entitled to courtesy and consideration."

If your objective in entering public administration is to get rich, be famous, or have great power, I can predict right now it probably won't happen. There are many professions and private sector opportunities that will enhance your probabilities of accumulating riches. If it is fame you are seeking, be an actor or professional athlete. If it is power, find a country you can take over, but if it is service to this generation and future generations, you have chosen the correct profession.

Genuine politics- even politics worthy of the name, the only politics I am willing to devote myself to- is simply a matter of serving those around us; serving the community and those who will come after us. Its deepest roots are moral because it is a responsibility expressed through action, to and for the whole.

The *Man of la Mancha* song continues, "In the end, I know if I'll only be true to this glorious quest, that my heart will be peaceful and calm where I'm laid to my rest."

Through my years of involvement in the private sector, public sector, and with my family, I have found this is true. Money, fame, and power do not bring happiness: service to mankind and having a sense of integrity do. I have known many who have had wealth, fame, and power, but it hasn't brought happiness. On the other hand, people who are willing to place their priorities on serving others always seems to have a smile on their face.

It is important to understand what Marian Wright Edelman meant when she said, "We must not, in trying to think about how we can make a big difference, ignore the small daily differences we can make that, over time, add up to big differences we often cannot foresee."

In the long run, it is how we live our lives on a daily basis, how we treat others, the routine decisions that establish who we are and what our reputation is.

Emily Dickinson said it well:

If I can stop one heart from breaking,

I shall not live in vain,

If I can ease one life the aching

Or cool one pain,

Or help one fainting robin,

Into his nest again,

I shall not live in vain.

Don Quixote sings in the final line of *Man La Mancha*, “And the world will be better for this that one man, still strove with his last ounce of courage to reach the unreachable stars!” I felt that I reached my unreachable star serving as your governor. Each one of you can have that dream of reaching an unreachable star if you remember to have integrity and serve others.

Thank you.