

Romney Institute Administrator of the Year
Remarks by Jonathan T.M. Reckford,
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Thank you for that kind introduction, and good evening.

It is such an honor to be here as the MPA Administrator of the Year, and I would like to thank BYU, the Marriott School of Business and the Romney Institute of Public Service and Ethics for this humbling recognition. By small world, I had the chance to work for Mitt Romney and Bill Marriott early in my career, and both exemplified servant leadership and integrity.

I would also like to offer my congratulations to tonight's student award recipients and all of the graduating MPA students. As I look around this room, it is inspiring to see so many people passionate about making a difference in the world – and your efforts are needed more than ever. Thank you all for making a choice to pursue a career in public and nonprofit service.

We are living in a very divided time, but what I witness every day through the work of Habitat is that service is the antidote to polarization. When people serve together, they focus on what they have in common instead of what divides them.

One of Habitat's greatest strengths is our ability to bring people together, and our home builds have brought together young and old, executives and laborers, Blacks and whites, Catholics and Protestants, Hindus and Muslims, and even Democrats and Republicans.

Sometimes working on a Habitat project is one of the first opportunities people have had to interact across a growing divide with someone outside their socioeconomic class – so done with the right heart, serving can transform everyone involved.

You all have the opportunity to be bridgebuilders and part of life-changing work, and I'm so excited to see the impact you will make on the world.

Leading Habitat is my dream job, but my path was unexpected and bumpy. After college, upon realizing I didn't want to go to law school, I talked my way into a job as a financial analyst at Goldman Sachs – despite never having taken any courses in finance or accounting. I was working all the time and not really living my values.

I knew I had to regain some perspective and was fortunate enough to be awarded a Henry Luce Scholarship, which gave me the opportunity to live and work for a year in Asia. I arranged a marketing job with the Seoul Olympic Organizing Committee and, very unexpectedly, was recruited to coach the Korean Olympic rowing team.

I had been a competitive rower in school, and Korea had only qualified because they were the host country (think Jamaican bobsled team) – but we did beat the Japanese! Personally, that year of living in the training camp with the Korean coaches and athletes took me out of everything that was familiar and gave me the space to reflect on and own my faith as an adult.

In the following years, I earned my MBA from Stanford with a certificate in public and nonprofit management. Back then, it wasn't a mainstream view in business schools that we needed professional management in the public and social sectors, and I'm excited to see so much change in the decades since.

There weren't a lot of nonprofit career tracks, and I decided to learn skills in the marketplace to bring to a mission that mattered. That led unexpectedly to a number of corporate positions with companies like Marriott, The Walt Disney Company and Best Buy.

When the company I was helping lead was acquired by Best Buy, I felt it was time to make a transition. Another lesson is to pay attention to the white spaces – what doesn't show up on the resume, but where so much learning and growth happens.

I took some sabbatical time, and that was when I saw my life pivot during a fateful trip to India, followed by an unexpectedly long period of being a stay-at-home dad and volunteer. That led even more unexpectedly to a new role as executive pastor of my local church, before God called me to Habitat.

When I look back at my career and connect the dots, I can see God's fingerprints so clearly – even though I couldn't always at the time.

Theologian Frederick Buechner said you will find your vocation where the deep gladness of your heart and the world's great need meet.

I found my calling at Habitat – and as you set out on your own path to find your purpose, I want you to think about the following three questions to help guide you.

First, have you determined “who before what?”

One valuable lesson I learned very early is that, ultimately, your success will be measured not by what you have achieved, but by who you are – by your character.

The word *character* is from Greek and means a tool that marks, cuts or engraves us. Our character is our marking, and we show that marking through each conversation we have and each action that we take. When the inevitable storms of life appear, they reveal your character.

To that end, I encourage you to fight and reject three common cultural lies:

- I am what I have.
- I am what I do.
- I am what people think of me.

To do that, you have to anchor your identity in a set of values that transcend those idols.

According to leadership expert Warren Bennis, leadership is a three-legged stool of competence, ambition and a moral compass. All three are critical and hold each other in balance.

If you lack competence, you can't be effective. If you lack ambition, nothing gets done. The most dangerous is to have competence and ambition, but lack a moral compass to point you in the right direction. Destructive achievers cause the most damage in our world.

Another defining element of character is knowing where your personal line is. You need to decide in advance what you are willing or not willing to do when faced with certain situations.

My grandmother was a civil and human rights pioneer and a New Jersey congresswoman. Her advice, when I expressed a desire to go into politics at one point, was that you had to know that line and be willing to give up your job before crossing it. Otherwise, you end up going down a slippery slope, which may lead to somewhere you never imagined or wanted to be.

From the start of your life, your character is influenced by the people and events around you, which leads to my second question: "Who are you going to follow?" Picking the right role models is critical to shaping your character.

My grandmother was an influential role model in my life. Her name was Millicent Fenwick, and she was quite a colorful personality. She encouraged me at a young age to care for the lost and left out in the world.

Have you ever heard of the comic strip *Doonesbury*? The character of Lacey Davenport in the strip was modeled after my grandmother, who had a very imposing presence.

Prior to her public life, she had written the best-selling *Vogue Book of Etiquette*. In order to graduate to the "grown-up" table at her house, one had to be able to sit up straight, hold one's fork properly and discuss food problems in sub-Saharan Africa. Let me tell you, as a 10-year-old, that was both fascinating and terrifying!

Almost every time I saw her, she would challenge me to be "useful" and recite Micah 6:8 from the Bible:

*He has showed you, O man, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.*

That passage of Scripture and my grandmother's unconventional determination to fight for social justice were profound influences on my life.

They still are.

Another role model I had the great privilege of getting to know was President Jimmy Carter. President and Mrs. Carter began volunteering with Habitat in 1984, and sustained that for over 35 years, working alongside more than 100,000 volunteers in 14 countries to build, renovate and repair 4,390 homes before their retirement from public life in 2020.

I had the chance to observe President Carter with some of the most and least powerful people in the world, and he is always the same person, a mark of integrity. He has the heart of a servant leader.

During one of the Carters' earliest builds with Habitat, they led a group to renovate a six-story apartment building in New York City. In the group was a newly married couple, who decided to give up their honeymoon to volunteer with Habitat. The group was staying in the basement of a local church, which had set aside a Sunday school classroom for the Carters. They offered it to the young couple and slept out on the floor of the church hall with everyone else.

President Carter exemplified all three elements of leadership – competence, ambition and a legendary, faith-driven moral compass – which resulted in a remarkable life of service, and he will always be an inspiration to me and so many others.

This leads me to my third, and perhaps most difficult, question – “How are you specifically called to serve?”

You've likely all heard you should follow your passion. That's not necessarily wrong, but incomplete. If I had done that, I might have pursued a career in professional basketball. Only one small detail – giftedness! You also need a problem worth solving. So purpose = passion + ability + a worthy cause.

I discovered my true purpose during the trip to India that I mentioned earlier. In rural Uttar Pradesh, I spent time working with the Bhangi, the poorest, most marginalized group in the country. The only jobs they were allowed to do were hand-cleaning latrines and cleaning up dead animals. Without some intervention, half of the children in those communities were dying before the age of 13.

Seeing their living conditions truly devastated me, and I experienced what Clarence Jordan, the pastor and spiritual father of Habitat, called “divine irritation.” Often when people watch a terrible event on TV, they shake their heads, say someone ought to do something about it, and then change the channel.

Divine irritation is when you watch that same event, but it wrecks you. It's when God fills you with such a sense of urgency that you simply cannot look away. It's an overpowering call to respond.

That is how I felt engaging with the children in those communities. I knew God was reaching out to me, and at that point I realized that my purpose was to do something to alleviate poverty in the world.

Some of you may have experienced your own moments of divine irritation, but most of you probably haven't – and that's okay. I was married, had children and had been a corporate executive for 15 years before I experienced that moment in India.

Also, divine irritations that move us to action are not always “bolt of lightning” moments. Sometimes those nudges come gradually, so I urge you to pay attention to the problems that gnaw at you over and over. Those are the things that will move you to take action – and the things that will motivate you to make the world a better place.

However, pursuing your purpose won't always be easy. It most likely will require sacrifice – but it is worth it in the end.

After my experience in India, I came back home energized and determined to find an opportunity to address global poverty issues, but then I found myself going through a long waiting period searching for the right mission or organization.

Unexpectedly, I was asked to become the administrative pastor at our church. The people I trusted for advice thought that move would be career suicide, but my wife and I prayed about it and believed taking that job was what I was supposed to do. It turned out to be a wonderful opportunity to serve and grow, and it was just what I needed to prepare me to take my next step to lead Habitat.

Our paths are not always easy or direct. I don't believe God ever said anything about easy, just that it will be good. Joy is deeper than surface happiness. Choose joy.

So now, as you forge your own path to serve others, I ask that you keep those three questions in mind:

- Are you clear about who you want to be and the values that will anchor you?
- Who are you going to follow and allow to speak into your life?
- And what problem are you going to solve?

Focus on your character, choose the right role models, and relish the joy of discovering your purpose – no matter how long it takes or where it takes you.

In closing, I would like to offer you this traditional Franciscan blessing:

“May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships so that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people, so that you may wish for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done.”

And all God's people said, “amen.”

Thank you again for this evening's honor, and Godspeed.