

Awesome Journey

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(Remarks as prepared for delivery)*

I have to begin with a confession. For the longest time, I could not remember who delivered the commencement address when I graduated from Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa. I think I had been out too late the night before on the Dubuque equivalent of Welch Avenue, and so I wasn't paying too much attention. So today I face the same dilemma and have the same fear that every college commencement speaker must confront – how to be interesting and memorable to an audience many of whom are anxious to get out here this afternoon to finish their Christmas shopping or beat the snow storm home. And as I thought about what to say, I thought maybe if I come up with a catchy title – you might remember me – something like, “Ten Reasons Iowa State is a Better Place than Auburn.” But in the end, it might be most effective if I just told you a few stories. I chose the title Awesome Journey for my remarks in part because all of you have just completed what I hope was an awesome journey through your time at Iowa State and you're about to begin the next phase of your equally awesome journey through life.

Sometimes at the end of a journey you can look back to your years at school, particular teacher, a graduation ceremony, the graduation speaker, and recall something that made a lasting impression about the impact a school can have on your life. So I want to begin by telling you about an experience I had at the end of my diplomatic odyssey when my wife and I moved back to Des Moines.

We spent hours sitting in our living room opening the seemingly endless number of boxes of things we had accumulated during our travels around the world. Each box was marked with the name of a particular location where we had lived – Cambodia, Philippines, Austria, Vietnam, Washington, D.C. – and finally when we got to the end there was a small box marked Dubuque, Iowa, Loras College, Graduation. And when we opened the box, in it we found my diploma case which I had received at the graduation ceremony (but which had no diploma in it since I still hadn't paid my parking tickets at that time) the graduation program with the name of the speaker which I had previously forgotten and there at the bottom of the box was an old yellowed receipt. My wife picked it up and asked me, “What's this?” Suddenly I recalled it was for my shoes. I was to fly out of Dubuque the morning after graduation, to begin my State Department career. The day before, I discovered my good pair of shoes had a huge hole in the sole of the shoe. There was only one shop still open on a Saturday afternoon – it was run by a young immigrant from Eastern Europe. I dropped off the shoes and he promised me that they would definitely be ready on Monday morning – so I could pick them up and get to the airport. Well, as fate would have it, I was out too late Sunday evening, overslept on Monday and had to rush straight to the airport – flew off to Washington with just one pair of shoes.

Now about 40 years later, I was going to travel back to Dubuque, so I put the receipt in my pocket. When I arrived, I wondered if the old shoe shop would even be there, drove down Central Avenue, there was the building. Stopped the car – got out and walked over – pressed my nose to the window – looked like the same man, grey hair and stooped over. I went in, familiar smell, showed him the receipt – said you won't believe this but I left a pair of shoes here to be repaired 36 years ago. I know they are gone, but I thought you would get a kick out of seeing the old receipt. He took it from me without a word – went into his back room – for 4 or 5 minutes – heard a lot of noise as if things being thrown around – finally, he came back out, handed me the receipt and told me – Come back on Friday – I'll have them finished for sure!

And as you go through your journey you will find that various aspects of your life have imparted values and character to you things that can shape your life and the decisions that you make. Some may come from your family, your parents, or religious leaders, or teachers, or the civic organizations to which you belong. But I found during my journey that it is also the schools you attend which can impart a very special character. And I saw that in decisions that I confronted and others confronted during my career.

I remember a dark night in a village in Vietnam during the war when a young teenage Vietcong Guerilla who was shot and wounded by a government ambush, had been brought to the center of the village where he had grown up and where we were stationed. His mother had been called and she was there holding him in her arms desperately calling for help while life drained from his body. But there was no help forthcoming. There was a hospital about 15 miles away but it was down a dangerous and insecure road which no one traveled at night. US medical evacuation helicopters all had other higher priority missions. The government Vietnamese forces were not willing to help him because he was the enemy. None of the villagers were willing to take the risk of traveling the road. Everyone started to walk away. Standing there all alone, I knew that no one expected me a Civilian Development Advisor to do anything. No one would have criticized me if I had also turned my back and walked away. But,..... but, at that moment something inside me, something imparted I believe by my years at Loras College, told me that I couldn't turn away. This was no longer the enemy, but a wounded human being. And so I stepped forward and said, "I'll drive him to the hospital." And that willingness unleashed then a flood of others now willing to do so as well and the mother and her son were soon loaded on to a vehicle and headed to the hospital. I wished the story had a happier ending, because the boy died that night. But the lesson was still the same for me. I had a choice to make.

I also saw that special character that had been imparted to former Governor Robert Ray as he dealt with the refugee crisis in 1979. We had just watched a special television news report of refugees half-way around the world – refugees desperately seeking to live in freedom – being pushed back out to sea and dying as their frail boats broke up in the raging South China Sea. No country anywhere, including the U.S., was willing to take them. Late at night at the Iowa capitol in Des Moines, he could have easily turned his back, for no one expected the Governor of a small landlocked state in the middle of America to do anything about such an international crisis. But Governor Ray turned to

me and said that he felt we had two choices. We could either turn our backs and walk away or we could reach out a hand to people desperately seeking to live their lives in freedom. And that night he wrote to President Carter saying that Iowa would double its refugee population, if only the President would re-open the America's borders to accept refugees. He became the first elected politician anywhere in the world to take a step to help save the Boat People as these refugees were known. And a few months later, thanks to Governor Ray and Iowa's leadership, the President changed U.S. policy. The Boat People would be saved. I believe it was at least in part those values that were imparted to Governor Ray during his study at Drake University and at Drake Law School that influenced his actions that night and changed the fate of thousands and thousands of refugees, and turned their desperate journey into an awesome journey to freedom and lives in Iowa and America.

Finally, I want to tell you a story that I believe has very special relevance for this graduating class of 2008. It is the story of another awesome journey, by a black man, from a state bordering Iowa; a man with a very unusual name – a name that clearly suggested its African origins. And it is a story of how this black man was separated from his father at a very young age, and never saw him again. And how he was raised alone by his mother, but how the most powerful influence over his life was an older white woman whose impact lasted well into his adult life. And it is a story of how this black man comes to Iowa with a hope – hope that there could be change – a hope that he could find acceptance. A hope that he could do something that no other African-American had ever done. And it is a story of how his journey takes him from small town to small town in this state, how eventually his journey finishes here in Ames, on this campus in a large room filled with white faces. And it is a story of how on the next day there would be a critical decision. A decision about whether he or any black man could be accepted. In a historic moment for Iowa and for Iowa State, despite all that history suggested would be the case, despite what had seemed impossible, – he is accepted. From that moment he goes forward with a message of hope and with a belief that perhaps he can make a difference, – that he might be able to bring about change. That he might change America, or even change the world. And from here in Iowa, his awesome journey would take him across America, to the south where he again found acceptance and ultimately a national recognition that would spread around the world.

But despite what you may be thinking, this is not a story of an awesome journey that took place in 2008, but in 1888. Not a story of the first decade of the 21st century, but of the last decades of the 19th century. Not of a man from Illinois with the name of Barack Obama, but of a man from Missouri whose slave name was Carver's George, and who later became known as George Washington Carver. Whose journey was anything but awesome when it began in Missouri, where despite his being emancipated, he was denied any such educational opportunity. First in Missouri and later in Kansas he was turned away again and again because of the color of his skin. And so his journey brought him to Winterset, and then to Indianola and finally, thanks to the daughter of an Iowa State faculty member, here to this campus to seek admission to the Department of Horticulture.

And just as Senator Barack Obama would stand before a huge rally on this campus on that fateful night before the Iowa caucuses in January of 2008 to make his final appeal to be accepted as a candidate for the presidency, George Washington Carver had to enter a room on this campus filled with white faces to seek admission as the first ever black student to ever attend this school.

There was no precedent for Carver being accepted. No African-American student had ever attended Iowa State. Iowa State could have turned its back. Few would have noticed if it had. But to its everlasting credit, Iowa State University, under the direction of President Beardshear gave him the acceptance he longed for and the opportunity to study science that had been denied him.

True character is often revealed by decisions that have to be made at a moments notice and without preparation. Iowa State and its leadership revealed its character the day they accepted George Washington Carver to study horticulture, just as I believe Iowa showed its true character last January when so many people voted for Senator Obama in the caucuses. No matter what your political preference may be, we all can celebrate when our school, our state and our country takes another step to eradicate the historic stain on our national soul that resulted from slavery.

I do not know how successful President-elect Obama will be. He faces enormous challenges. But we do know how successful George Washington Carver was both in his six years here at Iowa State and later from his journey across America to Tuskegee University and a life of scientific accomplishment. We know the many ways in which he brought change to America and to the world even reaching across oceans at one point to provide advice to Mahatma Gandhi as he led the quest for independence for India. Professor Carver's message of change through agricultural innovation brought hope to people halfway around the world. And in the time we are together at this ceremony, a NASA satellite will pass overhead containing experiments from Tuskegee that are based on Carver's work. All of it possible thanks to that one decision by Iowa State. And closer to home it may be worth mentioning to this audience another change that George Washington Carver helped bring about came while serving as manager of the Iowa State football team. He is credited with playing a significant role in helping the Iowa State defeat the University of Iowa in 1894 in one of the very first football games ever played between the two schools. As President-elect Obama likes to say – That's change we can believe in!

And so, as you leave today to begin the next part of what I hope will be your personal awesome journey my hope is that you will reflect on the fact that Iowa State University has had its own awesome journey which during this your graduation year celebrated it's 150th anniversary. And I hope you will take with you a clear understanding of the greatness of this institution that you have attended. And my hope is that this school has indelibly etched deep inside of you some of that same character that enabled it to make that historic decision to admit George Washington Carver. For sometime during your journey you will likely be faced with a similar decision to be made. It may be a matter within your family or, within your business, or profession, or as part of your role as a

development worker combating hunger somewhere around the world, or as a public official, or as a teacher, or maybe for one of you as the President of Iowa State University, or as Governor of Iowa. And perhaps with little or no notice, you will be forced to make what you may feel is a difficult decision. A decision to turn your back or to reach out a hand. And at that time, as you ponder what to do, I hope you will look deep inside of yourself and you will find there the imprint of this incredible institution, and that its defining character will help you make the right choice – one that will later leave you feeling that at your moment of decision you opted for greatness. For then as you sit there opening the boxes that contain the memories of your life, you will be able to look back and say your life was an awesome journey.

Today I have had one of the truly great honors of my life to receive a degree from Iowa State University. I will forever feel a kinship to all of you and I will always be proud to say that I am from I-State, the school that admitted Carver's George and that I am from Iowa the state that paved the way for the historic possibility of the 2008 Presidential election. And as you go out to begin your awesome journey I hope you will take a similar pride with you. If I were you, on your way home I would stop by the campus store to get an extra shirt or hat, like I did, to remind you of your Iowa State connection during this long journey. Oh, and by the way, don't forget your shoes.