

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

ILIFF SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY 2010

To paraphrase Mr. Shakespeare: Something is rotten in America.

I recently returned from Washington. I returned very discouraged. To say that it's dysfunctional is to be kind. It seems that everyone has been bought in one way or another. There are more than 25 active lobbyists for each member of Congress. Everyone appears to have his or her own agenda, not the country's.

Nobody trusts the Congress.

Nobody trusts Washington

Nobody trusts Wall Street.

Nobody trusts the oil companies.

Nobody trusts the banks.

Nobody trusts big business.

Very few trust the media, lawyers, organized labor, medical doctors or even organized religion.

In a large comprehensive study at Duke University, 80% of high school students in America admitted to cheating. More alarming was their attitude: Cheating is the norm.

Whoa! What's going on here? Is America a different place than it used to be?

The short answer is “yes”. Veteran D.C. observers agree, Washington has changed, even over the last decade. My own experience in business over more than 50 years is that values and behavior standards have declined radically. There was another study of cheating in schools back in the 1970’s which indicated that cheating was near a 20% level rather than the current 80%.

One interesting indicator of the changes in values is that in 1965, CEOs’ salaries were 24 times the average salaries of their employees. In 2008 they were 319 times their employee averages. Twenty four times their employee average in 1965, 319 times in 2008. Presently, the top 1% of the population makes more than the bottom 90%.

The current stream of scandals in Congress, with government officials at all levels, at top levels in business and finance, and even among religious leaders, is truly appalling.

We no longer trust our leaders, our institutions, and, generally, we don’t trust each other, and there are reasons.

Recently, Stephen Covey spoke to a full house at the Gates Concert Hall at DU about the importance of trust, based on his book *The Speed of Trust*. He pointed out, with ample evidence, that organizations fail when there is a lack of trust in leadership. On the other hand, when there is trust in the leadership and among colleagues, good things happen, and happen quite rapidly. A primary and necessary role of leadership is to build trust within the organization.

History tells us that societies as well as organizations fail when trust in its institutions and its leadership is lost. Trust cannot be maintained when corruption and dishonesty are common. When trust is lost, trouble cannot be far behind..

What I have told you so far is really not news to you. You might not have known the details but you know what I have told you is true.

Why am I telling you all these unpleasant things? Because we have to change things. As Mahatma Gandhi observed many years ago, if we're going to change things, it has to start with us.

We have a crisis of leadership in America because we have lost the values that make great leaders. The values of integrity, of caring for others more than ourselves, of courage to do what we know to be right, regardless. The ability to think and to listen. In short, leading in a way that rebuilds trust in our institutions and in each other. Practicing such leadership in an environment which does not seem to value it, however, can be unpleasant, even dangerous.

Interestingly, the American institution in which people have the most confidence is the military. Fifty nine percent of the American people have "a great deal of confidence" in the military. Nobody else comes close.

Why is that? Could it be because, through the military academies, the military have not lost the essential values? They understand why trust is the essential ingredient. I would like to quote from a recent lecture to the new cadets or "plebes" at West Point:

"We have a crisis of leadership in America because our overwhelming power and wealth, earned under earlier generations of leaders, made us complacent and for too long we have been training leaders who only know how to keep the routine going. Who can answer questions, but don't know how to ask them. Who can fulfill goals, but don't know how to set them. Who think about *how* to get things done, but not whether they're worth doing in the first place."

The lecturer, William Deresiewicz, went on to say, “What we don’t have is leaders.

What we don’t have, in other words, are *thinkers*. People who can think for themselves. People who can formulate a new direction: for the country, for a corporation, or a college, for the Army ---- a new way of doing things, a new way of looking at things. People, in other words, with *vision*.”

This is quite something, coming out of the Army. It expresses, however, exactly what I am talking about: the overwhelming need for a new kind of leadership in this country, at every level and in every domain. With due respect to West Point, who better than the graduates, the faculty and the administration of Iliff to be among the leaders of this change -- by philosophy, by training, and by intent.

I think you can begin to see why I chose the 3rd chapter of Exodus for tonight’s scripture reference. You will recall that the Lord told Moses that He wanted him to go talk to the pharaoh and then lead His people out of Egypt. Moses’ first response was, essentially, “Who *me*, Lord?”

That may be your reaction tonight: “Who me?”

I have just said that principled leadership is not easy, it can even be dangerous. At the same time it is desperately needed, if we are to begin to restore trust in every walk of life. There is no better place to begin than with Iliff and its graduates.

We’ve got to begin someplace. Why not here with us?