

“The Profession of Teaching”

Graduation Speech – Athens State University

December 7, 2013

Good morning and thank you for the privilege of allowing me to be your speaker ...

Preparing for this talk, I thought about what I wanted to say on this very important day.

Each of you has answered a call, whether you know it or not, you have answered an important call. You have worked extremely hard, and you are ready to be counted among the professional society of educators – a most esteemed and honorable society and one you should be proud, on this day, to call your own.

I titled this talk “The Profession of Teaching” because I find that in all the political wrangling, budget talks, and endless discussions of reform, the idea of the “profession” sometimes gets lost.

It’s important to remember what a profession is: A profession has two fundamental cores: (1) the art practiced is helpful to others; and (2) the persons so engaged in that art govern the practice in a way that is primarily for the public good.

Art and practice....art and practice...art and practice...Public Good...Public Good...Public Good...These are high minded concepts, and it’s altogether appropriate that you remember this as you make your way. Yes, you will have many, many moments when lofty ideas seem a million miles away. But,

you must, really must, always remember what your profession, your avocation, your chosen work is based in. You are a member of a profession. You have chosen a profession. You have set yourself apart in a quest to perfect an art that has as its ultimate goal – doing something good in someone else's life.

While you won't think about all this constantly, don't forget to take a little time now and again to ponder and remember that what you are doing is all that. It is an art and a practice that is never perfected, only perfectible, and is for the public good – or, I prefer to face on it. It is for Mary, Bob, Rick, etc. The quality of what you will be doing, each and every day, begins and ends with these ideas.

Today, when Dr. Glenn pronounces you graduates, you can count yourselves among the true professionals of the world.

Now, you may or may not know that not every white collar job is traditionally considered a "profession." Historically, true professionals were counted as Lawyers, Doctors, Ministers, Military Members, and...Teachers. That's it!

Now, today, we count others in that group, but historically, it was only those five. This is a small and select group, as it should be, and the gate to entry is narrow, also as it should be.

But what really sets these individuals apart from others who simply work...what's the difference really between just working and being counted among a "profession"?

I set myself to thinking about that and came up with a couple of differences.

Professionals seek to experience Joy. I think joy is essential in a profession and joy should be sought. Now, joy is sometimes misunderstood, especially as you consider the sacrifices you will make as a result of your profession, but you really should seek and expect joy.

There should be absolutely hilarious moments as you work that make you laugh out loud. You especially will have the privilege of experiencing this because kids are quick, and they are unfiltered.

You will have conversations with your students like these teachers:

TEACHER: Why are you late?

STUDENT: Class started before I got here.

TEACHER: Glenn, how do you spell 'crocodile?'

GLENN: K-R-O-K-O-D-I-A-L'

TEACHER: No, that's wrong

GLENN: Maybe it is wrong, but you asked me how I spell it.
(I Love this child)

TEACHER: Joey, name one important thing we have today that we didn't have ten years ago.

JOEY: Me!

TEACHER: Susie, why do you always get so dirty?

SUSIE: Well, I'm a lot closer to the ground than you are.

TEACHER: Now, Jane, tell me frankly, do you say prayers before eating?

JANE: No sir, I don't have to, my Mom is a good cook.

TEACHER: Clyde, your composition on 'My Dog' is exactly the same as your brother's. Did you copy his?

CLYDE: No, sir. It's the same dog.

(I want to adopt this kid!!!)

So, you will have these moments of pure joy, but other joys will be less obvious and will have a longer timeline to produce. Other joys will be born of the deep satisfaction you feel about your work, even as you are exhausted and fed up and feeling stressed, etc. Deep satisfaction is, to me, the best kind of joy. It's the kind of joy you get when you have tried everything with a child, and one day, all your work cracks through, and his mind wraps around that idea.

I think you have to keep in mind what we all seek for ourselves in the end – when the career is over, and our working days are done – you should want that joy of knowing, really knowing, that you committed yourself to an art and a practice and stuck with it. Very little in this life will bring you joy at the end of your life like looking back over a lifetime of good work.

And this brings me to the second of three characteristics of the "Profession of Teaching." It's a calling to serve others. Thank you for answering the call.

Now, you may be sitting there thinking, "Have I answered a call." Am I in the right place? Well, I assure you that you are in the right place. And, even if you can't remember a specific moment when you heard a little voice urging you toward this profession, that doesn't make you any less "called."

This is a place where I often question myself... I'm not one to hear a still small voice. I can be still and journal and ponder and think until the cows come home, but I still rarely take a road where I feel I'm exactly on track.

But, what I find is that, for me anyway, callings are like that. There's no tidy roadmap. There's no GPS navigation. But, what you will find, in responding to calls to serve, is that doors open and open and open, and one day you look around and you find that you have a couple of people that are looking to you to pick a path. You pick a path, and you flash your light into the dim future and walk on.

When you look back, the way behind you is lit and full of people who are following your lead. To me, that's how you know you have answered a call to serve. It's not necessarily looking forward but looking backward. The more you do it and have good outcomes, the more you are attuned to your calling and walking into the dimness gets less and less scary.

You educators will, I think, especially experience this. So many people will be along the path you blaze. Andy Rooney

said, and I so totally believe this, “Most of us end up with no more than five or six people who remember us. Teachers have thousands of people who remember them for the rest of their lives.” What an awesome responsibility and a privilege of your profession.

So, we’ve talked about two markers of the profession – Joy – Answering a call. I want to leave you with this – professionals seek integrity, not perfection.

I believe that integrity and excellence cannot be broken apart. Moral integrity is a baseline in a profession and without it you cannot expect excellence. Without moral integrity, without a moral compass, decisions are made that undermine self and others. The light is often hid in a moment of bad decision making, the true path becomes harder and harder to follow. Enough bad decisions, and the light gets snuffed out.

The professionals I know and admire have a common characteristic. They put integrity as an absolute requirement of their practice. And, it’s very practical because the result is a series of decisions that have a lot of fidelity. In the 70s, I remember when stereos came out that were “High Fidelity” meaning they didn’t include impurities in the sound. When marriages break down, we often find that “infidelity” is part of it.

Excellence, not perfection, should be the goal. Perfection can almost always nearly be achieved. Let me say that again, perfection can, almost always nearly be achieved. But, it’s as fleeting as a breeze and is usually achievable only through a focus on the end, not the means.

Seek excellence and seek it through decisions that are based in integrity and fidelity. Mark your profession with excellence, and throw out any desire for fleeting perfection as you would a temptation to steal.

Graduates, you have answered a call, and I am so privileged to be sending you out into the world where you will be lighting the path. You will have moments of joy, and you will have abiding satisfaction. You must answer calls, and if you get a little confused sometimes about what you should be doing, look backwards and ask yourself where you have shown your light the brightest. Walk through doors that allow you the opportunity to shine. Finally, remember that integrity and excellence are never broken apart. They only exist in the presence of the other.

Godspeed to you.