

Jacksonville University Commencement Address
by Robert L. Turknett
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Character is Destiny

President Romesburg, former president and Chancellor Emeritus Kinne, members of the Board of Trustees, the faculty and administration, graduates, parents, guests, friends, it's a great pleasure for me to be with you today. I would also like to recognize my wife, Lyn. This year we celebrated 40 years of marriage, and we've been working together for the past 30 years.

President Romesburg, thank you for those kind words, and thank you for your superb leadership of my alma mater. I am humbled by the opportunity to speak today and by the honorary degree awarded me.

Graduates . . . Congratulations! I know you've worked hard to get to this day and are ready to get on with it! I'll try to be brief, but we all know the commencement address is a necessary evil. As Gary Trudeau said, "We can't let college graduates out into the world until they've been properly sedated."

When I graduated from JU, I was especially excited because I almost didn't graduate from first grade. On the first day of school, my mother couldn't take me, so my sister took me on the city bus. When she left me in my class I felt scared and wanted to go home.

I started crying and was taken to the principal's office. I cried HARDER. The principal grabbed my hand, picked up her paddle, and said, "Bend over and grab your ankles." I complied, still crying. She began paddling me and I cried EVEN HARDER. The principal said, "I'll stop paddling you when you stop crying." I was now sobbing convulsively.

I tried to stop, but just couldn't. Two teachers heard the commotion and came running into the office; one grabbed the paddle, and the other physically pulled the principal away from me. I remember hearing one of them say, "That's enough—he's had ENOUGH"!

I don't remember what happened the rest of that day, but the next day I was on the city bus again with my sister. When the bus got to the school, though, I hid under a seat and STAYED on the bus until it made the round trip back to my home, where I got off. I remember making that "round trip" many times, but don't remember much else about those first three years of school.

In the fourth grade, though, I got lucky. Because of a change in school districts, I attended a different school. My 4th grade teacher, Sarah Taylor, was a **Godsend!** I don't know how much money she made, but teachers like her should make more money than anybody in any other profession. She saved my life, and if not that, for sure she saved my mental health.

From then on, I've loved school and loved learning. So, I resonate with what poet Taylor Mali says in "What Teachers Make." An adapted version goes like this:

The dinner guests were sitting around the table discussing life. One man, a CEO, decided to explain the problem with education. He argued this way. "What's a kid going to learn from someone who decided his best option in life was to become a teacher"? To corroborate his statement he said to another guest, "Hey, Susan, you're a teacher. Be honest, what do you make?"

Susan, who had a reputation for honesty and frankness, replied, "You want to know what I make? I make kids work harder than they ever thought they could and I can make kids sit through 40 minutes of study hall in absolute silence.

"I can make a C-plus feel like the Congressional Medal of Honor and an A feel like a slap in the face if the student didn't do his or her very best." Susan continued, "I can make parents tremble when I call home or feel almost like they won the lottery when I tell them how well their child is progressing."

Gaining speed, she went on, "You want to know what I make? I make kids wonder, I make them question, I make them criticize, I make them apologize and mean it, I make them write and I make them read, read, read" Susan then stopped and cleared her throat, "I make them understand that if you have the brains, then follow your heart. And if someone ever tries to judge you by what you make in money, you pay them no attention." Susan then paused. "You want to know what I make," she said, "I make a difference. What about you?"

I worked to pay tuition during my college years and lived at home to save money. I remember coming home from JU after my first day in Humanities class and saying to my Mother: "Some of my best friends went away to college and I felt a little envious, but I have this Humanities teacher . . . well, it's hard to describe, but I just **didn't want** to leave her class, even when it was over; and I could tell no one else wanted to leave either. There's something almost magical about her and the way she teaches. I'm actually LUCKY I didn't go away for college!"

That Humanities professor was Dr. Frances Kinne, who has also made a real difference in my life. I can still see and hear her saying, "Life is not about us; it's about OTHERS."

I believe it was Heraclitus over 2000 years ago who said, "**CHARACTER IS DESTINY.**"

It's easy to see how the character of my 4th grade teacher, the teacher at the dinner party in the Taylor Mali story, and my humanities professor, Dr. Kinne, make a real difference in the lives of others and in the world—not just because they are teachers, but because they know that character is the key to success. They understand and live integrity.

So remember: **YOUR CHARACTER IS YOUR DESTINY. Personality is not destiny. Personality may be set early on, but our CHARACTER is something we can work on every day of our life.**

When I told a friend I had been asked to speak to you today, his advice was, "The graduates want to know how to get a job in this troubled economy, how they might stand out, how they can

create an edge." In our own business, character is the first thing we look for in a job candidate. And it's not just us—we are often asked by our client companies to assess the character of the people they're hiring. Working intentionally to strengthen your character is not only the right thing to do, it's also key to success in your career.

I'd like for you all to think for a moment about the best teachers you've ever had . . .

I'll bet they had what we call the Respect/Responsibility balance. They almost certainly expected a lot of you; they were high on Responsibility, willing to hold you accountable. But they were also high on Respect, making you feel cared about and valued.

It was thinking about this fundamental balance of Respect and Responsibility that led to the development of our Leadership Character Model™ which we depict as a set of scales, with INTEGRITY as the base, balancing RESPECT on one side and RESPONSIBILITY on the other.

Each side of the scale has four qualities. On the Respect side: Empathy, Emotional Mastery, Lack of Blame, and Humility. On the Responsibility side: Accountability, Self Confidence, Courage, and Focus on the Whole. I'll talk briefly about how to develop one quality on the Respect side of the scale: Emotional Mastery; and one quality on the Responsibility side of the scale: Confidence.

Harvard educator Robert Kegan believes that the quality of our thinking will determine the success of our future. In other words, the *edge* you need to be successful is in your own mind! Kegan also says that adults develop in stages just as children develop in stages; and that many adults are unable to mature to the higher stages because they believe their emotions are caused by what others say and do.

If you come away from this speech with only one thing, let it be this: **"It's not the facts and events that upset man, but the view he takes of them."**

That's a very old quote from an ancient Greek philosopher named Epictetus, but it is just as relevant today as it was 2000 years ago. "It's not the FACTS and EVENTS that upset man, but the view he takes of them." Unfortunately, most of us never adopt this way of thinking. Rather, we continue to believe that other people or events cause our feelings. Sadly, we settle for a life of unnecessary melodrama and excessive emotional upset.

I have to tell you about an experience I had trying to help a CEO understand why emotional mastery was so important to his success. I was trying to get him to see that your thinking determines your feelings, and that you have a choice in what you think.

After several sessions, he came to my office seeming very happy, saying, "What you have been trying to get me to see finally clicked. My wife and I were driving home from vacation and she suggested we stop at this new restaurant on the outskirts of town, Carrabbas." He continued, "Usually, I would be feeling hurried and irritated because I wanted to get home, but, because of what you have been teaching about changing my thinking, I agreed to stop. Well, we had the best

conversation ever, and I have never felt closer to her than I did then. Thanks for being so persistent."

I then asked, "Tell me again when you were you at Carrabbas? I had suddenly realized that Lyn and I were also at that same restaurant at EXACTLY the same time. I said, "Well, I'm embarrassed . . . let me tell YOU a story."

"On that same day, I had been in client meetings all day and felt mentally exhausted. Lyn came into my office and said she would like to go to this new restaurant on the outskirts of town, Carrabbas. I felt tired, wanted to just go home and "veg out," but reluctantly agreed. Ironically, we were in the same restaurant at the same time as you, but my experience was quite different from yours."

"I am sure I was not very good company (and I am sure Lyn would agree), and I know I didn't initiate much conversation. Yet all I had to do was follow my own advice. Instead of telling myself how tired and mentally exhausted I was, I could have thought, "What a great opportunity after a long day of work to go to a restaurant and have some intimate conversation with my wife.' To change my feelings, all I needed to do was change my thinking!"

To grow in emotional mastery we have to be both aware and intentional about using the wisdom of Epictetus to change our thinking—it's so easy for emotions to have a life of their own. And **I'm** certainly still working on it.

Self confidence is critical for success, but in many ways it's a **CHOICE**, not a skill. I often say to clients that "Confidence is there for the taking!" It just requires believing in yourself.

When our two sons, now in their 30s, were 9 and 5, Lyn and I were sitting at the dinner table talking excitedly about a hypnosis workshop we had just attended—not stage hypnosis, but visualization, very focused attention and concentration.

Rob, who was 9 and playing baseball, said, "Hey, Dad, I've never hit a home run. Hypnotize me so I can hit a home run." Then, Josh, who was 5 and playing T-ball, said, "Yeah, Dad, hypnotize me too so I can hit a home run!" I said, "Well, we can try it and see what happens."

That was on Sunday night and when Josh went to bed, I went into his room and said, "You're feeling very relaxed but not going to sleep. Now picture a scene at the beach, lake, or mountains where you feel very relaxed and comfortable. Now switch that scene to the baseball field and picture yourself holding the bat the way we practiced. Now you see yourself swinging the bat, and keeping your eye on the ball until the bat makes contact. You see the ball sailing over 2nd base and you are running the bases so fast that you feel like a deer, rounding 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and sliding into home plate." I repeated this sequence for 15 minutes.

Then I would go to Rob's room and say exactly the same thing repeatedly for 15 minutes, except, for Rob, because he had a pitcher instead of a tee, I would have him watch the pitcher's release of the ball until his bat made contact. I did this every night from that Sunday to Friday, when Rob had his game. He hit his first home run!

The next morning, Josh had his game. He hit two home runs; and one was a **grand slam!** All of his teammates came running up to me saying, "Dr. Turknett, Dr. Turknett, please hypnotize **me** so **I** can hit a home run!"

This experiment was effective both because of the mental practice and because they were CONFIDENT—they believed they could hit a home run. Confidence really is "**there for the taking!**"

Before closing, I want to share an excerpt from the last page of our book, *Decent People, Decent Company: How to Lead with Character at Work and in Life*.

*Sometimes we meet people who see the God in us. For me, that was Dr. Frances Kinne. Even as a young professor, she was one of the most effective and **inspiring** leaders I have even seen, and she remains the most profound example of **leadership character** I have ever met.*

Her enthusiasm was contagious. Her empathy and respect for her students, and her love of her subject were complete – and as a result I never worked harder for any teacher.

Her integrity was unquestioned, and I have never seen anyone who better balanced respect for others with unwavering responsibility. Years later, she is still the person I “consult” most often, in my own mind, when I confront an ethical challenge.

I hope you, too, have someone in mind who embodies leadership character. Living an ethical life is hard enough; you don't have to attempt it all alone.

In closing, I certainly haven't done all this perfectly and you won't either. You have your whole lifetime to develop your character, so keep visualizing where you want to be; keep practicing, keep learning, keep growing. If we can ask ourselves what's the respectful thing to do, what's the responsible thing to do, what's the **right** thing to do, we'll go a long way to creating the world we want.

And, knowing you have a lifetime ahead for learning how to get better at living, I leave you with this treasured quote from Arthur Ashe about building a better world:

“Start where you are, use what you have, do what you can.”