

“The Will-Do Generation”

Academic Achievement Luncheon

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I want to talk to the Academic Achievement Students with us here today. The rest of you are invited to listen in.

You are here for a reason. The reason is not because you are bright, or because you have scientific, literary, mathematical, or artistic skills, and not because you have leadership abilities. The reason you are here and are being honored is not because of any talent or potential of yours but because you did something with what you had, used it, applied it, invested it, accomplished something with it, gave it to others. If we were to gather together all the students in your year with merely the greatest intelligence, ability, talent, potential ... it would not be you, but a different group of students. It's the difference between what a person can do, and what a person actually does.

Jeffrey Sachs, in a book I recommend to you called *The End of Poverty*, lays out a plan for how we can end extreme poverty in our world by 2025, i.e., by the time you will be a very ripe old 38 years old! It is about bringing one-sixth of the world's population, 1.1 billion people, onto the very bottom rung of the ladder of development and success. From there they can make it on their own. But they have no chance of getting on that bottom rung without our help in very practical and doable ways. They are dying, many of them from hunger or preventable disease, without ever having had a grip on that bottom rung.

In the preface to *The End of Poverty*, Bono of the band U2 writes:

“We can be the generation that no longer accepts that an accident of latitude determines whether a child lives or dies—but will we be that generation? Will we in the West realize our potential or will we sleep in the comfort of our affluence with apathy and indifference murmuring softly in our ears? Fifteen thousand people dying needlessly every day from AIDS, TB, and malaria. Mothers, fathers, teachers, farmers, nurses, mechanics, children. This is Africa's crisis. That it's not on the nightly news, that we do not treat this as an emergency—that's our crisis.”

Bono hits the nail on the head: the gap between “can do” and “will do”. In my view that is the greatest and most critical gap in our world. It is greater than the generational gap, the digital divide, or even the gap between the rich and the poor. The most important gap in our world, i.e., in your world, is the gap between what we now have the ability, the potential, the medical means, the technology, the financial resources to do, i.e. what we can do, and what we actually accomplish, bring about, bring into effect, realize, i.e. what we will do.

I see you, the Academic Achievement Students, as having bridged that gap, and I want to propose today that you are not part of “The Can-Do Generation,” but are the first members of “The Will-Do Generation”. We’ve had a hard time naming your generation—though I know you resist and even may resent this need of ours to name you as a group, as a generation. We’ve tried “Generation X” (bad idea!) then “Generation Y”(worse idea!) and more recently “The Millennial Generation,” which makes it sound like you recently landed here from Mars!. Permit me to call you “The Will-Do Generation.” It won’t quite fit, because you are who you are beyond any label, but it may provide a framework for seeing yourself in the photo or painting of this, your world.

College students tell me that their fundamental feeling about the world they live in is “anything could happen... and probably will.” That feeling could be paralyzing, imprisoning a student in fear, afraid to step out, concerned to protect herself or himself from this “anything” by making a lot of money that hopefully will bring security. (This, by the way, is the major motivation of the consumerism of our young; something much more serious than a fashion or a fad.) This could be the stopper between “can do” and actually “will do.”

Students today, however, have found a way to bridge that gap so that more than any previous generation they believe they will make a difference in the world. Their scores are off the charts on this sense of hopefulness as “will-do” people. What gives them this conviction is seemingly a very small thing and not something that shows up on the WASL. The bridge to hope, to “will do,” is not through concept, but through contact, human contact, contact with the poor, elderly, illiterate, shut-ins, the mentally ill, homeless, hungry. In that little thing that almost secretly got inserted as a regular part of education and schools called service, you, our students, learned first hand that you not only can but do make a difference in people’s lives, and from this it’s an easy step for you—because you already took that step—to be convinced that you will change the world.

A mother told me the story the other day of her daughter who is a high school senior here in Seattle. She says that daily the mailbox is full of slick college recruitment materials. I’m sure Seattle U. and Seattle Pacific U. were among them with our beautiful campuses and the Seattle skyline and Mount Rainier and the Experience Music Project, and coffee houses, and oh yes, education. One day, the mother said, a brochure came from a university in Ohio. Her daughter picked it up off the stack and glanced at the cover. It read “Do you believe you can change the world?” She flipped it open to find two words “We do!” The mother told me, with some sense of dismay, “My daughter is going to go to college in Ohio, of all places”. Well that was a college that believed in what this young woman, and her classmates, and you, our Academic Achievement Students, believe in. You’re not “Generation X,” as if you were a “fill in the blanks” generation, nor even “The Can-Do Generation,” which may be more mine, you are the first cohort of “The Will-Do Generation.”

Whether you actually become that generation, the one that our world, not only the 1.1 billion living and dying in extreme poverty, need, will depend on what you do with the rest of your education—or if you are going into military services what you do with that service and its education and the further education it makes possible. The danger of education is that it can stock up the “can do” of students, arming them with knowledge, skills, know-how, resources, and resumes, but may do nothing for the “will do” of these students. The law of good education is not that you learn and then apply, but that you only really learn when you apply. Count your course credits, sure, but also count your human contacts with those who need you with them. Take all the courses you can cram in—and whose exams you can cram for—but play hooky often from the culture you are comfortable in, and crawl into cultures here and abroad that are outside your cultural bubble and that will pop your bubble and allow you to learn something from a different world and show you how to make a world of difference and a different world.

Never believe in my “Can-Do Generation’s” motto “to hoist oneself up by one’s own bootstraps.” That phrase has two meanings:

1. To get ahead on one’s own by one’s own efforts, and
2. To be unable to do what is impossible, as in, trying to lift yourself off the ground by pulling up on your own boots... doesn’t work does it!

Show me any successful person, even any so-called “self-made man” (and note they never say “self-made woman”) and I’ll show you someone who got help from someone else just at the right time: a contact, a reference, a tip on how to understand the system, an encouragement, a loan, an introduction, some mentoring, coaching, teaching, some help up, a boost.

You simply will not become “The Will-Do Generation” all on your own. It defies the law of gravity. So look for help, ask for help, allow help from professors, parents, coaches, neighbors, businesswomen-and-men, even from stodgy old duffers like we Rotarians. Don’t try to defy gravity by hoisting yourself up by your own bootstraps; rather live by gratitude for the help you are given. (By the way, we Rotarians are not stodgy old duffers of “The Can-Do but Didn’t Do Generation.” None of us would be Rotarians if we did not also make the bridge from “Can do” to “Will do.” It’s ultimately the only reason we have lunch together once a week in hotel banquet rooms. The actual doing is in our “Service Beyond Self.” We would not be a bad lot to accept a leg-up from.)

I, for one, do not believe that you will change the world, whatever your education or service will be, unless you have a great humility about yourselves and unless you rely on a sacred source larger than yourself. I, and many others, call this sacred source “God”; many others call it something else: some a mystery beyond themselves, some others a depth of humanity they don’t own, some a higher or deeper or broader power. But don’t kid yourself about these plans to change the world: to end extreme poverty in the world by 2025, or to end homelessness in King County in ten years, or to build a global economy with democracy and dignity for all. The human person is not that kind of creature that can change itself by itself; neither is the human condition, humanity itself,

able to realize its plans or hopes by itself alone. It don't work! Hope like heck, work like hell, but be humble as a human—like all humans—who need the help of another, the Other. The words “human” and “humble” come from the same root word meaning “soil” or “ground”. Moving from “Can-do” to “Will-do” depends on that Other's will, your humility, and together their doing.

Pursuing an education that builds on your academic achievement up till now requires that you educate yourself about what really matters. I call it the “big story”. When people ask me as a priest-educator what I most want to save our young people from, they get surprised by my answer. I say, “I want to save them from their own culture.” What I mean by this is that among all the blessings of our culture—and they are abundant and we should be grateful—our culture also drastically hems us in, contains us, conditions us into what is supposedly important. So when I say that you need to educate yourself about what really matters, about “the big story,” I mean you need to break through how your culture tries to convince you about what is important:

- - The trials of Scott Peterson and O.J. Simpson: not a big story... access for all to justice in America: a big story;
- - Reality T.V. and Survivor: Tiny story... 8,000 homeless a night in King County; 20,000 dying each day in the world from extreme poverty: a very big story;
- - Mary Kay Letourneau and Michael Jackson: Not worth exploring... sexual abuse by priests, psychiatrists, teachers, parents; domestic abuse of women: a huge story;
- - Teenage boys rampaging: Not a big story... wasting the potential of a third of all boys and half of African-American and Hispanic boys by dropping out of school: an ominously big story;
- - Helping the person with a cardboard sign standing on the corner, not a big story... a King County community that annually gives \$37 million to the Community Safety Net: a big and wonderful story;
- - Hundreds of political distractions: not worth our time... fair, accountable elections; the integrity of appointing federal judges; no child really left behind; the future of Social Security and Medicare; giving a fair chance and a hand up not to the “Third World” but to the “Two-thirds World”: restoring the place in the world Americans are meant and deserve to have as a people standing up for the unalienable rights for all: these are the really big stories.

Your “Will-Do Generation” must counteract cultural confines about what is important and educate itself about what really matters, the big stories where “The Will-Do Generation” needs to make a difference if our world actually is to be different.

I am haunted more by one line by Henry David Thoreau than I am by any other line in anything I've ever read, even in what I consider the sacred scriptures. Thoreau writes: "The mass of humanity go to the grave with their song still in them." The only thing I really want is that when I die my song is not still in me but has been sung. Each of us has a song that no one else has. Our one vocation—regardless of our creed or calling—is to sing our song. The greatest of all tragedies can only be—whether in the eyes of God or in our eyes—that the mass of humanity does go to the grave with their song still in them. I hope you will also now be haunted by this line, but also bolstered by it to sing your song. Singing your song, ultimately, is what is the "do" in "The Will-Do Generation."

You have not yet heard perhaps of the following people, but hopefully you will. John Stanford, Patsy Collins, Sam Stroum did not go to the grave with their song still in them, nor did Pope John Paul II or Mother Theresa or Martin Luther King. Bill and Paula Clapp, Bill and Melinda Gates, Lee Hartwell of the Hutch, Denis Hayes of Earthday, Kent Stowell and Francia Russell of Pacific Northwest Ballet... and you can add many more, perhaps your own parents and teachers... are singing their song now. But how about you and how about the mass of humanity? Pursue an education that teaches you how to sing, to sing not just in a choir, but also in the choir of humanity and to sing within that choir your song.

Let me end my address to you our Academic Achievement Students, with a story, a true one, for it is often only stories that we remember.

Like most Seattleites I love to hike. On the Saturday of Labor Day Weekend two years ago I decided to take a more-than-usually rigorous hike up a trail in the nearby Cascade Mountain Range. It just happened to be 85 degrees that day.

I packed a lunch: non-fat turkey with non-fat cream cheese on whole wheat sandwich, non-fat bran muffin, apple juice, trail mix... yes, I'm a Seattleite. I prepared a canteen of water, took my trusty blue daypack, cap, hiking boots, and headed east into the mountains on I-90. Then off on a long road in and up to the trailhead. I was looking forward to the 5-hour hike with a gain of altitude of about 3,000 feet. When I got to the trailhead and was putting on my gear, I realized that the canteen of water was not there. I'd left it on the counter in the kitchen. What was I to do?

There was no place to get water and I was not about to go all the way back nor was I willing to abandon the hike. So I said to myself: "Well, yes it's 85 degrees, and it's three hours in and two hours out, and it's a gain of 3,000 feet, and I don't have any water, but I can do it! They say you need water; but you don't really; I mean what's going to happen; I'm not going to die or something. I'll just go without."

So up the trail I go. After a gain of 1,000 feet, maybe an hour in, I was really thirsty and thinking about it all the time. Then I remembered I had a 4-ounce can of apple juice in my lunch in the pack. So I drank that, one gulp, and headed along carrying this little empty can. Within moments I was thirsty, dry, and worried again. But what was I to do? Then I decided that I would beg for water from passing hikers. A tough decision.

Soon I met a couple coming down. I said to them “Excuse me, but can I speak with you, I forgot to bring along any water; could you spare a little water?” The first person said, “Well, I don’t know, I’m not sure we have enough for ourselves.” But the second person said, “Sure, we have enough. Why don’t I fill up your little can there, you drink it, and then I’ll fill it up again and you can take it along with you.” Wow!

So now I am moving along at about 1,500 elevation gain holding a 4-ounce apple juice can of water! Well suddenly I realize the sky is bluer than I’ve ever seen, the air purer, the rock cliff to my right more visibly sculptured than I’d ever noticed, birds singing, and a glorious play of a distant waterfall across the ravine! A hike I’d done a dozen times was fresh, new, transformed by a begged, 4-ounce can of water.

But soon I was bone-dry again, thirsty, dusty-throated. So again I did the same thing. Again the first person of the couple didn’t know if they had enough—probably in reality this big dry, desperate guy approaching them in the wilds scared them—but the second said “Sure”. And this time I suggested the two-times-four-ounce-apple-juice-can trick! And again the beggar boy was walking on a new trail and with a song in his heart.

But that too ran out and I was hurting and I was still short of the summit. One last try. Along came another pair of hikers. Same routine: “Excuse me, can I ask you for something; I forgot to bring along any water, could you spare a little?” Identical response from the first of the pair about not being sure they had enough to get all the way down. But good old #2 came through again. She asked, “Is all you’ve got that little can?”; actually I think she said “silly little can”. She took out a clear plastic liter bottle filled with water and a huge ice chunk in it. She began to pour some out into another small bottle. I thought: “How nice she’s going to pour a bit of ice water for me.” At that point, she handed me the whole big bottle with the ice chunk in it, and she said “Here, sir, and it says in the bible that if you give a cup of water to another in my name, you shall not lose your reward...so I want you to praise God every time you drink from this bottle!” I almost said to her, “Hey, I’m Catholic, we don’t do that sort of thing,” but I didn’t, and by the way you’ve got to realize I look like any other bloke out hiking; tee-shirt, shorts and cap and boots; no priestly black and collar. I thanked them and off I went.

Here I soon was at the summit of the trail, drinking abundant ice-cold water, taking in the transformed panorama, and a whole symphony playing back and forth between me and the whole mountain range. And I’d started out with no water, with just one, silly indeed, can of apple juice.

What I want to tell you, our Academic Achievement Students, the pioneers of what I am confident will be “The Will-Do Generation,” is that you don’t have to have it all within you when you start your journey. You don’t even have to be very self-confident. You’ve already asked for help and have done your version of the 4-ounce-apple-juice-can trick—for none of our human abilities are very voluminous—or else you wouldn’t be here with your achievements. I hope you already feel that it’s good to travel light and already experience how your path is transformed by human contact, even if you are more the

receiver than the giver. Go on; you'll get hot, and tired, and thirsty again and again. But there will always be companions on the way to help if you ask. The path is up; take it, don't just dream about it; the climbing is the doing. Lead the way for others of "The Will-Do Generation"; share with those coming behind you. The summit, the vista, the vision is a different world because you have made a world of difference. You will discover long before you get to the top that, almost unawares, you have begun to hum, and then to whistle, and at last to sing and that the song is the one your world needs, your song.
