

Graduation presentation

Wesley 6th form

May 16th 2009

Wesley Church, Albert Street

Belize City

Greetings Graduates

I wish to first acknowledge The Dean, the members of the faculty and staff, Invited Guests, Parents, and Guardians, friends.

It is indeed an honor to be asked by you graduates to address you on this occasion of your commencement exercise.

This marks a new era in your lives, hence commencement. You have reached the pinnacle of your general education, a place I wish all Belizeans one day to be. This is now your launch pad to specialist training in any field of training you will choose or in any endeavor you undertake.

On your behalf I thank your teachers, your parents, and your guardians, your friends and loved ones, children, husbands and wives for guiding and supporting you while you made this journey to greater knowledge and understanding. Of course I thank you for having determined to make yourself a better educated Belizean and thereby enabling you to make a greater contribution to the development of yourselves your fellow citizen and by extension this nation we all call home.

It is not always that younger people wish to hear a message from their elders; for you have certainly reached the age of 'I Know' this is why I am especially thankful for this opportunity to address you this evening.

We live in exciting times! The world has reached its highest stage of development ever. We can circle the globe in a matter of hours, this would have blown Columbus mind. We can talk to any one anywhere in any language as we wish and do so in an instant! We have open heart surgery and can transplant most parts of the body. Even the age of cloning is here. The dawn of longevity is on the horizon. We can look into the depths of space to examine other planets and search for other life forms and we can peer into the belly of the earth to detect minerals. We can travel faster than the speed of sound and soon we will be able to travel at the speed of light or even faster. We have (GMO) genetically modified plants which produce many times more than the natural species and produce foods designed with specific nutrients and resistant to certain diseases.

How wonderful! The age of scientific discovery and innovation is upon us. The households of today resemble nothing of the past; with microwave ovens, self defrosting refrigerators, even those which can do your shopping on line. Scientists have even developed the complete green –house fully electronically controlled with security and the works. Moms can monitor their homes online from work and see what their children are doing at any time. Yes we are living in a great technological age. We should all be happy, what more can we ask for? And yet there is more to come.

But are we better off than our parents? Do we enjoy a better quality of life with all these inventions? Have we really improved Humanity?

While we are able to sleep in better homes, they must be barred like a jail, since we must protect ourselves against those who would do us harm or rob our possessions. While we drive better and faster cars we must always be careful of those who are careless or worst reckless or drunk who use the roads and highways with impunity as though the open space belongs to them alone and who would through their careless action harm or kill us, While some of us we wear nice clothes and have the latest cell phones, there are those who dig through the garbage dump looking for a way to satisfy some of their basic needs. While our national income and wealth expands, our slums also expand and our poverty levels increases annually. While we have become more liberal and tolerant of the rights of others even if it offends our sense of morality and dignity we find an increase in the number of those who would molest rape and even murder our children.

I look back now some 40 years when I was a young man starting out like some of you will be doing and I ask are we better off ? Are we living in a better country; and yes as we drive around this beautiful jewel, we see magnificent homes. Back in those days you had arrived if you lived in a home with two bedrooms and a flush toilet; because that was the standard and indeed some of my colleagues who were way up there did have that flush toilet. Today, a two bedroom home with a flush toilet is considered a low income home. So yes, in housing, perhaps we have arrived. If you look around in transport, you will see lovely cars, the best that you can find in the world; and if you compared with back then, well, those of us who had a ride, had a beautiful bicycle with streamers, upon which we would ride to court our favorite girl or our favorite young man. I know that would have caught you attention.

If we look around, yes we have better roads. I also rode cross country cycle races and it was gravel all the way from Belize to Cayo and back. So in those days there was a number on your back so large, so they could make you out as you whisked by or bounced by, because you were doused in dust from head to foot and there was no way you could be made out from your facial expressions. So yes, we have improved.

Yes we have our own government and over the years we have rid ourselves of the colonial masters and there is no longer, The Governor and the Colonial and Financial Secretaries that lived in the better homes. And yes, we are better educated you are a testament to that. The highest graduation back then was from 4th form and we would say, "he graduated from college"

But it is noteworthy that... When we had 90,000 people there were 2 and at the maximum 3 murders per year and it was something that was talked about for weeks. We all remember when Father Sonntag was murdered in Benque and his accuser won, there was a parade in Belize City for the esteemed attorney who was successful in acquitting the accused. That is how big the news was. Today murder is 2nd place. I am not sure it is 2nd place, maybe 5th place on the news its Just another one. And if we did the mathematical calculation again, our population has multiplied about 3 ½ times so we should be at about 6 or 7 murders a year. If we look at rapes, thefts; if we look at muggings and even now the very dangerous prospect of kidnappings, we must ask what has become of our society?

Has our education then steered us simply to become self-centered, concerned only about ourselves, having lost the vision that indeed, now it has become every man for himself and God for the rest of us?

Back in those days one was lucky to get a tertiary education and; geographically it was about 1,000 miles away. Today there is the esteemed UB, geographically from any corner of the country as the crow flies, no more than about 80 miles away. Back then perhaps the only scholarships available were for law, economics and medicine; and perhaps those of us who wanted to do other disciplines had to first become our brothers keeper and had to become part of our neighborhoods to be able to access tertiary education. But I want to reiterate, Ladies and Gentlemen, Graduates, that while we have improved significantly in education, we have deteriorated significantly as a society.

We are accustomed to thinking of learning as good in and of itself but as an environmental educator, David Orr, remind us, “Our education up till now has in some ways created a monster.” David Orr is the founder of Meadow Creek Project, an environmental education center in Fox, Arkansas and, he is currently on the faculty of Environmental Studies of Oberlin College in Ohio. In his commencement address to the graduating class of 1990 at Arkansas College he pointed out six myths about the foundations of modern education and six principles to replace them. I extracted two of them from his speech. The first is that, “knowledge is increasing and by implication human goodness.” “There is an information explosion going on, by which I mean a rapid increase of data, words and paper, and electronic material. But this explosion should not be taken for an increase in knowledge and wisdom which cannot so easily be measured. What can be said truthfully is that some knowledge is increasing while perhaps other kinds of knowledge are being lost.” That is responsible partly for the deterioration in our society.

In the confusion of data with knowledge it is a deeper mistake that learning will make us better people. But learning is endless and “in itself it will never make us ethical people.” Ultimately it may be the knowledge of the good that is most threatened by all of our other advances. All things considered it is possible that we are becoming more ignorant of the things we must know to live well and to sustain ourselves on this earth. While at the same time we are becoming smarter in the things to promote our individual growth.

The other myth is that, “the purpose of education is that of giving you the means for upward mobility and success.” This was described by Thomas Merton as the “mass production of people literally unfit for anything except to take part in an elaborate and completely artificial charade.”

The truth is that the world does not need more “successful” people as defined by this culture, but it is desperately in need, ladies and gentlemen, of more peacemakers, healers, restorers, storytellers and lovers and more people who have compassion of every shape and form. This world needs people who live well in the places where they reside. It needs people of moral courage willing to join the fight to make the world habitable and humane and these needs have little to do with success as our culture has defined it.

The goal of education is not mastery of subject matter, but mastery of one’s person. Subject matter is simply the tool. Much as one would use a hammer and chisel to carve out a block of wood or marble, one uses ideas and knowledge to forge one’s own personhood.

For the most part we labor under the confusion of ends and means thinking that the goal of education is to stuff all kinds of facts, techniques, methods and information into student's minds regardless of how and with what effect it will be used.

Knowledge, therefore my friends, carries with it the responsibility to see that it is used well in the world. We cannot say that we know something until we understand the effects of this knowledge on real people and on our communities. For example, many of our problems stem from the decisions of corporate business and government who decide to invest or disinvest in the economy. In many cases esteemed economists and MBAs, people in business, educated in the tools of leverage buyouts, tax breaks, and capital mobility have done what no invading army could do to destroy the society. They destroyed a portion of the society with total impunity on behalf of something called the "bottom line". But bottom line of society included other costs, those of unemployment, crime, higher divorce rates, alcoholism, child abuse, lost savings and wrecked lives. In this instance what was thought in the business schools and economics departments did not include the value of good communities or the human costs of a narrow destructive rationality that valued efficiency and economic abstractions above people.

Many graduates now are more confused on leaving school than when they entered. One only need to watch the nightly news to see how in the US there are thousands of graduates from the ivy league schools who have a full time job looking for employment.

The high expectations brought on at the beginning by the promise of success at the end of the course and fuelled by the myths that education somehow leads to this success is dashed on the rocks of despair when the reality after graduation sets in, that indeed this success is not out there waiting for you and that it may never be achieved until it is defined in terms of our human reality.

The first realization may be that not many of your former graduates are working in their field of study and the starker reality is that many are working in fields which do not require a college education at all but could have been better accomplished by going to vocationally school at far less costs.

Even worst there are those who expect “the Government” to guarantee jobs. Our schools and colleges forget to teach the students that jobs are not created by governments but are created by entrepreneurs with a vision and by wealth generation. The students have no idea, many of you graduating, how free enterprise systems work because, sometimes, with due respect, the teachers themselves don’t know.

Modern public funded school teachers, across this nation, work for the government. They are paid from tax payers dollars. But unless the taxpayer has a job making enough money to pay their salaries, those teachers would not be employed as teachers. Many of them would wind up in less paying jobs because they did not know what else they could do to make a living.

An educated person therefore, fellow graduates, is one who not only knows where to find the information that one needs to know, but also is able to use that information productively.

If there are no jobs, an educated person should be able to make a living by discovering a need in the community and filling that need. The investment placed in you is only safe then, when you discover how to utilize it.

If your goal and drive is purely to make a lot of money and manifest your success in the material demonstrations of the world standards and at the twilight of your life you hope to stand back and revel in your accomplishments, I assure you that somewhere in that equation you will be factoring in the thought of suicide as the ultimate escape from your misery.

But if your goal lies in the service to your fellow man ,utilizing your God given talents and the knowledge you gained in school to improve the lot of the world by first seeing how you can help those desiring your skill or ideas or thoughts or suggestions and if you are prepared to give it freely remembering that someone invested in you in the first place so you could attain the knowledge you possess, then be assured that the fulfillment of service and the joy of serving will be followed by the remuneration which will bring maximum satisfaction to your life.

Those who are trapped by the desire to achieve material wealth alone relegate themselves to the department where victimization, extortion, oppression and sins of omission reside.

They must consciously at all times live lives of fear driven by the need to be careful of what they say and do and to whom they say it or do it.

Trapped by this burden there is no room for expansion in their minds , creativity and innovation dies or flees and their only quest is to be careful to comply with the status quo ,no matter how debilitating or

despicable it becomes since they must protect at any and all costs the impression of the material success they have achieved.

I say to you dear graduates fall not victim to this trap, for nothing is more successful than liberation from the shackles of this perceived material success as a reward for you years of study.

But as your knowledge expands be mindful of the responsibility that comes with it to be humble by the awareness that you can no longer be blissful in you ignorance.

Be aware, that the investment made in you by your parents or guardians and the society was not to empower you to be selfish or to privatize your knowledge solely as a means of making a living, but was intended to make you a better person and one who would be able to give something back to society especially to help to bring your fellow man out of the darkness and the bliss of his ignorance and into the light of truth and enlightenment so he too can become a better person and together we become a better nation. This is the measure of real success.

As you leave here today to begin your new era, whether it be in pursuit of further learning or in pursuit of some gainful employment, remember that whenever you encounter a brother or a sister who needs your help, turn him or her not away but render your assistance to the extent of your ability whether that be a simple word of advice or a helping hand.

Ask yourself daily as you rise to greet the new dawn, how can I help to make my fellow Belizeans better and how can I help to make Belize a better place,

a place where all of us can live in peace and happiness without fear, a place where our children can once again run freely, a place where there will be no slums and where poverty will be a thing of the past, a place where all children will have the opportunity to develop to the maximum of their capacity? Ask yourself if this is the kind of place you would want to live in, and how can you help to make it a reality?

If you commit yourself to doing what you can to make this dream a reality and if you take this attitude to your studies, you will pursue them with greater vigor aiming to do your best so you can make a greater contribution to society when you are done. If you take this attitude to your work place, you will attend your customers or perform your chores with enthusiasm and your day will be fulfilled.

If you somehow become unemployed, with this attitude of service to enhance the lives of your fellow man, your creative talents will be released and you will soon find you are thinking up lots of things you could do to help people to live better, you will find that as you explore these, you will be creating employment for yourself.

So my dear graduates, I bid you 'Bon Voyage' with this gift of a positive attitude of service toward your fellow man and I assure you, you will never fail and in time your graduating class of 2009 would have made its mark on the historical records of Belizean Society and you would have contributed positively to recovering our society and position it on par with the technological advances we now enjoy.

As Alexander Graham Bell, The great inventor and educator put it,

The most successful men and women in the end are those whose success is the result of steady accretion in the service of their society.

It is the man or woman who carefully advances step by step, with his or her mind becoming wider and wider and progressively better able to grasp any theme or situation and analyze it with a positive view to enhancing the wellbeing of humanity that will attain the maximum satisfaction during his life.

In the twilight of your life, the positive contribution to society which you made will become the measure of your life, not the material wealth you have accumulated, for those will simply be the relics of an era passed which happened to be in your possession.

God Bless you all and Happy Graduation.