



Dr. H. Philip West Jr. giving his commencement address.

HELPING THOSE WHO PURSUE HAPPYNESS

**By H. Philip West Jr., upon being awarded Doctor of Laws degree
To Graduate Degrees Commencement at Rhode Island College
May 17, 2007**

President Nazarian, members of the faculty, and Board of Governors.
Thank you for this honor.

I want to add special thanks to the Common Cause community.
Without your support and wisdom these reforms
would not have been drafted or enacted.
I also want to express particular thanks
to my wife of nearly 42 years, Anne Grant.

We all know that **few of us accomplish much by ourselves.**
We live in a wonderful web of human relationships
that sustain and empower us.

A hundred years ago this week, on May 22, 1907,
my father and his twin brother were born
just above the Gowanus Canal in Brooklyn, NY.
Their family was poor, and the twins left school
after eighth grade to work on the docks.

Neither earned a college degree, but my parents
sacrificed far more than I understood at the time
so that I could go to college and beyond.

**I suspect the same is true for many of you
who are receiving degrees today.**

VERY FEW OF US GOT THIS FAR BY OURSELVES.

Some who sacrificed for us may be in other lands.

Some may have died.

Before I say any more, could we take just a moment
to acknowledge the parents, spouses, family,
friends and mentors sitting in audience . . .

I wish we could hear each of your stories:

What brought you here.

What challenged you most.

What hopes and dreams are in your hearts tonight.

Many of you may feel, as I do:

that we have been blessed, and we want to pass it on.

In the years ahead, you will work with people
who will succeed only if they overcome huge obstacles.

You may have seen Will Smith's fine film:

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPYNESS.

**It's based on the true story of Christopher Gardner
who struggled to survive with his young son
on the streets of San Francisco during the 1980s.**

Many of you will work with people like Christopher Gardner
who are swimming hard in troubled waters.

You may be the first person on earth to recognize their potential.

You will connect with many who feel
the undertow of addiction or self-blame.

You will deal with riptides of oppression and discrimination.

**These are hard realities, but I believe
many of you will make the time become
mentors, personal coaches, cheerleaders.**

**ULTIMATELY, YOU WILL FACE NOT ONLY QUESTIONS
OF HELPING INDIVIDUALS WHO STRUGGLE
IN THEIR PERSONAL PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS . . .**

**YOU WILL ALSO FIND YOURSELVES
CHALLENGING SYSTEMS AND INSTITUTIONS
THAT BLOCK THEIR WAY.**

With the graduate degrees you receive today
many of you will find yourselves in positions of influence

to shape public policy and mold institutions.

And so, as you move forward,
I want to offer **SIX PRINCIPLES**.

I know they say:
“**Always remember never to say ALWAYS or NEVER.**”

But here are three “**NEVER**” principles
and three “**ALWAYS**” principles.

1. Never judge the value of your work by the size of your paycheck.

Many of you will work for nonprofits.
You will see friends and family members
in the corporate world or in government
who do **far less work** than you
but bring home **much bigger paychecks**.

You will **work longer hours under more pressure**,
and sometimes A VOICE WITHIN will tell you
that you are WORTH MORE.

You’ll read stories like the one in the Providence Journal last week
that the CEO of United Health Care is makes more money
than 2,000 workers at St. Joseph’s Hospital.
AND THAT VOICE WITHIN MAY TAUNT YOU
ABOUT YOUR PALTRY PAY.

Some of you will see guardians and psychologists in Family Court
billing hundreds of dollars an hour, and you’ll wonder
why you can’t even get reimbursed for your parking . . .

No matter what your beliefs or idealism,
there will be times when you wonder
if you shouldn’t just go make money.

Believe me, I know that feeling.

But keep in mind
that we live in **America’s new gilded age**.
It’s not easy to go against the belief that GREED IS GOOD.

**BUT I URGE YOU, NO MATTER WHAT JOB YOU TAKE,
TO REJECT THOSE VALUES. LIVE BELOW YOUR MEANS.**

With graduate degree from RIC
you don't have to prove to anybody how good you are.

**So this the first principle:
NEVER JUDGE THE VALUE OF YOUR WORK
BY THE SIZE OF YOUR PAYCHECK.**

2. Never settle for mediocrity in your mission.

Many will find yourselves in institutions
that have a culture of not trying too hard.
"Ease off, slow down. You make the rest of us look bad."
You will hear all kinds of reasons and explanations
that say in various ways: "It's not professional
to extend yourself for your clients . . ."

**I hope you will challenge that mindset.
I hope you will remind others what they perhaps once believed . . .**

**Second principle:
NEVER settle for mediocrity in your mission.**

3. ALWAYS avoid every kind of impropriety.

**The Rhode Island Constitution says
public officials and employees are to avoid
even the "appearance of impropriety."
So should all the rest of us.**

Nearly every job, whether in government or in private sector,
offers enticing opportunities that seem innocent
but can lead us to betray our mission.
Very few people who get embroiled in scandal
were corrupt from the beginning.

The behavior that brings them down
often starts small and sweet and secret.
It's only later that they need to offer excuses
and rationalizations or even outright lies.

So watch out for the little blandishments
that come with nearly every position of trust and power.

**Take it from one who has dealt with too many scandals:
ALWAYS avoid conflicts-of-interest.
AVOID even the appearance of impropriety.**

4. ALWAYS be a voice of conscience, and if necessary, become a whistleblower.

Jon Oberg was a researcher at the U. S. Department of Education who tried over several years to get his superiors to deal with abuses of the Federal Student Loan program. He spoke and wrote memos warning that abuses by lenders could vastly increase the debt of borrowers and cost taxpayers billions of dollars.

Instead of going after those who were gaming the system, Jon Oberg's superiors in the Department of Education cut off his access to the data. They said this research wasn't in his job description.

Meanwhile, some lenders were raking in hundreds of millions of dollars and sending huge amounts back to key people in Washington as campaign contributions.

Jon Oberg worked conscientiously from the inside but finally concluded he had to leave his job and become a WHISTLEBLOWER.

I hope that each of you, as you go forward, will challenge wrongs you alone may see.

**ALWAYS BE A VOICE OF CONSCIENCE.
Whatever the blowback, don't be intimidated.
And IF NECESSARY, BECOME A WHISTLEBLOWER.**

5. ALWAYS color outside the lines.

You may take it for granted that the Poverty Institute exists here on the RIC campus. But it's no simple thing to have faculty and students of a state sponsored institution going to the State House every spring to fight for money to help the least fortunate in our society.

I can imagine some of the hostile phone calls that must have come to the President's office here at RIC and to the Board of Governors for Higher Education. **I'm sure there have been threats and angry accusations. And yet, the Poverty Institute is still here at RIC. For that, great credit goes to the people on this stage.**

A second example of coloring outside the lines involves a **paradigm shift**: Leaders of the Poverty Institute changed the way people across Rhode Island think about the state budget.

They created a TAX EXPENDITURE BUDGET that shows how much money flows out each year for tax credits that fund BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT, MOVIE PRODUCTION, and RESTORATION OF HISTORIC BUILDINGS while services to the poor get slashed.

**So my fifth principle is:
ALWAYS think outside the box,
ALWAYS watch for new paradigms.
ALWAYS color outside the lines.**

6. Finally, never give up, even when you think no one cares.

And there will be times when you think no one cares, so why should you bother?

I remember a meeting in Governor Carcieri's office about Separation of Powers.

We were in a

- little inner office with a conference table.
- There were no gold letters on that door, only plain frosted glass.

The only people there were

- Governor Carcieri, two of his top lawyers,
and a couple of us from Common Cause.

Suddenly, from the hallway, came the sound of a 12-string guitar and gentle voices singing that great Woody Guthrie song "This land is your land.

Inside, we could hear every word.

I had trouble concentrating, and I know others did, too.

The singing continued from hallway outside.

A bluesy tune with new words about the state budget.

Meeting ended.

I went out through the Governor's large, formal office, through the receptionist's office, through the magnificent State Room, and around into the hall.

There, outside the Governor's door, were Nancy Gewirtz (Poverty Institute) and Rick Harris (NASW) with members of families who would be affected by particular cuts in the state budget.

**Nancy was in the last stages of her cancer,
but you would never have known.
She sang her heart out with the others.**

**TOGETHER, THEY GAVE VOICE TO THOUSANDS
WHO HAVE NO HIGH-PAID LOBBYISTS.**

“That’s great,” I told them. “We were right inside that door,
and we could hear every word. Keep singing.”

**So that’s my final word to you:
NEVER GIVE UP. ALWAYS KEEP SINGING.
Even when it seems that no one’s listening,
NEVER GIVE UP. ALWAYS KEEP SINGING.**

I said I wish we could hear each of your stories . . .
I wish, even more, that we could glimpse today
the lives you will touch during the next thirty or forty years.

As we sit here today --

None of us knows how the Iraq war will finally end.

None of us knows how emerging technology
and the pressures of globalization will affect
the people you serve
or funding for the institutions where you work . . .

None of us knows whether leaders of nations
around our fragile blue planet
will address the challenges of global warming . . .

**WE DO KNOW THAT IN THESE LOOMING CRISES
THE LIVES OF ORDINARY PEOPLE
WILL BE STRESSED IN NEW WAYS.
AND WHERE WILL THEY TURN?**

Many will rely on your wisdom and strength and
on the quality work you’ve prepared yourselves to do.
So I thank you, in advance, for that vital work you will do.
Cheers for you!