
VII. ON SELF-ESTEEM AND LIFE'S OPPORTUNITIES

LINCOLN HIGH SCHOOL COMMENCEMENT

Los Angeles, June 19, 2008

I first want to congratulate the graduates tonight for arriving at this first major step in their education. I also want to congratulate the parents and teachers who have also worked hard to get all of you to this point.

Why would I be asked to speak today? Although I don't have a sure answer for that, I can only guess that I was asked to speak because there is so much in my background and experience that I share with you. After all, not only did I graduate from Lincoln High School (although a long time ago) but I also grew up in this immediate area — I was in fact born just a mile or so from here at the County General Hospital. I rode on the same bus routes that many of you used to get to school (some of those same buses are still running!), ate at the same places, played on this field, and shared many of the same experiences you've all had as Tigers.

Also, like a great number of you, my first language was a language other than English. My parents spoke to me in Spanish and I responded in English and Spanish, and no one in my family had done much more than graduate from high school, if they even did that.

So, while I am guessing — because I don't know each and every one of you — we probably have more things in common than most other people.

I remember what a great time I had here. In the three years that I attended Lincoln I remember some wonderful and remarkable teachers, a great collection of tightknit friends who participated with me in a variety of activities, particularly in our junior and senior years — plays, dances, speech contests, athletic competitions between the classes, class sweaters, rings and picnics.

Of course, I realize that times were different then in so many ways, and that you have had a much more difficult time adjusting to a much more complex and dangerous world. But for me, in the mid-1960s, before the expansion of our nation's involvement in the Vietnam War (where Lincoln lost many of its sons), I had a great experience here.

When I graduated from high school my sense of self-esteem was that a whole new world was about to open up for me, that I had many, many choices to make, that those choices would take me far and wide, that those choices would be mine and mine alone.

And as remarkable as it may seem, and I remember this as if it were yesterday, I felt a great sense of empowerment that I could become anything or anyone I wanted to become in this world. I could become a surgeon, an airline pilot, a scientist, a lawyer or successful businessman. Curiously, I never envisioned that someday I would become a judge, and certainly never imagined in my wildest dreams that I would sit as one of seven justices on the highest court of this state with over 35 million people. That could not happen to someone who grew up next to Chavez Ravine. But with the strong support of my teachers and my family, I did feel then that I could achieve anything that I set out to do.

And that is the message that I would like to give to you tonight: that is, that you, too, regardless of your circumstances or background, can achieve virtually any goal that you set out to accomplish. It is not easy. It is not delivered to you on a silver platter. In fact, I have to tell you that it is much harder today than it was for me back then. You will encounter many obstacles to success — the real world out there is in many ways unforgiving, not forgiving like your parents and teachers. So you must be prepared.

It will require a great deal of work, determination and stamina for you to succeed. But the fact of the matter is that in this great country the opportunities are there for the taking.

Let me tell you a story. I have tried to imagine what it must have been like when my mother first came to this country following the Mexican Revolution. And I imagined an interview between my mother and an immigration official when she crossed the border. I imagined the official routinely asking her, “Where are you from?” as the official who processed her entry visa along with thousands of others coming from Mexico, must have asked her.

And my mother, accompanied by her mother and little sister said, “I am from Guaymas, Sonora, Mexico.”

And the official questioned her, “What do you do?”

“Nothing now; I am going to meet my older brother, José, in Los Angeles.”

Question: “What does he do?” “Nothing, he’s looking for work.”

Question: “What kind of work?”

Answer: Any kind.”

Question: “But what can he do?”

Answer: “Well, he has no skill, he has little education, but he is strong and he can use his hands and will work all day and he will help my mother and little sister.”

Question: “Well, does he have any friends?”

Answer: “Not really.”

Question: “Any money?”

Answer: “Not a lot. Not yet.”

Question: “How about you?”

Answer: “Well, we have very little and no friends, no money, just our family.”

Question: “Well, with no friends, no money, no skills, no education, what do you expect from this country?”

Answer: “Not a lot, not a lot. Work. A place to sleep. A chance to raise a family. And just one more thing, sir, before I die, I have a dream: I would like to see my son, if I have one, be a judge on the California Supreme Court.”

Imagine if you will, what kind of reception a dream like that might have received. And yet, it describes a story that has happened over and over in this country for those who dared and who worked for their dreams.

And just think of Barack Obama’s father, a student immigrant from Kenya, having the same type of conversation — “I want my son to be president of the United States.”

I knew before I graduated from Lincoln that if I was to succeed I would have to set goals. Now, as I mentioned, I never set as a goal then, or even many years later, that I would someday become a judge, deciding cases like the death penalty, or more recently, the right of same-sex couples to marry. But I did set high goals for myself. I made it a goal to attend college. I set as my goal early in high school to get good grades so I would be able to get into a good college. So I made the decision then, and I want you to make the same decision, to set big goals, never to sell yourself short.

I don’t mean by any of this that you should expect to achieve all your goals in one big leap, unless you’re a star player for the Lakers. That doesn’t

happen in real life. I urge you to set small goals, step-by-step. And you will find that with each small step, your goals may change (and that's a good thing), but as they change so will the options and opportunities available to you increase dramatically. Just be sure that with each small goal that you set and reach, you continue to move toward the big goal that you set for yourself, whatever it might be.

I am reminded about a statement by a famous judge:

He said, "The greatest thing in this world is not so much where we are, but in what direction we are moving."

Ask yourself, "What direction am I moving in?" Today, upon your graduation, I can say, you are moving in the right direction.

The choices you make, the small ones and the big ones should always keep you moving in the right direction. So, it doesn't matter whether you attend Los Angeles Trade Tech or East Los Angeles College or an Ivy League school. As long as when you look at yourself in the mirror you're moving in the right direction toward your main goals.

One final word:

There are many problems in our modern society: problems related to economic inequality, crime, about discrimination and social injustice. These problems existed when I was in high school, and they will continue to exist. But I want to issue a challenge to all of you to become advocates for eliminating these problems rather than contributing to them. I want to challenge each of you personally to do what you can to make this a better world for everyone. Something as simple as making sure that people you know are not excluded from participating in our society because of a barrier such as language, money, or technology can make a big difference.

And you will be all the happier for helping other people.

Ethel Percy Andrus, one of Lincoln's first principals, the first woman principal in this state, and the founder of the American Association of Retired Persons said:

"We learn the inner secret of happiness when we learn to direct our inner drives, our interests, and our attention to something besides ourselves."

And don't think for a moment that because you are just one person that you can't make a difference. By getting an education you can help solve many of our world's problems. I know you are probably concerned about fairness and equality, and equal opportunity for all. Believe me

when I say that as you move ahead in your education, you will be able to achieve these objectives, not just for yourself, but for your family, and for your community.

Congratulations to all of you on your outstanding achievement tonight.

[EDITOR'S NOTE: At a 2013 Lincoln High School reunion, Justice Moreno was presented the inaugural Dr. Ethel Percy Andrus Legacy Award for his achievements.]

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