

FIRST YEAR INDUCTION CEREMONY
Sunday, August 25, 2013

DOING THE RIGHT THING

First year Blue Jays, welcome. You have an incredible future ahead of you. You're also leaving much behind. Many of you accomplished great things in high school or, at least, had lots of fun. You'll have the opportunity to do both at Elizabethtown College. Some of you may wonder if you'll ever again hit the high points that you did in high school. Some of you can't wait to leave high school as far behind as possible. But one thing every single one of you will face here is the challenge to do the right thing: when you're faced with a tough situation, when someone needs help, when you hear someone say something hateful or bigoted, or when a friend is depending on you. Some of you know exactly what I mean since you've already faced this choice in high school. For others, it will be a new experience. But it will come for you all.

I can remember experiences like this in my own life, in high school and college. When I was a senior in high school, I knew a girl who I'll call Louise. She was a wonderful person, lively, smart, fun, who also wrestled with depression, and had a difficult relationship with her father. Like so many men, he'd gotten wound up in his job, and wasn't there when Louise needed him. She didn't tell me all the details, but during my senior year, things got worse. One day at school, the word spread that she run away from home, headed no one knew where. About a week later, I was working on the weekend at the school newspaper office, and a couple of guys dropped by. They told me that they had seen Louise at the football game the night before. She was back in town, but was crashing at various places and wasn't ready to go home.

I'm still a bit amazed at what I did next. My own relationship with my parents at the time was not very good, to say the least. But for some reason, when I heard that Louise hadn't gone home, I could just imagine what her parents must have been going through. I also thought that she wasn't solving anything by crashing at other people's houses. I had to do something. I found out from one of the guys who'd dropped by the newspaper office where he thought Louise was hanging out. I found her, and told her, "Look, even if you're not ready to go home, please let me call your parents. They must be sick worrying about you. I won't tell them where you are. I'll just tell them you're alive and okay."

She let me make the call. Her parents almost fainted while I was talking to them. "Thank God, she's alive! Where is she, Carl? Please tell us! Is she okay?" I had to tell a white lie and say that I didn't know exactly where she was, but that I would get a message to her if I could. "Thank you, thank you, O God, thank you," they said. I was shaking by the time I got off the phone. I found Louise again, and I told her, "You got to go home. No matter what's happened between you and your father, your parents want to make it better. They deserve another chance. Please, please go home." It took some persuading, but in the end, she admitted that she was in pretty bad shape and that she needed to go home.

Things for Louise still didn't go that well. For a time, her relationship with her family was stable, and then it deteriorated again. But I didn't see her as much as I had earlier, either. About a year and half later, I ran into one of the guys who had dropped by the school newspaper office that day. He was one of the few people who knew what I'd done to persuade Louise to go back home. He told me that he'd seen Louise again some weeks earlier, and then lost track of her. She was in bad shape, he said. She wasn't in school, wasn't living with her family, and he was worried, he said, that things might get worse for her. "What you did back in high school, Carl," he said, "was pretty cool." I could see the look in his eyes: "Do something....now."

And, I did..... nothing. After all, I was busy with college by then. I was living in the same city as Louise, but I didn't know where she was. She wasn't my responsibility. Was she?

That was over forty years ago. Since then, I have had my share of moments when I could have done more, could have said something, could have gotten involved, and didn't do as much as I could. But I also know that I've tried to stand up, reach out, comfort, protect, and support people in tough situations more than I would have if I'd smothered my conscience or let myself just look the other way.

Each of you, here in Elizabethtown College, and in the rest of your life, will face those times. Will you do the right thing? Will you do nothing? One of the best ways to use your college experience is to equip yourself now for the journey ahead. Yes, your academic goals are vitally important. Learn all you can, find out what you're good at, take advantage of the opportunities to do research with faculty members, to do internships, to take service learning courses where you're engaged with schools, hospitals, businesses, or community agencies. Absolutely study abroad, if you can. But remember that you need to educate your character as well as your mind. What better time and what better place to learn to stand up for the right things, to take responsibility, to speak up for right things than here and now? When a roommate, classmate, or friend is depressed, fearful, or hurting, yes, it is your responsibility to do what you can, even if all you do is help them get to Counseling or Student Health Services, or even just tell the RA in your residence hall that the person needs help. All of us need all of us to be the community we want to be. When you hear or see someone say bigoted words or words that are hateful or put down another person or a group, yes, it is your responsibility to speak up. If you can't confront the person who's spewing out the hate or bigotry yourself, go to your RA, Campus Security, the Dean of Students office, or a faculty member and tell them what happened. It's not snitching. It is not taking away someone's free speech. It is defending the rights of everyone to live with respect and not be afraid of prejudice. When you see bigotry or hate, silence is not an option. All of us need all of us to be the community we want to be.

Realize, too, all the positive energy that you embody. This campus is full of impressive student organizations because students like you have built them up, sometimes starting new clubs to meet a need, sometimes, generation of students after generation, keeping great organizations going. Check out Called to Lead, Moving Forward Together, Enactus, VITA (Volunteers in Tax Assistance), Campus Diversity Advocates, Into the Streets, and many, many more groups and activities on campus where students are helping the campus and the community, and learning to do the right thing. If there's a need, and you can't find an organization that's meeting it, find out about starting one that does.

You have a precious opportunity over the next four years to begin to shape your life. For over a century, Elizabethtown College has had the motto, “Educate For Service.” If there’s one phrase that every E-town student, every alumnus, and even many parents and community members know, about Elizabethtown College, it is “Educate for Service.” Serving someone doesn’t help only the person served. It helps you doing the service to know yourself, to learn about what the rest of the world is like, and to know what’s most important about life. Remember, you can never know how much difference you can make. About a year ago, I found out that Louise’s father had died. What had ever happened to her, I wondered? Unlike forty years ago, nowadays, thanks to Google and Facebook, it’s a lot easier to find someone if you want to, even if she’s changed her last name when she got married. I decided, after some hesitation, to write Louise. It was an awkward sympathy card to write. Maybe her relationship with her father had never healed. Maybe I was opening old wounds. Maybe, she didn’t even remember who I was. Maybe the fact that, like so many of her friends, I hadn’t done anything when she was really going through the toughest times, outweighed any good that she remembered about me from high school.

After several weeks, I got a letter back from Louise. Her father had died with his family around him, having lived, she said, a good life, and having, obviously, reconciled a long ago with Louise and she with him. Louise herself was married, with children, and even grandchildren, had gone to college and graduate school, and was, perhaps appropriately for someone who’d gone through such tough times herself, a counselor who’d helped many, many people deal with depression and addiction. She appreciated my card, and wrote that she still remembered me as one of the few people in high school who’d tried to help her when things were so bleak. As luck would have it, my travels around the country gave me the chance to meet Louise and her husband and learn what incredibly strong and caring people they are. She even said I looked like I did in high school—minus the hair. I think of her, and wished I had done more. I’m glad that I did the small act that I did. Acts like that, she said, helped her later get through the toughest times. Most of all, I admire how she came through deep struggles, did not give up, and ended up having an wonderful impact for good on the world. Take that lesson for yourself as well.

You will all face choices. Learn to do the right thing now. Elizabethtown College is the community it is because over and over again, students like you have spoken out, spoken up, reached out, and gone the extra mile for others. You will make this an even stronger, better community, and make yourselves into the kind of men and women you want to be.

Thank you.