

GENESEE COMMUNITY COLLEGE 49TH COMMENCEMENT CEREMONY

KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY BILL KAUFFMAN

MAY 21, 2017

THANK YOU, PRESIDENT SUNSER; TRUSTEES; FACULTY AND GUESTS.

CONGRATULATIONS TO EACH AND EVERY ONE OF THE GRADUATES AND YOUR FAMILIES, WHO ARE JUSTLY PROUD. THIS IS YOUR DAY, SO I SHAN'T DRONE ON UP HERE.

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESSES ARE OFTTIMES A STRING OF CLICHES TO BE ENDURED, IMPATIENTLY, BEFORE THE MAIN COURSE, THE AWARDING OF THE DIPLOMAS. I CAN'T RECALL A SINGLE THING THAT A SINGLE COMMENCEMENT SPEAKER HAS EVER SAID THAT STAYED WITH ME. FIVE YEARS FROM NOW--FIVE DAYS FROM NOW--I MAY BE JUST A DIM MEMORY, BUT I HOPE YOU'LL RECALL WITH APPRECIATION THE PEOPLE--YOUR NEIGHBORS, YOUR ANCESTORS, YOUR FAMILY--WHO MADE THIS PLACE, AND YOUR EDUCATION, POSSIBLE.

THIS IS THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF GENESEE COMMUNITY COLLEGE, WHICH WAS A CHILD OF THE 1960S. IT WAS BORN IN THE SUMMER OF LOVE, THROUGH A CITIZENS' INITIATIVE, A GRASS ROOTS MOVEMENT BY PEOPLE IN GENESEE COUNTY. IT WAS ORGANIC, A NATURAL OUTGROWTH, NOT SOMETHING IMPOSED UPON US BY SOME DISTANT AUTHORITY.

THE VERY NAMES OF THESE BUILDINGS SPEAK, BREATHE GENESEE COUNTY. WE'RE GATHERED TODAY IN THE ANTHONY ZAMBITO GYM--IF YOU'VE EVER BEEN IN ELBA, YOU KNOW THAT YOU CAN'T THROW A SNOWBALL WITHOUT HITTING A ZAMBITO. ANTHONY ZAMBITO WAS A SCIENTIST, A BROKER, AND A MUCK FARMER--I ALWAYS HAVE TO BE CAREFUL WHEN PRONOUNCING THAT PHRASE: MUCK FARMER; HE WAS ALSO A TRUSTEE OF THIS COLLEGE AND THE BIGGEST FAN THE COUGAR SPORTS TEAMS EVER HAD. I KNEW HIM ONLY BRIEFLY, WHEN MY WIFE AND I MOVED TO ELBA 25

YEARS AGO. HE WAS A KIND OLD MAN WITH WISE EYES WHO ALWAYS TOOK TIME TO SPEAK WITH ME WHEN I'D SEE HIM IN THE POST OFFICE. JUST A FEW WORDS, BUT HE WAS AN EMBODIMENT OF MOTHER TERESA'S ADJURATION: "NEVER LET IT HAPPEN THAT YOU MEET SOMEONE WHO IS NOT HAPPIER *AFTER* MEETING YOU THAN BEFORE."

FROM SMALL THINGS, BABY, BIG THINGS ONE DAY COME, AS THE SONG GOES, AND IT'S THOSE LITTLE ACTS OF KINDNESS, OF THOUGHTFULNESS--A SMILE, A HAND EXTENDED IN FRIENDSHIP, A SYMPATHETIC SHOULDER-- THAT VALIDATE OUR TIME ON THIS EARTH.

ANTHONY ZAMBITO'S SON CHARLES IS NOW THE GENESEE COUNTY COURT JUDGE: A MODEL OF PROBITY AND FAIRNESS AND INTELLIGENCE. HE IS HIS FATHER'S LEGACY, JUST AS THIS GYM IS.

TO GET TO THE ZAMBITO GYM I WALKED THROUGH THE STUART FORUM, NAMED FOR ANOTHER ELBAN, WILLIAM STUART, WHO AS A MEMBER OF THE GENESEE COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS HAD OPPOSED THE CREATION OF THIS COLLEGE; BUT UPON SEEING THE WIDESPREAD POPULAR SUPPORT, HE BECAME ONE OF ITS MOST AVID CHAMPIONS.

MR. STUART'S DAUGHTER, LETA SACKETT, TAUGHT GENERATIONS OF ELBA PRESCHOOLERS, INCLUDING OUR DAUGHTER, LESSONS NOT JUST EDUCATIONAL BUT MORAL AS WELL.

I PARKED NEAR THE CONABLE TECHNOLOGY BUILDING, WHOSE EPONYM IS THE LATE BARBER CONABLE, WHO SERVED THIS AREA IN CONGRESS FOR TWENTY YEARS. I REMEMBER MR. CONABLE SAYING, UPON LEARNING OF THIS HONOR, "I CAN'T BELIEVE THEY'RE NAMING A TECHNOLOGY BUILDING FOR ME. I DON'T EVEN KNOW HOW TO USE A COMPUTER."

BARBER CONABLE WASN'T JUST A TIME-SERVING OR GRANDSTANDING POLITICIAN. HE WAS BORN TO A FAMILY OF ERUDITE WYOMING COUNTY LAWYERS AND DAIRY FARMERS WHO USED TO RECITE POETRY TO THE COWS AS THEY MILKED THEM. AS A BOY, BARBER WAS TEASED FOR HIS NAME--WHO NAMES A KID BARBER?— [Dairy farmers who read poetry to their cows, that's who!]

BUT HE WENT ON TO A TREMENDOUSLY DISTINGUISHED CAREER. ON MULTIPLE OCCASIONS IN THE 1970S AND 1980S HE WAS NAMED "MOST RESPECTED MEMBER OF CONGRESS" IN VARIOUS POLLS. HE NEVER ACCEPTED A CAMPAIGN CONTRIBUTION OF GREATER THAN \$50. WHEN HE RETIRED, BARBER CONABLE DIDN'T SELL OUT FOR BIG MONEY BY BECOMING A LOBBYIST IN WASHINGTON, DC; HE MOVED HOME, TO ALEXANDER, IN THAT GREAT BIG YELLOW HOUSE ON ROUTE 98 THAT IS NOW OWNED BY GCC'S MATT AND MOLLY GRIMES.

WHAT WAS REMARKBLE ABOUT MR. CONABLE IN RETIREMENT IS THAT HE MOVED EFFORTLESSLY BETWEEN WORLDS; ONE DAY HE'D FLY TO WASHINGTON TO CHAIR MEETINGS OF THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION'S BOARD OF REGENTS, AND THE NEXT DAY HE'D BE BACK IN GENESEE COUNTY, HAVING COFFEE AND DONUTS WITH HIS FRIENDS AT GENESEE HARDWARE OR GIVING A TALK TO SOME HISTORICAL SOCIETY ABOUT THE SENECA INDIANS.

HE WAS, FULLY, A MAN OF HIS PLACE.

ALL THESE PEOPLE I'VE MENTIONED BRIGHTENED THE CORNER WHERE THEY WERE, TO BORROW A LINE FROM AN OLD HYMN. THEY WERE PRESENT; THEY MADE A DIFFERENCE--NOT NECESSARILY IN BIG WAYS; LATE IN LIFE MR. CONABLE TOLD ME THAT HIS POLITICAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS WERE LIKE FOOTPRINTS ON A SANDY BEACH, AND SOON THEY'D BE WASHED AWAY FOREVER.

NO, THE DIFFERENCES THESE PEOPLE MADE WERE ON A MORE INTIMATE SCALE, THE HUMAN SCALE: THE ONLY SCALE THAT CAN TRULY MEASURE A PERSON'S WORTH.

BARBER CONABLE'S MEMORIAL BENCH IN THE ALEXANDER CEMETERY READS, "REACH OUT!" THIS MEANS ENGAGE WITH EACH OTHER; TALK--FACE TO FACE, IN COMMUNION WITH ONE ANOTHER. LIVE A REAL LIFE, NOT A VIRTUAL LIFE. THE VIVIDNESS, THE COLOR OF THE WORLD OUTSIDE IS SO MUCH MORE SPECTACULAR THAN ANYTHING YOU CAN SEE ON A HIGH-DEFINITION TV SET.

WE CAN BE GRATEFUL FOR THE APPLICATION OF CERTAIN TECHNOLOGIES--AIR CONDITIONING IN A SWELTERING CLASSROOM; VOCAL AMPLIFICATION (MAYBE); PHOTOGRAPHY, SO YOU CAN TAKE A PICTURE OF YOUR SON OR DAUGHTER OR HUSBAND OR WIFE RECEIVING HIS OR HER DIPLOMA--BUT TECHNOLOGIES CAN ENSLAVE US IF WE DON'T WATCH OUT. DON'T BE REMOTELY CONTROLLED BY A LITTLE HAND-HELD PHONE. DON'T STAGGER AROUND LIKE EXTRAS IN *THE WALKING DEAD*. DON'T LET READING TEXTS REPLACE READING BOOKS. (I SUPPOSE I HAVE A CERTAIN FINANCIAL SELF-INTEREST IN DISPENSING SUCH ADVICE.)

I DON'T USUALLY PREACH, BUT IT IS SUNDAY, AND I HAVE THE PULPIT, AS IT WERE, SO I'LL TELL YOU THE KEY TO A LONG LIFE. (I HOPE IT'S NOT ABSTAINING FROM PIZZA AND BEER, IN WHICH CASE *I'M* ONE OF THE WALKING DEAD.)

I HAD A FRIEND NAMED HENRY CLUNE WHO LIVED TO THE AGE OF 105. HE WAS A WELL-KNOWN NOVELIST AND NEWSPAPERMAN. UNTIL HE WAS IN HIS LATE 90S, HENRY RAN WIND SPRINGS ON HIS FRONT LAWN EVERY DAY. HIS DOCTOR HAD TOLD HIM TO STOP DOING THIS WHEN HENRY WAS IN HIS 80S, BUT WITHIN A FEW YEARS THE DOCTOR WAS LONG DEAD. EVEN AT AGE 105 HENRY STILL WROTE IN HIS DIARY EVERY DAY, READ A FAVORITE BOOK

EVERY EVENING, AND DRAINED A MARTINI EVERY AFTERNOON PROMPTLY AT 5 PM.

PEOPLE WOULD ASK HIM, "WHAT'S THE SECRET TO LIVING SO LONG AND SO WELL?" IT WASN'T THE MARTINI. NO, HENRY ANSWERED, IT WAS "CURIOSITY."

HENRY WAS INTERESTED. IN THE WORLD. IN HIS NEIGHBORS. IN HIS OWN BACKYARD. IN WHAT WAS GONNA HAPPEN NEXT. HE PARTICIPATED. HE LISTENED. HE ENGAGED. HE REACHED OUT. HE HAD FOUND SOMETHING HE LOVED TO DO AND HE DID IT AS WELL AS HE COULD, WITH JOY AND PRIDE AND ALWAYS A SENSE OF WONDER AND GRATITUDE.

HENRY WASN'T JADED. HE WASN'T BORED. HIS IMAGINATION HAD NOT BEEN DULLED BY COUNTLESS HOURS OF VIDEO GAMES. HE STAYED IN HIS HOMETOWN OF ROCHESTER FOR OVER 100 YEARS YET IT REMAINED A SOURCE OF ENDLESS FASCINATION TO HIM. BATAVIA, TOO, AS I DISCOVERED AFTER SOME YEARS AWAY, IS IN ITS OWN STRANGE WAY A PLACE OF ENCHANTMENT AND MYSTERY, IF ONLY WE OPEN OUR EYES TO IT.

A WEEK OR TWO BEFORE HE DIED, I VISITED HENRY. HE WAS BEDRIDDEN BUT STILL SHARP OF MIND. HE ASKED ME TO WALK OVER TO A SHELF ON WHICH WERE LINED UP THE 12 OR 13 BOOKS HE HAD PUBLISHED DURING HIS LIFETIME.

"RUN YOUR FINGER ALONG THE SPINES OF THOSE BOOKS," HE TOLD ME IN A QUAVERING VOICE. I DID.

"NOT BAD," HE SAID. "I TRIED."

I TRIED. MAY WE ALL STRIVE FOR SUCH AN EPITAPH?

WHETHER YOU'RE GOING INTO THE WORKPLACE OR OFF TO ANOTHER SCHOOL OR INTO THE RAISING OF A FAMILY YOU'LL BE FACED WITH CHOICES ABOUT THE LIFE YOU'RE GOING TO LEAD. THESE AREN'T NECESSARILY HUGE, EPOCHAL, TURNING-POINT TYPE DECISIONS. NO, THESE ARE LITTLE EVERYDAY CHOICES YOU MAKE ALL THE TIME.

TO BE A GOOD NEIGHBOR, A GOOD FRIEND, A GOOD FARMER OR NURSE OR ENGINEER OR POLICE OFFICER OR MUSICIAN; TO BE A GOOD MOTHER, A GOOD FATHER, A GOOD MEMBER OF YOUR CHURCH, A GOOD BASEBALL OR SOFTBALL COACH, A GOOD TEACHER: THESE ARE ALL WITHIN YOUR GRASP; IT'S ALL UP TO YOU.

WHAT A HORRIBLE THING: TO BE OLD, LOOKING BACK ON YOUR LIFE, AND TO REALIZE THAT YOU MISSED IT. YOU WEREN'T PRESENT. IT PASSED YOU BY. I DON'T MEAN BY THIS MATERIAL OR PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS; THOSE THINGS ARE EPHEMERAL, AND CAN TURN OUT TO BE FOOL'S GOLD. I MEAN BE PRESENT IN THE MOMENT; BE THANKFUL FOR YOUR BLESSINGS, INCLUDING YOUR TEACHERS, THE STAFF AT GCC, AND THOSE WHO ARE NO LONGER WITH US BUT WHO MADE ALL THIS POSSIBLE.

YOU'RE NOT JUST GRADUATING FROM COLLEGE TODAY. YOU'RE GRADUATING FROM **GENESEE COMMUNITY** COLLEGE. THE NAME MEANS SOMETHING. IT'S IMPORTANT. THE COMMUNITY OF GENESEE HAS, IN VARYING WAYS AND TO VARYING DEGREES, SHAPED YOU. NOW IT'S YOUR TURN TO SHAPE IT; AND FOR THOSE WHO WILL BE LIVING IN OTHER COUNTIES, OTHER STATES, OTHER COUNTRIES, IT'S YOUR TURN TO SHAPE THOSE PLACES. YOU CAN ENRICH YOUR PLACE; YOU CAN MAKE IT BETTER, KINDER, LIVELIER, MORE INVITING; OR YOU CAN JUST SKATE ALONG THE SURFACE, MAKING NO DIFFERENCE, LEAVING NO ONE'S LIFE BETTER FOR HAVING MET YOU. IT'S YOUR CHOICE.

IN A FEW MINUTES YOU'LL BE WALKING ACROSS THIS STAGE, RECEIVING YOUR DIPLOMAS, AND EXITING GENESEE COMMUNITY COLLEGE WITH, I HOPE, A REAL AND MERITED FEELING OF PRIDE, ACCOMPLISHMENT, AND GRATITUDE. BUT EVEN THOUGH YOU LEAVE THIS CAMPUS, YOU'LL CARRY PIECES OF IT WITH YOU WHEREVER YOU GO, AND WHATEVER YOU DO. MY WISH FOR YOU IS THAT YOU'LL PURSUE YOUR VOCATION, YOUR AVOCATION, YOUR EDUCATION, YOUR FAMILY LIFE, YOUR COMMUNITY LIFE, WITH A SENSE OF WONDER AND LOVE AND AWARENESS AND CURIOSITY.

THANK YOU FOR LISTENING, AND BEST OF LUCK TO YOU ALL.