

Senior Last Lecture
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Thank you, and good evening. And congratulations to you graduating seniors...It's always good to return to Miami. You never quite remember just how beautiful it is here until you're actually back. And it seems the students keep getting brighter – and younger.

I am honored to have been asked to take part in your senior activities. I am also honored to see so many of you in attendance. I know it's a hardship to have torn yourselves away from your PCs. Many of you no doubt are in the throes of becoming as rich as Bill Gates – was. I'm sure you are eager to return to your labors, so I'll keep my remarks as brief as possible.

How times have changed. Thirty-seven years ago, when I was sitting in a graduation ceremony here, the greatest concern of my class was either hoping to get into graduate school or just finding a job. Imagine. Then, we only knew about blue chips. Or potato chips. We'd never heard of microchips. And yet – there are some similarities between then and now. Certain truths remain constant. While times change, people don't. Nor does dealing with people, and that includes oneself. That, I assume is what leadership with values – the topic I was asked to speak on – are all about. Or ought to be. Leadership with values are qualities that all of us grapple with all of our lives.

To be sure, I am one of those grapplers. And while I wouldn't presume to lecture any of you about how to lead, or how to maintain high moral postures – many of you, I imagine, could tell me a thing or two about those subjects – I HAVE lived longer than you and so have witnessed more. From my experience – that is, from what I have learned and from what I have observed – there are various kinds of leadership. Primarily, though, there is the kind in which one leads by words, and the other by example. There is, at one end of the spectrum, the general motivating his troops. At the other end is the lone individual facing perhaps a private situation and demonstrating an inner courage.

Take the latter first. One of our country's greatest generals was Dwight David Eisenhower, supreme commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force in the Second World War. Under him was General George Patton, commander of the United States Third Army. A man who served under Patton told me this story. When the Third Army liberated Paris, Eisenhower was concerned about the soldiers becoming too friendly with the French citizens. There were still German spies among them. So Eisenhower issued an edict from his office in London: there is to be NO FRATERNIZATION between American troops and the French. General Patton realized this would be hugely demoralizing to his troops. After all, his men were in PAR-EE, the city of romance. What if Cupid was hard at work? How could his men be prohibited from, as the French say, la cohabitation, with the French women? No fraternization? Won't do.

So while General Patton didn't want to be insubordinate to General Eisenhower, he, nonetheless, issued a counter-order. Patton told his men: Cohabitation without conversation is non-fraternization. Some leaders know by instinct or reason how to get the best out of all possible

worlds – or words – regardless of the obstacles. It takes will, creativity and independence – subtle or otherwise.

Then there is the other kind of leadership, beyond that of Eisenhower or Patton, one in which the world is not watching. I was reminded of this when I read a recent piece in The New York Times Sunday Magazine entitled “Saving Konrad Latte.” The subhead read: “For every Jew saved (during the Nazi regime), dozens of Germans performed everyday acts of heroism to make it possible. This man’s saviors proved that obedience wasn’t the only religion.”

Turns out that there were some Germans – hardly a multitude, to be sure, but some – who during the Hitler era hid Jews in Berlin and in other parts of Germany. One of them, a woman named Ursula Meissner, now 77, said that she felt compelled to give shelter in her Berlin apartment to Konrad Latte, then a boy, and Latte’s parents. Frau Meissner was spiritually unable to turn away these people who stood at her doorstep with Jewish stars sewn onto their coats. She recalled: “You wanted to look yourself in the eye the following morning.”

It is rare for someone to show the kind of courage, the level of values that civilized people prize, that Frau Meissner did in such perilous circumstances. Most of us, fortunately, will never be in that kind of position, one in which taking an action may determine life or death. Ours as well as others. But there are small moments when standing up for what’s right does take some courage. And “wanting to be able to look yourself in the eye the following morning,” as Ursula Meissner said, is the guiding principle.

Thinking for yourself can be one of the bravest things anyone is ever called upon to do. I have been covering sports for newspapers and magazines and writing books on sports for 35 years, and I found it over-rated when someone is supposed to show so-called courage when he plays “hurt,” as the saying goes. Sometimes the players just like the game enough to play despite pain in his leg, or he’s foolhardy to risk further injury, or sometimes he’s playing on the last year of a contract before he becomes a free agent, and selfishly hopes to show off his skills. And sometimes a player has abused his body to the extent that he dissipates his talents with wine, women and song, as did Mickey Mantle, who, in the hospital shortly before dying of liver cancer, told the world on a national television press conference, “Don’t look to me as a hero, I was no hero.” He said he hadn’t taken care of himself as he should have. “Maybe kids can learn from that,” he said. And for the man who hit booming home runs from both sides of the plate in tense World Series games, I thought that this was his finest hour.

But I have seen and been aware of leadership and a demonstration of significant values by athletes, on and off the playing field. There was a baseball player, an outfielder, named Jesse Barfield who played for the Toronto Blue Jays in the 1980s. You may never have heard of Jesse Barfield. He was a good player, not a great player, though one year he did lead the American League in home runs with 40. One day in the Blue Jays clubhouse a woman reporter entered. This was at a time when women sports reporters were not as common in the locker rooms as they are today. A Blue Jays teammate was being interviewed not far from Barfield’s cubicle. The other player saw the woman and began shouting obscenities at her, his shouts that she didn’t belong there filled the locker room. He screamed that if she didn’t leave he’d cut off the interview.

Women had been fighting the legitimate fight to have the kind of access to news sources that men do. If a player is considerate, all he has to do in a delicate situation in the locker room is wear a towel around his waist. Anyway, the woman reporter, Suzyn Waldman of SFAN in New York, then relatively new at the job and understandably embarrassed – and possibly intimidated – began to step back. She also didn't want to squelch the interview for the other reporters.

“Hey, Suzy,” she heard someone calling from nearby. “I went 3 for 4 today. Don't you want to talk to me?” It was Jesse Barfield. Barfield did not know Waldman personally – she later learned that he had turned to someone and asked her name. Barfield smiled, waved her over, and gave Waldman what she said was “a terrific interview.” Barfield's move was more than mere chivalry. It was an act of moral courage – the kind of courage that goes beyond, say, hitting a home run in the bottom of the ninth. He didn't have to say anything at that moment. No one expected him to. And he risked possible ridicule from his teammates, maybe even a kind of ostracism from peers if he did so. And no one else came to Waldman's defense. True, Jesse Barfield was a veteran player – but more than that, Jesse Barfield was A MAN. He understood that, as noted by Nobel peace laureate Elis Wiesel, “silence signifies consent.” And Barfield spoke up. I later asked Barfield about the incident. He said: “She was just trying to do her job, just like I'm trying to do mine. I only did what I'd want done to me. As long as they respect us, they should be respected as well.” Waldman said that she never had a problem in the Blue Jays locker room after that. So Barfield's obvious VALUES resulted in leadership as well. He was a one-man peer group.

There may also be times when leadership may involve grave physical risks – even in sports. When Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier when he appeared in the lineup of the Brooklyn Dodgers in April of 1947, it meant an entire social revolution – one that has had ramifications in virtually every area of our culture, from housing to education to business. Sometimes even a sports story can have that kind of effect. But in many parts of our country then, and in many peoples' minds, Robinson's integration of a ball field was worse than odious. Some members of his team, primarily Southerners, initially drew up a petition not to play with him. One who refused to sign the petition was Harold (Pee Wee) Reese, the respected shortstop of the Dodgers, and the team captain.

Reese was from a small town in Kentucky – Brandenburg – which had a Southern sensibility. Reese rose above that, and his action put a pinprick into the balloon of the racists on his team. Yet Robinson continued to absorb verbal abuse from opponents, was spiked on purpose, ducked beanballs and received numerous death threats. Reese observed this with anger. On the morning of a game that first season in Cincinnati, Robinson got an anonymous phone call in his room. He was told that if he took the field, he'd be the target of a rifle in the stands. Authorities and the team were alerted. Just before the start of the game, Reese walked over to Robinson and put his arm around him. Everyone saw it. It was a most casual but powerful message of acceptance. It also seemed for Reese to be saying, as players on the Dodgers would later recall, If you're going to shoot Jackie, you must shoot me too. Years later I asked Robinson about that. He said, “I think Pee Wee had kind of sensed the hopeless, dead feeling in me and came over and stood beside me for awhile. He was STANDING by me, I could tell you that. I will never forget it.” I

once spoke with Reese about it. “Something in my gut reacted to the moment,” said Reese. “Something about – what? – The unfairness of it? The injustice of it? I don’t know.”

For the most part, Reese’s proper treatment of Robinson was done in an understated manner. Years later, Robinson recalled to Reese how much Reese had meant to him in those early difficult days in which he was trying to make it in the major leagues – how much Reese had helped. Reese replied: “You know, Jackie, I never went out of my way to be nice to you.” And Robinson said: “Pee Wee, maybe that’s what I appreciated most.” Reese, as it were, treated Robinson with the respect he would anyone else who earned it, and that was all Robinson had hoped for. Interestingly, for the rest of his life Reese would be called “Captain” by all of his former teammates. It was a mark of enduring respect. The Captain died last August in Louisville, at age 81.

But the Reeses, the Robinsons and the Barfields, in the not-so-isolated world of sports, helped instruct us in the strength of the individual, the refusal to be cowed by the crowd. Larry Bird, now the coach of the Indiana Pacers, was another interesting team leader as a player, and in some ways exhibited leadership qualities that, though the circumstances were not quite so dramatic, were similar to Reese. On the court, Bird’s hustle, his desire to win, his seeking to make teammates better – his coolness under pressure – was a clear sign to the other players to follow suit.

Some here may remember the playoff game in 1988 against the Detroit Pistons with two seconds to go and the Pistons ahead by a point. They had the ball out of bounds. Victory seemed certain. In fact, Dennis Rodman, a rookie with Detroit and in his pre-neon hair days, was already dancing down the court, arms waving, celebrating the win. But the canny Bird, knowing the game wasn’t over, anticipated the in-bounds pass, stole the ball – whipped it to a teammate, Dennis Johnson, cutting for the hoop – and Johnson scored the basket as the buzzer sounded that won the game for the Celtics and broke the hearts of the Pistons.

Off the court, the leader Bird may have been even more intriguing. Like Pee Wee Reese, he often did significant things in a seemingly casual manner. I remember covering an NBA playoff game in Boston, between the Celtics and the Los Angeles Lakers in the early 1980s. Bird had had a typical terrific game. In the crowded Celtic locker room after the game, the reporters naturally made a bee-line for Bird’s locker. He wasn’t there. Where was Larry Bird? He was in the trainer’s room, we were told, which is off-limits to the press. What to do, as the deadline clock ticked away? Well, interview some of the other players until Bird came out. You gotta get something in your notebook. About a half-hour later, Bird emerged, and spoke. But why had he been gone so long while all the other players sat at their lockers?

“Larry knows that he’ll generally be the focus of a story,” one of the Boston writers told me. “And he doesn’t want to hog the spotlight. He knows that everyone likes to share the glory, to get their names in the papers and their faces on the news. “So he forces us to talk to the other players. The other players appreciate it, and respect it.” On the other hand, when the Celtics lost, and the reporters came into the locker room, Bird was seated in front of his cubicle, ready to take the questions. He was the leader of the team, and he was going to take the brunt of anything that

was negative about the team's performance. The other players appreciated, and respected that, as well.

When I was a student at Miami, I wrote a sports column in the Miami Student newspaper. I loved it. I would sometimes be up much of the night writing or re-writing the column in my head. I wanted to be good at it. Now, I grew up in Chicago, and grew up reading the sports pages, and reading Red Smith in the Chicago Sun-Times. Red Smith was a syndicated sports columnist with his flagship paper the New York Herald Tribune. Turns out, his column, while I was a student at Miami, was also carried in the Dayton Daily News and the Cincinnati Enquirer. So I read him there, too. Smith was not only generally considered the best sports writer in America, he was also viewed by many as a literary figure. He was a beautiful, graceful writer, admired by such as Ernest Hemingway and taught in college English courses. Smith's versatility was such that he could be hard-hitting, or humorous, or touch a chord so deep that it could bring tears to the eyes of the reader. I loved his figures of speech. He wrote one about an outfielder who jumped to catch a fly ball and "stayed aloft so long he looked like an empty uniform hanging in its locker."

One day in 1960, my junior year and living in Brandon Hall, I decided to send Red Smith two of my columns from the Miami Student, asking him for advice and comment – I mean, what else did he have to do with his time? About a month later I received this reply:

"Dear Ira Berkow, when I was a cub in Milwaukee I had a city editor who'd stroll over and read across a guy's shoulder when he was writing a lead. Sometimes he'd approve, sometimes he'd say gently, 'Try again,' and walk away. My advice is, try again. And then again. If you're for this racket, and not many really are, then you've got an eternity of sweat and tears ahead. I don't mean just you; I mean anybody. My first impulse was to paste up your stories and write in marginal criticisms. They wouldn't have made you happy. Just keep trying to do it your way, never imitating."

He then made a couple of comments about my use of language, and closed with: "Never mind about this. Keep trying to do it your way. Good luck and God bless... Yours, Red Smith." Of course I had hoped he would like my stories more. But I was flattered that he had taken the time to read them – and to write.

I pasted up those same two stories, sent them to him with a note: "Dear Mr. Smith, Please make me unhappy." I continued a very casual correspondence with him over the years, and at one point, perhaps a year after my first letter to him, he wrote: "You are showing decided improvement." "Decided" immediately became one of my all-time favorite words. By the way, in time, Smith and I became friendly and colleagues and overlapped for nine months at The New York Times.

When Walter Wellesley (Red) Smith died in January of 1982, at age 76, I was asked to write his obituary, which, it happened, ran on the front page of the Times. In the piece I mentioned, without using a name, or names, that Smith could be generous with advice to college students who aspired to be writers, and quoted from that first letter to me.

Why do I bring this up in a discussion about leadership? Because Smith was honest about those first two stories I sent to him, but sensitive enough in advice to a novice to also be encouraging,

in a wholly realistic manner. And HE had been similarly encouraged when he was a cub reporter. Surely, advice he had received early on from the city editor in Milwaukee was, also, “Try again.” And Smith did tell me, “Do it your way.” Which I have attempted. Everyone has a different style. You see it not just in writers, of course, you see it in coaches too. Two examples:

There was Dean Smith, the great North Carolina basketball coach, who never seemed to raise his voice. And there is Bobby Knight, known by his admirers as General Robert Montgomery Knight, who has been known to raise his voice on occasion, and maybe even in a fit of pique heave some of the arena’s furniture onto the court. Or throttle a player by the neck.

But it is obvious that one doesn’t have to berate or physically abuse someone to get the best out of him, or her. You can be honest, and, in most cases, use facts instead of emotions.

Red Smith explained to me, for example, that using “precocious phalanges,” as I had in describing Bob Jencks, a very good place kicker for Miami, was simply a pretentious way of trying to avoid the cliché “educated toe.” Avoiding a cliché was a good idea, it was clear, but my choice of phrases was not. Red Smith’s tone, though, suggested compassion. And kindness should not be construed as weakness.

Leo Rosten wrote in his novel, “Captain Newman, M.D.” that “it is the weak who are cruel, and gentleness is to be expected only from the strong.” And I believe that. And cruel, of course, is different from tough. One of the toughest, but gentlest, athletes and men I have had the pleasure to know is Muhammad Ali.

In the early 1970s, for a column, I traveled to Chicago to spend a day with Ali, who was training for a defense of his heavyweight boxing title. Just before leaving New York a woman friend, learning of my trip, asked if I’d please get an autograph from the champ for her two small boys. I told her that that was totally unprofessional. I couldn’t ask for his autograph when I’m writing a story about him. “Oh,” she said, “couldn’t you? It would mean so much to my sons.” I said, Look, if the situation arises, and I can ask him without feeling there’s a problem, I’ll do it.

My day with Ali went well. I had known him for a few years and he seemed comfortable with me. At day’s end, I said to him, “Champ, I hate to ask you this, but would you mind signing an autograph for two small boys?” He said, “No, not at all.” I handed him my notepad and a pen. Ali asked what the boys’ names were. I told him, and for some reason I added that their mother has trouble making them clean their room. Ali wrote: “To Timmy and Ricky. Clean that room or I will seal your doom.”

That’s leadership. That’s values. That’s also a sense of humor, not a bad thing to have in your arsenal for life. Good luck and good striving to each of you. Thank you.