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My Last Lecture

Ben Elrod

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INTRODUCTION

August 27, 2008

This outline is offered with some degree of reticence because of the nature of the subject matter. The context at the time of the original presentation was quite different than that of the present.

My retirement was at hand after twenty-three years in the service of Ouachita in one capacity or another. That figure does not include my four years as a student. The point is that I knew my audience about as well as one can know others. They, in turn, knew me quite well. I spoke as one speaks to a “band of brothers.” The context allowed for some extraordinary openness by a usually basically private person. I was sharing my inner thoughts with my friends. I asked that there be no recording because the lecture was intended for that audience only.

Now, ten years later, my friend, Ray, inquires about my willingness to allow the outline to be published. Ten years of personnel changes means that many of the Ouachita family are unknown to me and they, in turn, “know not Joseph” (Ben, for those who aren’t acquainted with the Old Testament). That is quite a different context than the original one.

Ray, as you know, is a patient man. He has tolerated my indecision and quirkiness, and has coaxed me through the process of deciding that, yes, we would publish. So, friends known and unknown, here it is.

Perhaps the best explanation to those who do not know me is to compare myself in this instance to the fellow who, in a shopping mall in a major city, threw himself into a plate glass window. As his wounds were being tended, someone asked why in the world he did it. His explanation was, “At the time, it seemed the thing to do.”

Ben M. Elrod

LAST LECTURE

April 22, 1998

Somehow, doing what was touted as a last lecture was more appealing to me at 37 than at age 67. After all, the odds have greatly increased that this could, indeed, *be* the last lecture! Pete Parks always spoke in his cowboy lingo of “that great round-up in the sky,” but I’m not in a hurry to get to that “great board meeting in the sky.” So, the implications of age change the eagerness with which I attack the subject.

By way of further preliminary remarks, I see no evidence of recording, and request that there be none. There will be no copies of this presentation. What I’m going to say is too personal for any distribution beyond this group, and may be too personal even for this limited group.

I feel a bit like Daniel Webster must have felt when, late on an evening in the White House, someone asked the question, “Mr. Webster, what is the most profound thought you have ever had?” He was reported to have looked around carefully and asked a trusted friend in a whisper, “Do all here know me?” When he was assured that it was so, he said, “My relationship to God.” If you understand what he was saying to his friend and to the group, you will understand what I am about to do.

I will not present admonitions, suggestions, or even subtle hints about how life should be ordered. Rather, I want to share with you how I discovered that I have ordered mine. I say “discovered,” because I couldn’t have told you two months ago. In preparation for this presentation, I have worked with three lists which I want to share with you. I began preparing them not knowing what would be on any of them. There were some surprises for me. There may be some for you.

The three headings of the lists are (1) things which have been relatively unimportant to me, (2) things which have been important to me, and (3) the ambitions reflected in the foregoing lists.

I considered calling this presentation “Confessions of a President” after concocting the headings! However, after compiling the lists, I decided to call it “Seeking One’s Essence.” At this juncture in life, what do I know about my essence? What makes me tick? And how can I find out? Nothing more complicated was involved, I discovered, than providing answers to the three questions. An obvious qualifier is the matter of how honest we can be with ourselves. I’m not sure about that, but I can say that I’ve tried very diligently to tell myself, and ultimately, you, the truth. You obviously will have your own opinion.

I. Things Which Have Been Relatively Unimportant to Me.

1. Position. I have never sought position in life. I applied to Turner’s Stave Mill when I was 12 years old for a job carrying a bucket of water to pour on fires on the mill yard caused by sparks from the steam boiler. I applied to the barber shop in Rison for a shoe shine position.

Since that time I have never applied for a position. I have had friends ask me if they could submit my name here and there, and I have agreed to let them, but I have never asked them to do so.

Strangely enough, the opportunities have seemed to come in pairs, and at times that has been confusing, but I haven’t applied. A good example was in 1970 when Dan Grant was coming to Ouachita and called to invite me back as V.P. for Development. I had been dealing with the presidential search committee from William Jewel College in Missouri. That was the most agonizing choice I ever made. Finally, the contact from William Jewel asked me to respond with a “yes” or “no” by 8:00 p.m. on a Saturday night, with the Board poised for a Sunday afternoon meeting to elect me if I said yes. I ultimately called him and told him I couldn’t say yes, and I supposed that meant no. I next called Dan Grant and told him I would return to Ouachita.

Now, there were logical considerations. I was president of Oakland City College, and had found that I got much more satisfaction out of development work than out of being a president. Further, I came to feel that my 10 or 12 years as a pastor had conditioned me to want to serve people more than direct them as an executive. Finally, my children were at ages and stages which made us feel that being “home” at Arkadelphia might be much more important than the higher position at William Jewel.

Similarly, in the case of the presidency of Georgetown College, I took no initiative. We were sitting on the platform in April of 1978 dedicating McClellan Hall. Dr. W.O. Vaught leaned over and whispered, “Would you be interested in being interviewed by the presidential search committee of Georgetown College in Kentucky?” I said “no.” Later, I said, “Tell me more later.” It turned out that he had been asked by the committee to get my response.

When the Ouachita Committee called in 1988, my response was “Comb the field, and if you don’t find someone better, I’ll talk to you.”

Point—Position hasn’t been terribly important to me.

2. Possessions. We all have unimaginable possessions compared to most of the peoples of the world. I have had few possessions, and I have had many, and I have been equally happy under either circumstance.

My passion is not possessions. I will deal further with money later in what could appear to be an inconsistency in this presentation.

3. Orthodoxy. I have always resented efforts at forced orthodoxy whether in religion, in Rotary Club, or in friendships. I resist being made over in anyone's mold.

If you are shocked to hear me say that, let me say that I am, too. But it's infinitely true, and I could elaborate much more if time permitted. By the way, this characteristic came crashing to the surface in my reaction to denominational politics.

4. Social Standing. I despise most strictly social events.

I have a strong innate shyness that makes me very uncomfortable in most large social settings, and especially so when I do not know any or many of the crowd.

My tendency is to stay close to people I know, or, failing that opportunity, to stay on the fringe of the crowd. I usually go to receptions anywhere but Ouachita for the last fifteen minutes, only. I seldom ever enjoy the experience. I am not a social climber. I've never aspired to be socially active even in Arkadelphia circles.

II. What Things Have Been Important to Me.

1. Family. My parents and my brother first, and later my wife and children, now grandchildren. The extended family of grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins—all have been very important to me.

2. Friends. I have been most fortunate to make and keep the most meaningful friendships. Several are 3 years old! I've also been very fortunate in the identity of those who have been my enemies—one could not possibly have more appropriate people as enemies!

3. Other Relationships. Students, faculty & staff, parents, alumni, vendors, etc. Not necessarily close friends, but significant in my life.

Children—A special set of relationships.

Students—A source of great joy to me.

4. God. I have fellowship with God, my Heavenly Father, my Redeemer, my strength, my joy.

Experienced through church.

Experienced through worship.

Experienced through His wonderful world.

5. Money. I said that possessions were not all that important to me, and now I'm saying that money is important. Let me explain. In 1963, I came to Ouachita as its first Vice President for Development partly because, as a Trustee, I had learned how limited we were in trying to improve Ouachita because of lack of money.

Money is the power to get things done, and there is no substitute for it.

Individually, with it we support our church, Ouachita, and the Baptist Medical

System primarily, and other causes secondarily.

Betty Lou and I have created a \$100,000 gift annuity for Ouachita and have the school in our wills for \$500,000. We hope to do more.

The improvements during my tenure as president have come about only with the availability of a lot of money.

The three things of which I am most pleased are the new General Education Curriculum, the increased salaries, and the increased retirement commitment. Two of the three required a great deal of money to accomplish, and the third, the General Education program, will cost a “bundle” to implement.

Money is important—not to be loved—the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil—but to be deployed for good things—and there are no viable substitutes.

6. Integrity. I believe that one’s integrity is one of his or her most precious possessions. I have very seldom lost sleep over problems. When I have, it has been because I felt that my integrity had been questioned.

I’ve paid quite a price throughout my life to try to maintain my trustworthiness. I believe it is worth the price.

7. Ouachita. There is no way that I can fully describe how my life has been intertwined with this institution since I was eighteen years of age. The *ways* in which Ouachita has impacted me would fill a book. I can’t begin to explain my life without repeated references to Ouachita. It has been God’s primary means of His invading my life and guiding it for His better purposes.

8. Other Things.

Children.

Music—Easter Sunday—Resurrection hymns—Greeting people—My tears.

Learning.

My boat.

III. The Ambitions Revealed. What, then, are the ambitions revealed from a consideration of these two lists? I hope that my analysis is accurate.

1. A desire to serve God and my fellow man.
2. A desire to be where I could make a difference in the lives of others.
3. A desire to have enough wealth to do the following:
 - A. Provide for a reasonably comfortable life for myself and my family.
 - B. Provide for significant giving to causes in which I believe.
 - C. Provide for my wife if she survives me, and leave a reasonable share of my material blessings for my children and their children.
4. A desire to stay meaningfully related to my friends and to Ouachita and my church.
5. To design one more houseboat!
6. To get to heaven!