

2006 Distinguished Teacher of the Year

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Dedicating ourselves to moral courage

I am honored to accept this award and to share the stage with so many leaders of this University. Most importantly, however, I am honored to be able to be here today to celebrate you – the students – who are being recognized and honored. As such, I wish to address my remarks directly to our student honorees and graduates. I also ask your forgiveness because I am going to deviate a bit from the usual Distinguished Teacher address. Rather than discuss my teaching pedagogy or my research, I want to speak directly to our students and offer them some advice.

Those being honored today represent the best of FAU and the best of your generation. Seated here are the future doctors, scientists, attorneys, teachers and political leaders – the next generation of influence. You represent the ideals of hard work, honor and academic excellence. No doubt you have made your parents and professors so very proud; and I applaud you for what you have accomplished. But, because your best is yet to come, I am also here today to issue a challenge to you.

My challenge to you is to never just “show up” in life. But, rather, commit yourself to making a difference, to being that change you desire. Do not simply settle for doing well or good, but always, always strive for excellence and greatness – commit yourself to it.

So, what do I know of excellence and greatness? Though lacking personally(!), I am keenly interested in learning all I can from those who changed the world. Historians and political scientists like myself study the traits of great leaders and important people, compiling lists of the keys to greatness – vision, intellect, inquisitiveness, charisma and so on. But the mark of true greatness is simply to make a difference in the lives of others. And, in my opinion, the key to doing so – the one common denominator, more than any other, in the lives of those who have indelibly left their mark – is moral courage.

On that note, as a professor I am always asked by my students whether one person can

make a difference. Well, can they? You bet! History is full of George Washingtons, Abraham Lincolns, Cesar Chavezes and Susan B. Anthonys. Men and women without whom our country would be fundamentally different... and less well off. Let me share with you two of my favorite stories of great people who made a difference... and of the moral courage they exhibited.

So, can one person make a difference?

Just ask Rosa Parks who, on December 1, 1955, refused to get out of her seat on a bus and, in doing so, changed history.

The public bus system in Ms. Parks' hometown of Montgomery, Alabama – like in most of the South at the time – was segregated. Blacks had to sit in the back of the bus, whites were able to sit in the front or, basically, wherever they wanted to sit. So segregated were the buses that black passengers could not even walk down the center aisle of the bus after paying the driver. The buses had two doors, one in front, the other on the side in the back. By law, when a black passenger boarded the bus he or she had to pay the driver and then exit the bus, walk outside to the back door and enter there. These so-called “Black Codes” also required black passengers to abandon their seat to a white rider if the bus filled up, forcing the black passengers to sit three to a row or stand in the back.

Well, that was the case on that fateful day in 1955. One such black passenger who was asked to give up her seat was Rosa Parks, who happened to be sitting on the bus in a row with three black men. When a white passenger asked all four black passengers to get out of their seats, the three men did so quietly and without incident. But Ms. Parks, tired from a long day at work, did not move. Even after the driver of the bus ordered her to move and threatened to call the police, she did not move.

Rosa Parks was arrested. This act of moral courage might not sound like much to us today, but it must be remembered that, at the time, thousands of blacks were fired from their jobs, beaten or even killed for such actions... and less. In refusing to get out of her seat, Rosa Parks was putting her life in danger.

After posting bond to get out of jail, Ms. Parks went to her church – the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church – where she and other parishioners met with their preacher in objection to the discriminatory laws in Montgomery. They decided to take action. The new 26-year-old minister was none other than Martin Luther King, Jr., who led his flock in a bus boycott – named the Montgomery Improvement Association – which started the Civil Rights Movement.

And the rest, as they say, is history.

The absolutely delicious historical irony – and lesson – of this story is that Rosa Parks was a petite, uneducated seamstress who happened to be a black woman. Every single one of you being honored today is better educated and has far more opportunities, comforts and privileges than Rosa Parks could ever have imagined. The lesson? You don't have to be rich and powerful to change the world. You simply need to have moral courage.

Can one person make a difference?

Ask Harry S. Truman, who became president upon the death of Franklin Roosevelt. FDR had been a father figure to the country, leading us for 12 years through the crises of the Great Depression and World War II. Americans could scarcely imagine our nation without FDR at the helm. FDR's death on April 12, 1945 occurred at one of the most critical moments in our history – the war waged on in Europe and the Pacific and the challenge of the post-war world loomed large. And who was the new president? Harry Truman, a failed store owner and farmer from a small Missouri town. He entered the presidency not with cheers but with jeers from the public of "Harry who?" and "To err is Truman."

And how did Truman respond?

Truman emerged as one of the greatest leaders the world has ever known, repeatedly showing vision and great courage in his bold decisions. In fact, it is my opinion that the greatest examples of moral courage by a president since Lincoln were shown by Truman in the year 1948. It must be remembered that 1948 was an election year and politicians never do anything bold or risky during an election year, yet Truman did; and did so not once, but several times. And what were those great examples of moral courage? Two of them were desegregating the military (Executive Order 9981) and helping establish the state of Israel.

Now, this might not sound too bold to you, but these two decisions threatened to cost Truman his presidency. If he desegregated the armed forces and recognized the existence of Israel, he would, according to his advisers and polls, lose the election. Why? In order to win the election Truman needed to carry the American South because his opponent, Mr. Dewey, would win in the North. These two actions of Truman's were among the most politically unpopular decisions among southern white voters. Yet Truman did not hesitate to do what was right, what was good for the country, even if it

would end his presidency. Remember, that the right thing to do is to do the right thing.

Truman's aides, the Joint Chiefs, the military and southerners all opposed Truman's desegregation order. And on the decision to recognize Israel, add to that list opposition from the United Nations, our own State Department and Britain. Moreover, Strom Thurmond – the popular but racist South Carolina politician – threatened Truman that he would run for president as a third-party Dixiecrat if Truman supported desegregation and Israel, and do so for one reason: to take southern votes away from Truman in order to deny him the election.

Sure enough, when Truman made good on his promise, Thurmond made good on his threat. At the 1948 Democratic National Convention Thurmond led fellow southerners in walking out of the party convention in protest over Truman's civil and human rights platform. A reporter stopped Thurmond and asked him why he was leading the walkout. After all, the reporter noted, Truman's platform simply said what FDR's platform always said. Yes, conceded Thurmond, but the difference, he pointed out, was that FDR just talked about it, while Truman meant it!

Mean it he did. Truman's own response to the pinch he was in was that he was willing to lose the election in order to do the right thing. Now that, my friends, is moral courage!

And, once again, the delicious historical irony in this story is that Truman was actually descended from slave owners, raised in a racist, anti-Semitic household in rural Missouri. I frequently refer to the Trumans as "unreconstructed Confederates." One dared not even speak the name of Lincoln in the presence of Truman's mother or his mother-in-law. Harry had to joke with family members about his favorite room in the White House being the Lincoln Bedroom – "but don't tell Mama" he would say! Nor did Truman have a college degree. He was, by the way, the last president who did not. So, once again, I remind you that you don't have to be well educated to change history. But you do need to have moral courage.

Washington, Lincoln, Cesar Chavez, Susan B. Anthony... or Rosa Parks and Harry Truman, none of these great men and women had the benefit of a quality education like you or the privilege, comfort and plenty that you enjoy. Yet armed with moral courage, they did the right thing and made a difference in all our lives.

In closing, Adlai Stevenson, the former presidential candidate and ambassador, used to say, "a wise man does not try to hurry history." With all due respect to the late statesman, I couldn't disagree more. What would you call those who "hurried history"

by leading righteous causes such as abolition, women's rights or civil rights against overwhelming opposition? I would call them wise men and women... and I would call them morally courageous! It is not always easy to be "ahead of your time" or to choose the path less traveled. But it is the right thing to do. Remember, once-radical concepts have often become so readily accepted by us today as to appear commonplace, thanks to such wise and courageous men and women.

The moral of these two stories is that there is no waiting for the right time for doing what is right. So take the valuable lessons you have been taught at FAU and, when you are faced with a dilemma or challenge, I encourage you to reach deep down inside yourselves to find your own moral compass. Embrace it, and go forth, dedicated to excellence and to doing the morally courageous thing.

So then, like Rosa Parks, Truman and others before you, we might replace the old adage that "might makes right" with the truth that "right makes might." And so, one day, when you go to the Ever-after to meet your maker... and you are asked: Did you feed the hungry? Give drink to the thirsty? Work for the less advantaged? And give comfort to the suffering? You can say, YES.

Thank you.