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EXCELLENCE: AS DIFFICULT AS IT IS RARE

ROBERT TAIT MCKENZIE MEMORIAL LECTURE

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by

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Excellence in the Life of Robert Tait McKenzie

In preparing this lecture, I read with fascination and profound respect of Robert Tait McKenzie's life and his remarkable accomplishments. What a unique individual he was; and how fitting that your organizations perpetuate his memory and, by means of this lecture, pay tribute to this great man and all that his life and teaching represents. I earnestly hope that my lecture this evening will be furthering of your purposes and honoring of the values and ideals reflected in the life and works of Robert Tait McKenzie.

The breadth and distinction of his contributions were, and remain, uniquely impressive. He was one of a few dedicated and accomplished individuals who excelled at a time when life tended to permit more far-ranging, rather than more restricted, opportunities to sample and develop one's talents and interests. His professional and personal activities encompassed the study of medicine, the development of physical education as a field of study, the publication of scholarly and scientific research of a high order, the creation of enduring works of art, and the nurturing of young lives as a respected teacher.

Robert Tait McKenzie's values, dedication, lifestyle, achievements, and humaneness reflect the ideals of excellence to which my remarks this evening are addressed.
The Idea of Excellence

Excellence is a particularistic and comparative concept implying pre-existing standards.

Harvard philosopher Robert Nozick suggests that the notion of excellence nearly always has reference to a particular thing, type, or some other scheme of classification.

Something is always excellent of a sort, an excellent thing of a certain type, or excellent as something. There can be an excellent painting or an excellent car or an excellent shortstop. . . . *

Nozick also suggests that excellence is at base a comparative notion, i.e., how something compares with other things of its type or referenced class. For example, on a good day, I would be regarded as an excellent skier by a group of persons attempting to ski for the first time; but I would not be so regarded in the National Freestyle championships held at Snowbird, Utah.

The notion of excellence also implies standards. Pre-existing standards of excellence are the benchmarks against which performance and achievement are judged to be excellent or not so excellent. Standards of excellence must necessarily be particularistic to the event or specific area of interest. In some areas, of course, there is little agreement about what the standards should be or about how best to define them and, hence, uneasiness with the notion of excellence itself. Politics, statesmanship, generalship, and some of the social sciences are but examples of fields of endeavor where the

difficulty of judging excellent, as contrasted with mediocre, performance is apparent. Moreover, we should be careful not to over-generalize about standards as they are considered at any one point in time compared or contrasted with another point in time. Many of the world’s great artists, for example, would not have been judged as being excellent painters by the then extant standards. We should, therefore, allow, in our concept of excellence, for the relative as well as for the absolute.

These three characteristics of excellence—its reference to particular qualities or events, its comparative nature, and its dependence upon judgments made with respect to standards—may seem and probably are commonsensical if one thinks carefully about the notion of excellence. They are, nonetheless, distinguishing and important attributes which help guide our thinking and assist us in both identifying and furthering excellence in our chosen work and in our individual lives.

Making Judgments

Competitive endeavors, by their very nature, require judgments to be made about the merit of one’s performance compared with another’s. In some instances the determination is relatively straightforward and is free of ambiguity, e.g., the winner of a 100 meter dash whose time can be compared not only with the other competitors but also with established records of earlier races. In other endeavors, however, a more sophisticated measure of judgment is required in assessing
the quality or excellence of one's effort, e.g., in judging
the significance of a scientific experiment or the architectural
merit and structural integrity of a high-rise building in the
design stage.

Allow me to draw an example from gymnastics, a source
of some pride to the University of Utah where the women's
gymnastics team recently captured its second straight
national title. Gymnastics illustrates well the notions of
particularity, comparison, and standards in defining excellence,
and, it might be added, was one of the first sports coached
by Robert Tait McKenzie and one in which he himself especially
excelled.

First, gymnastics requires judges who are as equally
or more qualified than the participants themselves. Judges
undergo extensive training, are tested each year, must meet
requirements of rigorous on-going training and activity, and
are certified to judge only at differing levels of competition.
Second, the sport of gymnastics has developed specific standards
for performance and adopted a point system to reflect them. In
scoring optional routines, for example, the judges evaluate
participants according to criteria of difficulty, execution,
combinations and composition, and bonus points. In addition,
point deductions are listed for specific occurrences such as
falling from the beam or uneven bars.

These standards of performance in gymnastics have,
interestingly enough, changed over time as more has been learned
about the sport, its inner subtleties and remaining potential,
and as the level of competition has improved. It is, I am told,
much more difficult to score a "10" now than when Rumania's
Nadia Comaneci did it in 1976.

Higher education, and education in general, has much
to learn from endeavors such as gymnastics, dance, and other
fields where explicit judgments as to quality of performance
must be made and made with skill, toughness, and knowledge
if the performance itself is to have meaning for the athletes
or artists involved, or for the endeavor itself, for that
matter. Many disciplines, however, are hesitant to make such
explicit judgments. Thus, both the interested observer and
the public in general gain the impression that excellence in
such a discipline is either easily or never attained because
no one is quite certain what excellence means.

Failure to distinguish clearly between performances or
achievements that are excellent as contrasted with those that
are not measuring up diminishes the regard with which a discipline
or profession is held. To the extent that incompetent physicians
are not reviewed by their peers or corrective professional
action is not taken against them if reviewed, confidence in the
medical profession itself is diminished. This would be
similarly true for lawyers and the legal profession or teachers
and the teaching profession, or students and the schools or
faculty members and the colleges and universities.
Making such distinctions, of course, is a difficult and, sometimes, agonizing experience, particularly when dealing with close professional associates. Making such distinctions, however, constitutes the core of academic and professional vitality, engenders whatever respect and confidence laymen have in the field or profession, results in a healthy and positive climate for the enhancement of the endeavor and for the personal growth of those involved in it. In commenting on the importance of evaluating performance in professional football, Fran Tarkenton once observed,

...we grade that guard, and that tackle, and that end every day. We have a scorekeeping system for him so he knows the day after he's played whether he won or lost, regardless of what the team did. I find that pretty reinforcing. I would hate to play the game and not know whether I had won or lost.

The absence of such feedback in football, or other endeavors, fosters complacency, discouragement, feelings of abandonment and ultimately works a deadening effect on the individual and the perceived worth of what he or she is about both personally and professionally.

To fail to distinguish excellent from mediocre or failing performance seems to me to have important and long-term consequences for us as individuals, as professionals, and as a society. Such failure dulls our incentive to strive and to achieve and drains away respect for what we do both by those who observe us and by the loss of self-esteem as well.
Permit me to draw an illustration from my work on the National Commission on Excellence in Education. Based upon my own observations in the schools as well as the research and experience of others as reported to us, students want and need to be challenged. They are quite willing to be worked to the level of their potential and feel cheated if they are not. Various streams of educational research, including the much publicized effective school research, confirm the importance of teacher and school expectations in raising the achievement levels of students. If we as teachers or administrators hold and express high levels of expectation and performance, students will respond; teachers will respond; parents will respond. The fault, in part, lies in not expecting more even though in doing so, we are obliged to make hard decisions and students must come to terms with some hard lessons of life.

Achieving Excellence

Another important lesson to be learned from the life of Robert Tait McKenzie, as well as from the disciplines and academic fields represented here, is that seeking excellence requires an unusual measure of commitment, self-discipline and persistence in addition to raw intelligence and/or natural physical capacity. C. G. Probst, President of Sperry Univac Corporation, has rightly observed in this respect that "people are not excellent because they achieve great things; they achieve great things because they choose to be excellent."
In his study, The Voices of Silence, André Malraux suggests that one does not become a painter because one falls in love with a beautiful painting; but rather because one wants to be one of those who makes such paintings. Belonging, in this example, implies that an artist is an artisan, a working person, who is fully engaged in a work which is both a profession and an avocation.* To become a true artisan, and, thereafter, an artist, commitment, hard work and discipline are required. Arthur Mitchell, the noted director and choreographer now associated with the Dance Theatre of Harlem, has observed that the most important element in achieving true quality in the arts is discipline.

"Discipline is the catalyst that pulls together everythinź we do. And without which we flounder helplessly, no matter how great our native abilities or opportunities. Discipline lies at the heart of what every artist does. It is accepted and cherished. Submission to discipline is one of the vows that an artist takes, making a total commitment to the art he or she chooses to pursue. It's like entering a monastery."**

Permit me to illustrate this point by drawing again from the experience of our women's gymnastics team and, more specifically, from Coach Greg Marsden's philosophy in helping athletes and coaches achieve excellence in their performances. Coach Marsden's guiding philosophy and training objective is twofold: first, he helps these young athletes come to the realization that through discipline they can achieve whatever they want to achieve, both in competitive gymnastics and

*Tom Wolfe, op. cit., p. 72.
any other endeavor to which they commit their talents and energy; and second, individual motivation and determination are what separate gymnastic champions from merely good gymnasts. Translated, these principles mean highly disciplined physical training of an intensive and exacting kind for at least twenty hours per week, development of a high level of competitive concentration, and a willingness to sacrifice, at least temporarily, other interests and pursuits.

It also means testing one's own intrinsic potential as well as testing it against another's. For example, in winning the national women's gymnastics title last year, the team felt it performed below its potential even though it outperformed those teams with which it was in competition. This year, the team not only won the title again, but felt that it had realized its performing potential. Thus, the team separated the objective of beating its competition from the objective of making its self-imposed goal of attaining an excellent performance irrespective of the team's final standing in respect to its competition.

**Concluding Comments**

Spinoza's observation that "All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare," has provided me with both the title and theme of my remarks.

Spinoza's characterization of excellence is sometimes associated, at least by some, with notions of elitism. There is a tendency, for example, for some to view a
recommitment to excellence in education as elitist and as hostile to the need for expanded educational opportunity. Educational excellence and equality are viewed as competing, almost mutually exclusive, with undue attention to the former being considered undemocratic and to the latter being considered too democratic.

We do indeed have a long and cherished tradition of egalitarianism in our culture. In the 19th century, many foreign observers and even many Americans believed that by its very nature, the United States was incapable of producing anything of real distinction. The British critic Matthew Arnold, for example, deplored the forces that worked against any kind of distinction in our national life and talked about the leveling process fostered by a democratic society. John Quincy Adams once said that art and literature would never flourish in the United States. He and others thought that art and literature were aristocratic in their nature and, thus, not achievable in a democracy, not even desirable perhaps.

We have been an ambitious nation in attempting to achieve both equality and excellence in our educational system as well as in other facets of our cultural and economic life. And, contrary to the pessimism expressed by our critics, the American educational system has long enjoyed a deserved reputation for both its egalitarian achievements and the
excellence of its programs and products.

Our schools serve a much broader segment of the population as compared to other countries, yet we have produced, as a percentage of our larger student pool, as able and well-trained individuals as any nation on earth. Dr. Thorsten Husén of the Institute of International Education at the University of Stockholm, Sweden, recently testified before the National Commission on Excellence in Education and reported that the top nine percent of American students perform just as well on standardized achievement tests as the top nine percent in other industrialized countries, even though their educational systems tend to be more "elitist" in their purposes, programs and selection of students than our own. Similarly, our colleges and universities, which admit a far larger proportion of 18 year olds than other countries, produce exceptionally able students and are responsible for the graduate and research programs that are indisputably the best in the world.

It is not only a matter of our having possessed abundant material resources or a free society, or a representative form of government that has enabled us to seek for both equal opportunity and individual achievement simultaneously. It has also been our commitment to an educational philosophy, which differs from that held in most other parts of the world, that has been a major source
of our nation's strength. I refer to the basic purposes of education, as expressed by John Dewey and others, which hold that the aim of education is to encourage individuals to live their lives to the fullest, to enable them to expand their horizons and to provide for both individual and societal growth.

This philosophy is at base egalitarian and democratic in that everyone, irrespective of race, social, or economic background, is believed to be capable of and, therefore, should be afforded an opportunity for, personal growth and a education responsive to each person's potential and promise. Such a view, although still more of an ideal than a reality, is in no respect inconsistent with fostering the achievement of excellence if one is willing, as I am, to accept a notion of excellence that John Gardner so many years ago and with such understanding and insight observed:

"A conception (of excellence) which embraces many kinds of excellence at many levels is the only one which fully accords with the richly varied potentialities of mankind. . . . Our society cannot achieve greatness unless individuals at many levels of ability accept the need for high standards of performance and strive to achieve these standards within the limits possible to them. . . . The tone and fiber of our society depend upon a pervasive and almost universal striving for good performance. And we are not going to get that kind of striving . . . unless we can instruct the whole society in a conception of excellence that leaves room for everybody who is willing to strive. . . ."

The views of Dewey and Gardner encompass the notion and value of rising standards of excellence for individual
performance as well as a general level of enhanced societal accomplishment. It is in our best interest to encourage individuals to achieve new peaks or standards of excellence for it is in the defining of such excellence and the attainment of it by a few that the middle is pulled toward the upper reaches of their potential rather than permitted to slide toward the bottom.

Even though excellence is by definition difficult to attain and is rarely reached, the successful seeking of it by the few works a positive and encouraging influence on the many who, although in perhaps falling short of their ultimate hopes and aspirations, will in the process of striving have accomplished more and grown more and learned more than if the standard were not there for them to seek or if they had not chosen to strive for excellence at all.

When the idea of excellence and the noble effort needed to reach it are neglected, demeaned or opposed, the individual and the society are the losers together. To quote from John Gardner again:

We cannot have islands of excellence in a sea of slovenly indifference to standards. In an era when the masses of people were mute and powerless it may have been possible for a tiny minority to maintain standards regardless of their surroundings. But today the masses of people are neither mute nor powerless. As consumers, as voters, as the source of public opinion, they heavily influence level of taste and performance. They can create a climate supremely inimical to standards of any sort.
But one might add, they can also create a climate conducive to and supportive of standards, if the idea of excellence is seen to be a positive force in our society rather than one to be shunted aside or ignored.

It is my opinion that the time is ripe for the schools, colleges, and universities, working more closely and cooperatively than they are inherently wont to do, to tap the reservoir of public desire today that is crying out for educational programs that will truly prepare young people to succeed and to function effectively in our society.

Similarly, in our own professional endeavors, it is important that we expect from our students the best they have in them. One way of doing so is to foster a climate conducive to excellence by demanding from ourselves the best we have to offer. To do less is to place at risk the long term health and shape of our several professional endeavors, to fail the young and to betray ourselves.

The members of your organizations and the skills embodied and reflected in your individual and collective disciplines and fields, are particularly well fitted to this task, it seems to me. Your skills lend themselves, in more facilitating ways than most, to this objective and your record of professional accomplishment is more advanced than most as well. The man whose life and works you
honor this night, Robert Tait McKenzie, showed us how
to do it. That his memory should be perpetuated in this
commemorative lecture suggests to me that you intend to
do your part as well. Good luck!