

### **I Will Not Die an Unlived Life**

I will not die an unlived life.  
I will not live in fear  
Of falling or catching fire.

I choose to inhabit my days,  
To allow my living to open me,  
To make me less afraid,  
More accessible,  
To loosen my heart  
Until it becomes a wing,  
A torch, a promise.

I choose to risk my significance  
To live, so that which came to me as seed  
Goes to the next as blossom,  
And that which came to me as blossom,  
Goes on as fruit.

~ Copyright Dawna Markova, 2006 ~

### **Learning to Persist**

My goals today are to connect with your passion, encourage you, and affirm your efforts. As I considered what I might say today, I was keenly aware that I would possibly be speaking to the next “hero” generation. Maybe we need some heroes right now.

This is an interesting time in America. It seems we have all awakened to the issues of global climate change and its impact on the planet. Our actions have made both food and water scarce for those already living in circumstance of extreme scarcity. The rise in oil and our overdependence upon this finite resource got all of our attention this year as prices rose to

levels we could never have imagined four years ago. The last eight years have been especially trying years for many. While a great deal of wealth has been created during this time, poverty has also deepened. The disparity between rich and poor has grown exponentially. Our feelings of fear have increased and our sense of safety diminished. Most recently we have come to see that triumphant capitalism, and unbridled greed have pushed us to the brink of financial ruin. Especially if you are close to graduation, the frequent, recent reports of the thousands of professionals suddenly laid-off by this massive economic collapse must cause you concern.

Among my generation and that of your parents, which may or may not be the same, many of us have been tied to the stock market in the last decade through retirement funds, money markets and 401ks. For those lucky enough to have these assets we've cheered the ascent of the stock market because it meant our futures would be brighter and our retirements secure. Those with the power to oversee this ascent did little to monitor the rise. It seems that no one was watching as the balloon or bubble rose higher and higher into the economic stratosphere. No one seemed to notice or yelled loudly enough to get our attention as the balloon got closer and closer to the power lines or the sun. Well the bubble seems to have burst and all of us are paying attention now.

Perhaps all of these events help explain why we are in one of the most active and engaged political processes in our history. More people are working for, thinking about, contributing to, and agonizing over the current race to the White House than likely at any time in our recent history. No matter who

wins, this election will be historic. What to do with this important moment in history?

It is possible that we can use these disruptions in our ever expansive, over consuming natures to do the impossible. We can use these disruptions in our way of life as yet another opportunity to PAY ATTENTION. We can pay attention to the work that must be done in the world, the unfinished business of so many generations of activists before you. You've spent some time over the last day and half talking about your own Millennial generation. What I hope is that you will use the best attributes of your generation-your confidence, your diversity and your optimism to move us through this difficult time to a better one.

I know that people at your institutions, actually much of the higher education community cares about what you and your peers are doing on your campuses and in the world. They care about whether you are engaged in your learning and whether or not you are actively involved in your community. They care because one of the important historical missions of higher education has been to prepare an educated constituency that would serve their communities as "responsible and effective" citizens. In the early years of higher education in this country that "educated citizenry" was narrowly defined. Over time, because of the civic activism and engagement of a wide array of outsiders- women, minorities, the handicapped, and gay and lesbian individuals; the people able to be included in this notion of an educated citizenry has greatly expanded. Some of all of the people are now present in higher education and therefore some of all of the people have access to the educational resources that continue to give people greater

access and capacity to “participate in politics and civil society”, which is one of the definitions of civic engagement. But is there more to hope for? Can we create environments on our campuses that as Caryn McTighe Musil, vice president at AACU says, “melds the work of the mind with the welfare of the world?”

Someone on your campus chose you to be here over these two days. Someone has seen something in you that makes them think that you might just be the next generation leader/hero/citizen. I am hoping that they were right and that the time you have spent here has opened a space for you to consider what you might contribute to the solution.

Student activism can be described as a network or coalition of students who come together with shared concerns to seek solutions for common problems. One definition describes civic engagement as the impact an individual can have to effect change in her/his community whether alone or in concert with others. Often synonymous with these ideas was the description of social capital *or* social networks that have value *or* simply put, people who know people doing things for each other. Well duh , I thought! Clearly no generation on earth has perfected “social networking” better than you”. So what might you do with this tremendous capacity for mobilizing “people who know people”?

Student activism and civic engagement have deep and old roots in our society. As early as the 1930’s college students began to organize for change. You are all beneficiaries of the engagement of students in the sixties and seventies around civil rights, women’s rights and the anti-war

movement. Thousands of young people, just like you, overcame fear, intimidation and apathy to work for social justice and change. That legacy continues today in you. Even as we lament the lack of engagement by young people in our society, you and your peers are engaging the problems in your communities.

Dr Suzanne Moore, author of Smart Communities says “the main political skill we can support for students to learn is the ability and courage to act.” By your presence at this conference it is clear that you are heirs to the legacy of student engagement and activism and you are learning, practicing and exercising your courage so that you might act.

What gets in the way of this action from time to time are a wide variety of things. I know you are often discouraged by the perceived apathy of your peers. If you are passionate about what concerns you, it is difficult to accept when others can't or won't join the cause. *We can all be paralyzed by fear.* In such an uncertain world, why bother? If we could all be gone tomorrow, why care about global warming, clean air or water, genocide, sweatshops, AIDS or poor schools? *Why work within the system when we can't trust our leaders?* They lie to us, disappoint us, and divide us. If people do all the right things and still get cast out when corporate greed is rampant or government fails to protect-why do the right thing? *I know, you're really busy.* There are papers to write, exams to prepare for, resumes to build and futures to construct. You simply don't have enough time to accomplish all this and change the world too. But I ask you, if you don't change the world, who will?

These are certainly explanations for why you or others might not get involved or why we can't always sustain our involvement, but these reasons are just excuses. Even though we might get discouraged from time to time we must never give up. Paul Loeb in his book The Impossible Will Take a Little While says, "History shows that the proverbial rock can be rolled, if not to the top of the mountain, then at least to successive plateaus. And, more important, simply pushing the rock in the right direction is cause for celebration." He continues, "history also shows that even seemingly miraculous advances are, in fact, the result of many people taking small steps together over a long period of time."

On my campus a couple of years ago we were talking about engaged citizenship and a term we use a lot- citizen leadership. We had many lively debates about which of these terms capture what we wanted for Dickinson College students. For many good reasons we began focusing our attention and energy around engaged citizenship and not citizen leader. As we read and talked about what these terms meant, and what they implied we began to feel that perhaps leadership isn't the thing we were seeking for ourselves or students at all.

In fact, many in the higher education community have now realized that it is entirely possible that in our zeal to nurture leadership on our campuses we have let the vast majority of the student body off the hook. Our over reliance on leaders and leadership training may have disenfranchised most of our students. Some of you here today are overworked, over extended and over wrought because you are among the talented 20%. You and your colleagues are members of that elite club on most campuses that all of us

rely upon. You are among the 20% of any organization that does 80% of the work. You brought yourselves to our attention for all the right reasons. By your commitment to scholarship, your clear voice and sometimes your actions you stood out. Unfortunately, we will likely keep calling upon you until you burnout or burn up. Don't let this happen. I am coming to believe that we have colluded in your demise and stress by focusing too much on leadership and not enough on citizenship. So I want to challenge to take what you learned back to your campuses and broaden the circle.

In a really good article from 1991 called "From Leadership to Citizenship" Paul Block quotes the prize winning author Laurens Van der Post. He said that the "era of leaders is over". Van der Post was arguing for an abandonment of creating gods of men and women and anointing them with the title of leader. He believed that when we place leaders above us we create the mechanism for our own escape from responsibility for the world we have created. Van der Post encouraged us to consider the ways in which ordinary people in neighborhoods, cities, civic and political associations, clubs and organizations are really the folks who create change. Focusing on the training and nurturance of leaders and leadership postpones the day when each of us will take responsibility for community. So perhaps you should reject that "hero" definition as well. Superheroes will not save us.

As you return to your campuses I encourage you to focus not only the leadership skills which I'm sure each of you possess but on the qualities of citizenship which you also exhibit. In his article Block describes citizenship as "our capacity to create for ourselves what we have sought from our leaders."

This kind of citizenship will allow each of us to create and articulate a vision; be accountable for the well-being of the whole; set and pursue goals that sustain our institutions; and establish boundaries and set limits. Rather than look to the few we may begin to accept that each of us is responsible for engaging problems, finding solutions, and establishing our own accountability for our shared vision. Engaged citizens understand that we are all “called to participate”.

It is my privilege to work in higher education. Hopefully, through my education and mentoring of young people I have had the chance to encourage and shape the citizens of tomorrow. I want these citizens to care about the things I’ve cared about but most importantly I just want You to CARE. I want you not to be discouraged by the inevitable set-backs and to realize that the work of world changing is a life-time commitment. I want you never to allow cynicism to replace your idealism. I want you never to give up hope. Some of you here know that I am a prisoner of hope. But this is not a blind hope, it is an active hope. I’ve accepted that doing the impossible might take a little while. I have had to fight against becoming brittle and impatient because of the setbacks. I struggle to remind myself that the world does change, is changing all around me, all of the time.

Some thirty plus years ago the things I cared about included the well-being of children and the elimination of racism and discrimination. It is clear that these problems have not all been solved. We still don’t love our children enough in this country. And last time I checked, we were still discriminating against people. If not me or you today, then someone new. An activist could

get discouraged by these intractable problems. But if you are really going to change the world you have to be prepared for the long haul. What I am suggesting is that we must not only keep pushing the rock, you must ask why the rock keeps slipping? We need to work on solutions not just symptoms.

Twenty years from now when you look around and realize that you have not completely eradicated all of the problems about which you are passionate today, or even if new problems have cropped up, I don't want you to lose faith. I hope you are still deeply engaged with those issues whatever they may be. When that time comes I hope you are about the work of training and nurturing the next generation of world citizens. That is what I get to do for a living. By teaching and, I hope, by example my goal has been to encourage young people to find their passion and motivate them to act on behalf of that passion on the campus and in the world. I want them and you to consider how the world will be different and better because you were in it. I ask you always to consider what your legacy will be.

One can be overwhelmed by the task of working over the course of a lifetime on the same old problems. Unless we truly revolutionize the world working over a lifetime may be what is required. "We discover what is possible not through calculation but through doing" Acting together is essential if we are going to keep going", Margaret Wheatley wrote.

"Concentrate less on the measurable impact of what we do, and more on the value and appropriateness of our work and on the communities we build in the process". I continue to work for change, teach young people, hope for the best because I have to believe that my commitment means something.

Without this commitment to change, to justice, to hope, then what would my life be worth? Someone wiser than me has said that “In order for somebody to win an important, major fight a hundreds years hence, a lot of other people have got to be willing-for the sheer fun and joy of it-to go right ahead and fight, knowing you’re going to lose. You mustn’t feel like a martyr. You’ve got to enjoy it”.

Remember it is better to do something than nothing. It is more beneficial to help ten hungry people, teach five children to read, help build one habitat house, recycle something, than to be overwhelmed by the problems of the world and give up. Everything I read and know takes me back to the same place. The world will not be permanently changed until we accept our inevitable mutuality. The world will not be permanently changed until we connect our humanity with each other’s.

I am teaching a course this semester called Cultures of the U.S. Over the last six weeks we have been reading the more inclusive, realistically multicultural, tragically flawed history of our great country. It can be a bummer. What I am hoping is that through this more realistic, inclusive story the students in my class will connect with the pain and suffering of their fellow Americans. That they will examine the ways that we have been divided from one another and will see that our survival as a country and a planet is inextricably connected. Despite the sadness in our accurate history, I try to remind my students to see the moments of resistance. I want them to see the pain-so that we might connect our humanity to that of our neighbor-but I don’t want them to be stuck there. I am pushing them to see the places where people refused to “collude with evil and insanity and resisted the

darkness and despair.” I want them to see the places where ordinary citizens defied bad leaders and worked for change.

Stay connected with each other after this conference. Create a Facebook page so you can share the work that you are doing on your campuses. Resist isolation. It starves the soul. Seek connection and healing. Give support and encouragement to each other’s work. Brainstorm new ideas. We don’t each have to each create the perfect solution to our problems. Somebody somewhere has a good idea. I always say I’ve never seen a good idea I wasn’t willing to steal. Steal good ideas! Work for change. Barbara Kingsolver, another of my favorite writers says in her book “Small Wonders”, a series of reflections written after 9/11, “who says it’s ridiculous to imagine that the world could be made better than it is. When I come down to this feeling that I am an army of one standing out on the broad plain waving my little flag of hope, I call up a friend or two and offer to make dinner for us. We remind ourselves that we aren’t standing apart from the crowd, *WE are a crowd*. We’re a prairie fire, a church choir, a major note in the American chord.”

We are the leaders we have been waiting for. We are the ones who will call others to action. Call your friends, be hopeful, risk disappointment, trust when things seem most unsure. Change happens! In the next month we will elect a new president and vice-president of the United States. No matter your hopes for the outcome-it will mark a watershed. The earth has shifted, a door has been knocked off it’s hinges. Somewhere in our near future a black man or a woman will occupy one of the two highest offices in our country. No matter what happens-they wont be the last. When I feel discouraged I have to remember that.