



**Johnstown Rotary Club
“Salute to Scholars” Awards Dinner
Sunnehanna Country Club
May 8, 2013
Remarks of President Tom Foley**

Thank you for that generous introduction, and for welcoming me to Johnstown, to Sunnehanna and to Rotary. I am in that difficult spot between dinner and the presentation of awards. You may be a little interested in what I have to say, but a lot more interested in what is to follow. That is okay, so let me just share three thoughts with you.

First, let me start with the shortest prayer in the world—thank you.

Thank you to all your teachers, your guidance counselors, your mentors, your coaches, your classmates (who were sometimes your “teachers”). The historian Henry Adams wrote that “a teacher affects eternity—[they] can never tell where their influence stops.” I hope that before you finish school, you find that one person on the faculty or staff who made the biggest difference to you—and thank them in person.

Thank you to all the parents, brothers and sisters, grandmoms and grandpops, aunts and uncles, and best friends--thank you all for getting these honorees to this point. You should all be very proud. We thank you for the roles that each of you have played in their lives—whether it was building up their confidence or perhaps knocking it down a few notches, whether it was showing them how to tie a slip knot or rig a fishing line, how to catch a fly ball or handle a sly insult, how to sing retro 80s songs for the school musical or make the perfect pumpkin pie for Thanksgiving.

Finally, thank you to all the Rotary men and women in this room—they are truly the gift that keeps on giving. Whether it is blood drives or book drives, community clean ups or curbside barbecues, third world water projects or first world education programs, Rotary members give of themselves here and all over the world. They are excellent role models. They were for me, in my small town growing up, in Ireland when I was a peace worker during the Troubles and for Michele and me in the town where we raised our three children. They were role models in every place we lived and worked. And they deserve our thanks this evening.

I want to thank them for myself and I wish to commend them to you--as examples of lives well lived, doing—to paraphrase Teddy Roosevelt—what they can, where they are, with what they have.

Second, we are in awe of you. Let me tell you why.

You have grown up in an era when “MySpace” is already old space, where “email” is the new “snail mail,” where the first association with the word “web” is not “spider”, and where a foreign government—Egypt’s, entrenched for 40 years—can be toppled by a thousand protesters armed with smart phones, Facebook accounts and a common cause. The keyboard, our son Tom reminds me—“faster than the pen and still mightier than the sword.” My goodness, if Facebook were a country, it would be the third largest country in the world.

These new forms of communication have created bonds of friendship and commonality *over the web*, they have allowed you to forage for ideas (sometimes for whole term papers!) *on the web* and they permit you to join and support diverse causes, all *through the web*. And you have done all of this instantaneously--across schools, cross community, heck even across oceans and often without a single in-person encounter. Today’s constant communications and creative connectivity have shrunk your world to a fraction of its previous size. You make friends with kids in countries that didn’t exist a generation ago just as easily as you do with the kid who stood next to you in line the first day of high school.

You have taught the rest of us that going “global” doesn’t mean you can’t stay “local” —heck, you don’t even have to leave your bedroom (or for the fellows in the audience, your “man cave”) to do most of these things. So we are in awe of you.

In education today, we on this side of the podium all come late to the party, trying to keep pace with developments we couldn’t even imagine—not just a generation ago—how about a year ago. I saw a video recently of a Good Samaritan somewhere in the Third World building a well by following the directions on his IPAD mounted on a dirt pile next to him. I saw a movie last year in Altoona where a teenager dialed up his blackberry to figure out how to pick a lock. The ripple effects of all these examples of “higher” education— how to peacefully overthrow a government, how to pick a lock, how to build a well--are not unrelated to what we do at Mt Aloysius College every day and are directly related to what you must do as you go forth this very day from High School.

But in the end, we are in awe of you--the generation of iPhones and iPods--whose pocket PCDs have more brain power literally—I am not being figurative here--than the Apollo computer that landed a man on the moon.

Finally, let me leave you with three things that I have learned to be true. It took me about fifty years to figure this out, and I want to share them with you as my last words tonight, as a personal gift to each one of you.

The first thing that I know for sure is true is this--the happiest people in the world don’t necessarily have the best of everything, they just make the best of everything.

My father worked in an electronics factory his whole life, never made a big salary, never had a big job title. My mother, the only child of depression-fatigued parents, gave birth to and raised 12 children, never complained about the dozens of carpool assignments every week, never

forgot to leave some dinner in the oven for the ones who got home late from practice. The two of them worked the busiest booth at our church carnival every year, joined the mother's and father's club at each of our schools. My father coached every team at our little grade school, he worked each chicken barbecue for every good cause in our small town, and my mother fed anybody we dragged through the kitchen door with us. They were family people first and community people right after.

When my father died, it was the biggest funeral that town ever saw--4,000 people came--and every single one of them had a story. My parents didn't have the best of everything, but they sure made the best of everything—and that's the best advice I can give you today. Make the best of what you have. Better yet, share some of it—on a team, in a family, with your community, through the Rotary (when you are old enough). That will make all the difference.

So, the first thing I know is true—the happiest people in the world don't necessarily have the best of everything, but they know how to make the best of what they have.

Second thing I have learned to be true--kindness is the universal language. Even in those rare instances when people don't respond to that "language," it will at least be clear that it is their problem, not yours.

Now I want to be clear that kindness is not just about being "nice," it's about recognizing another human being who deserves respect. One of our greatest Generals, Colin Powell, says that "being kind doesn't mean being soft." He tells the story of "young soldiers who go to basic training and meet their worst nightmare—their drill sergeant. They are terrified of him (or her) when they first get there. The sergeant is with them every step of the way, teaching, cajoling, enforcing, and bringing out the strength and confidence they didn't know they had. When they graduate, they leave with an emotional bond they will never forget." Powell says that if you ask those same soldiers forty years later the name of their drill sergeant—they will know it.

So, I'm not saying that facts and figures don't matter—they do, especially on SATs and final exams. But they are not all that matters. And I am not saying that kindness is just some coefficient of "nice-ness." Kindness is about recognizing the essential dignity in another person and maybe sometimes bringing out the best in them. Don't forget the old saying that "to the world, you may be one person, but to one person, sometimes you just might be the whole world." That could just as well be the official motto of Rotary.

So, second thing I know to be true, kindness is truly the universal language.

Third, and finally, something that sounds simple, and maybe even trite—don't forget to stop and smell the flowers. Every now and then take a long look at something not made by a machine—a mountain, a star, a rose, the bend in a stream, a child. You will learn patience in those moments, you might even catch a glimpse of wisdom and you will know in those moments that you are not alone.

Hope some of this has make sense to you, at this time in your lives when you have so much more on your mind!! Just don't ever forget to enjoy the little things—your favorite CD, a childhood swing set, pulled pork, a baseball game, sitting next to your parents on a night like this, whatever—because some day you will look back and realize they were the big things.

Thank you and congratulations.