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Speech at Walworth County Prayer Breakfast

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**Walworth County Prayer Breakfast
The Abbey
Lake Geneva WI**

May 6, 2004

C. William Pollard

“ _____ no title _____ ”

I am delighted to be with you today. Walworth County, the Geneva Lakes area, is part of who I am. It represents my American heritage. My grandfather came here from England in 1890, working initially as a caretaker on the Mitchell estate and later as a farm manager on the Mitchell farm, which is now the home of Lake Geneva Youth Camp. My father was born on that farm in 1898 and grew up in the area. During my youth and teenage years, every summer was spent at Lake Geneva, and when the time came for my wife, Judy, and me to raise our family, we did likewise with our children. And today, my son, Brian, has a growing land development, construction, and real estate company in this county.

There is something good about Walworth County. It is where people want to come – not just for a summer vacation, but a place to live and raise a family.

The growth that has come, and will come in the future to this area, places a certain challenge and responsibility on the leaders in government and in the community of this county. It is appropriate and right for us to set apart this time in

a public way to pray for you and to be reminded on an individual basis to pray for you regularly throughout the year and I am sure that the leaders here today are thankful for the prayers of the people of this county.

These are good -- but also uncertain times. Dickens once said: “It is the best of times and the worst of times.” Although he wrote this years ago about the struggle between two cities – one in England and the other in France, he may well have written it about the world we live in today.

As Americans, we have much to be thankful for. Our standard of living is one of the highest in the world. Even though our economy has been sluggish, there are signs of improvement and there are still many great opportunities ahead of us.

During the last several years, however, we also have been reminded that our way of life is not a given. September 11th was not just another Tuesday morning. It was a defining moment. The reality of our times is that there are certain people groups in this world who hate what we stand for as Americans and will kill themselves and thousands of others as part of their war against us. Our engagement in Iraq and the events that have unfolded in recent months have confirmed that this hatred and terrorism is still alive and well and there are no easy answers for containment or resolution.

We also have seen during this period too many failed examples of leadership in business.

As one who has spent most of his life and career in the marketplace, I am very much aware of how these failures have shattered the public's confidence in corporate America. People have been hurt. Savings and provisions for retirement plans have been extinguished. Jobs have been lost. One of the world's largest accounting firms whose reputation was once like sterling on silver is gone.

People are edgy. Nobody is sure what is coming next. There is a feeling of being out of control. How do we get back to some state of normalized living and have control over our lives? What is life all about? What does it add up to? Is there purpose and meaning in what we are doing?

As I ask these questions, I am reminded of a talk that C. S. Lewis, a noted Oxford don, gave to the students who arrived at Oxford University in the fall of 1939. The title of his talk was "Living and Learning in a Time of War".

As we think back to that period of history, it also was a time of great uncertainty. Germany was on the move. Poland had been invaded and conquered in a few weeks' time. War had been declared by both France and England but the

odds seemed to be stacked against these two countries. They were not prepared for war and America had stated that it would stay out of the war. Germany's military strength was growing and the blitzkrieg was a reality.

In such a world, why were these students coming to learn the classics at Oxford University? What did Plato, Aristotle, or Shakespeare have to do with current events? As he posed these questions, he reminded the students that war really didn't change anything. All it did, he said, was to aggravate reality -- the reality that there is a lot about our life that is not in our control. No one really knows when they will die -- what calamity may be ahead of them in their personal lives or in their business lives. Life, at best, is always uncertain. But Lewis also pointed out to students that there were some things that were within their control -- the daily choices of life -- the daily choices they had to go about the business of learning -- to bloom where they were planted. There was no need to be paralyzed into inaction or reaction.

As Lewis concluded his talk, he paused for a moment and then emphasized to students that as they faced the reality of uncertainty and realized all of what was not in their control, they also should take some time to reflect upon Who is ultimately in control and what was their relationship to Him.

I believe that as I come here this morning to pray, I am praying to a personal God – a God Who is in control – a God Who loves and cares for me and for this world and has provided a hope that can sustain us through the uncertainties of life. For me, that hope is found in the offer and promise of Jesus Christ that all who will turn from their own way and follow Him will be accepted and secure in God's love.

This offer of God to be involved in our lives is available to all, but like any offer it cannot be a completed transaction in the life of an individual unless there is a corresponding choice of acceptance and trust by that individual. When that choice is made, there is hope not only for this life but for a life beyond.

Again, it was C. S. Lewis who reminded us that “There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations – these are mortal and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals who we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit.”

In a pluralistic society and a world where there is freedom to choose, not everyone will agree with my starting point or the need for a personal relationship with God. But, for me, this is where I get my direction, my anchor in the wind and storms of the uncertainties of life.

Now you know that as I come and share these thoughts with you today, I do so not as a philosopher, educator, political or religious leader, but simply a business person. Someone who over the past 26 years has participated in the leadership of what has been a fast-growing and dynamic company that we called ServiceMaster.

As I have now retired from those leadership responsibilities and look back, I can add up the numbers that show growth in profits, customers served, and a return for our shareholders that on average doubled every five years. A base of business that served over 12 million customers with one or more of our services located here in the US and 44 foreign countries. While these figures are part of a normal business assessment of performance, the conclusion for me cannot be limited to these money or value creation measurements. The real and lasting measurement is whether the results of my leadership can be told in the changed and improved lives of people I have led.

As a business firm, during my leadership we wanted to excel at generating profits and creating value for our shareholders. If we didn't want to play by these rules, we didn't belong in the ballgame. But we also tried to encourage an environment where the work place could be a community to help shape human character – an open community where the question of a person's moral and spiritual development and the existence of God and how one related the claims of

his or her faith with their work were issues of discussion, debate and, yes, even learning and understanding. We considered the people of our firm as, in fact, the soul of the firm.

My experience confirmed Peter Drucker's conclusions: that people work for a cause not just a living and that mission and purpose were important organizing and sustaining principles for the firm. Our corporate objectives were simply stated: To honor God in all we do; To help people develop; To pursue excellence; and To grow profitably. Those first two objectives were end goals; the second two were means goals.

We didn't use that first objective as a basis for exclusion. It was, in fact, the reason for our promotion of diversity as we recognized that different people with different faiths were all part of God's mix.

It did not mean that everything was done right. We experienced our share of mistakes. We sometimes failed and did things wrong. But because of a stated standard and a reason for that standard, we could not hide our mistakes. Mistakes were regularly flushed out in the open for correction and, in some cases, for forgiveness and leaders could not protect themselves at the expense of those they were leading.

The process of seeking understanding and application of these objectives at all levels of the organization was a never-ending task. It involved matters of the heart as well as the head and it was not susceptible to standard management techniques of implementation or measurement. While at times it was discouraging, it also was energizing as one realized the continuing potential for creativity, innovation, and growth as there was a focus on the development of the whole person.

Now as I look back to my life of running hard to grow and develop a business, loving and supporting a wife for over 40 years, caring for 4 children and now 13 grandchildren, I realize that my life has not been a simple, logical, predictable sequence of events. God has, in fact, chosen many different people and circumstances to break, mold and develop me. The most exciting thing about the process is that it is continuing.

There haven't been answers to every question. In fact, in this growing relationship with God, there will always be some unknowns, but as I continue to choose for Him, my faith has grown and the anchor of this love is sure.

There were many tragic and heroic events that occurred on that fateful day of September 11, now almost three years ago. One such event involved a young man who I knew, Todd Beamer. Todd had been a classmate of my children in

high school and college. On that fateful day, Todd prayed and then acted to lead his fellow passengers to stop the terrorists on Flight 93 from reaching their target of destroying the White House. This was not just an act of heroism but a reminder to all of us that as we pray and then act things happen.

Six weeks after September 11, I had the privilege of having dinner with the President at the White House. As we shared together the challenges of leading during these turbulent times, we were both reminded of the prayer and actions of this young man that changed what could have been another tragic event of history.

My hope is that as we come here to pray today each of us may learn from the example of this young man to value the importance and power of prayer and the responsibility to act in a way consistent with our prayers.

* * * *

Revised April 27, 2004