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Speech at Liberty University Baccalaureate (Draft)

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DRAFT
LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
BACCALAUREATE SERVICE
LYNCHBURG, VIRGINIA
May 2, 1997, 6:00p.m.

We come tonight with parents and friends to worship together.

It is the last chapel service for the Class of 1997, tomorrow is commencement, your studies here at Liberty are over. There are new challenges, new opportunities before you, you have received a special preparation. You have found here men and women dedicated to the Lord and dedicated to investing themselves in your training and expanding your knowledge. You have parents who have sacrificed for you to be here. It is time now to go forth, it is time to move on.

If I were to give a title for my message tonight, it would be “Steer for Open Water”.

For those of us with a nautical background, we know the thrill and expectation of finally passing that last channel buoy and seeing open water ahead. There still needs to be a careful watch for the occasional uncharted shoal or rock ledge, but the wind is up, you feel it in your face, and it’s time for a full sail with a firm hand on the wheel.

But who has set the course and where are we going? Is it a journey you must take alone?

The life before you presents a sea of opportunity but it is not time to throw away your charts or your bearings. There will be changing winds and currents, some storms and some uncertainties, but the Master has a course. He is with you and you can experience the reality of his presence.

Our text tonight comes from the 33rd Chapter of Exodus. The subject is Moses, his leadership for the future. There is the open water of the wilderness before him, God has told him to move on to that distant but promised land but he is hesitant. Just where is he going, will God be with him and will he know his presence?

You remember the background to the story, Moses had completed forty days and forty nights on the mountain top communing and learning from God. It was a time of teaching and training. He had received God's law written on tablets of stone in God's own hand. He was prepared to lead forward, and then, as he came down from this mountain top experience, ready to lead on, what does he find? The children of Israel with Aaron in the lead, dancing and worshipping a false god, a golden calf. How could this be? How could he ever apply his learning and leadership from the Lord to this unruly, sinful, and rebellious people? Where was he to go from here?

The evils of sin and blasphemy had to be dealt with, but there was still the question of a future direction. It was the fierceness of the storm so soon after the

time of preparation that caused Moses to doubt, to hesitate, and then to dialogue with God. Listen as we read his discussion with God.

(Here read Verses 12-23).

Moses needed assurance, and in this passage he dialogues with God and asks him three very direct questions, “God, is it your will? God, will you be with me? God, can I see you?” God’s answer was specific and direct, “yes, it is my will”. “Yes, I will be with you, and yes, you can experience the reality of my presence. Although you cannot see me directly, I will put you in the cleft of the rock and you will see my glory as it goes by.”

Now no one can predict the times or intensity of the storms, uncertainties, disappointments, or difficulty of the decisions before us but they are out there, just as certain as knowing that the weather barometer goes down as well as up.

Many of you have already felt uncertainty about your next step. For some, it may be graduate school or seminary but then there is the question, “will you measure up”? “Will you graduate at this next level of education?” “Will you be successful at this next level of education?” For others it may be a job, or looking for a job. But where? Doing what and is there a job out there? Or marriage may be on your mind, is he or she the right partner?

The questions that Moses asked are the same basic questions we often ask ourselves. What is your will God? Will you be with me? Can I know the reality of your presence?

The benefit of gray hair is the opportunity of looking back. Over 35 years ago I sat in your chair at a baccalaureate service of a Christian college, ready and prepared to graduate but I was very uncertain about the future. For me the open waters were more frightening than pleasant. I was married, our first child, Julie, was just born. I did not have a full time job. I had the opportunity to go onto law school with a full scholarship but also knew the reality that scholarships don't put food on the table or support a family. What was God's will in these conflicting currents? Was there a right course in the direction? Could I make the wrong decision?

I am here today to affirm with Moses that God does answer these basic questions of life, and He is there as we steer for open water.

There are times that one has the opportunity to muse and reflect on just how God has provided an answer. It was such a time for me a few months ago when I had the opportunity to visit and share with one of my classmates from college. Dave had graduated from Wheaton in 1959, I graduated in 1960. We were friends in school and had maintained a relationship over the years, especially during the last ten years. We both found ourselves at the World Economic Forum. Dave was representing his company, an information based concern called Oxford Analytica, and I was there to give a talk on values and ethics in the marketplace. During our visit together we had a chance to share about how God had worked in our lives over the years. How He showed himself as we had left the shore of college learning and steered for the open waters of life and opportunity. Although our experiences were different, there were some common themes, including periods of crisis and storms during our 30's.

After Wheaton College, I went to Northwestern law school, David went to Yale law school. After law school I went to work in a large law firm in Chicago and David went to work in a large law firm in New York city, his firm represented the Rockefeller family and the Rockefeller Foundation. Within a few years David left the law firm and went to work for the Rockefeller Foundation as an assistant to Henry Kissinger. When Richard Nixon was elected President, Kissinger went to Washington as Secretary of State and David went to Washington as his assistant. Soon Kissinger was also appointed head of the Security Council and had an office in the White House and David's office moved to the White House as part of supporting his boss. It was an exciting time, negotiations were underway for the conclusion of the war in Viet Nam and David found himself involved in a lot of top secret meetings. It was also a time of great domestic turmoil in our country, there was little trust, even among friends. A psychiatrist in California was apparently leaking information about some of the strategic moves being made by the administration in the settlement of the war. The time came when David was called into the President's office and he was asked to do something that violated the law. At the same time he was assured this was a matter of national security. You all know the rest of the story, David was one of the original plumbers. A few years later, as the news unfolded about Watergate and the other events in the Nixon White House, David's life was in a crisis. He lost his license to practice law, he received a suspended sentence and moved his family to England. He later secured his Ph.D. at Oxford, wrote his thesis on Watergate, joined the faculty at Oxford and started Oxford Analytica. David had been on the fast track out of college that took him to the highest positions of power in our country.

The storm of Watergate had been all-consuming. It resulted in a dramatic change of direction, but through it all God was with him. It was all part of His will and the process of what David was becoming in the likeness of Christ. So as part of this traumatic experience, David and his wife renewed their relationship with the Lord, they have had a significant influence for God and Oxford and have had a ministry to many from this platform of service.

The storms in my life, or crises in my life, have not been so public or so dramatic. After law school I did not go to Washington, I was not one of Kissinger's aides, I just began doing the job of practicing law. It was exciting for me, it was stimulating, and I started making what I thought was a lot of money but something was also happening in the process. I describe it now as I look back, as if the law was becoming a jealous mistress in my life. It was consuming most of my time and effort, it was separating me from my family, from my church, from my spiritual growth and development. As I was striving for success, God's voice had become distant and dull to me but he was still there and then decided to talk to me through a shout of a crisis. One morning, my wife Judy found me out cold on the bathroom floor with a bleeding ulcer. My recovery involved serious stomach surgery followed by an extended hospital stay.

There were lessons to be learned about priorities in life, priorities that would involve my family and my service to God. A regular visitor to the hospital was the President of my alma mater. God used him to encourage me in my faith and my desire to serve Him. During those visits he also encouraged me to consider joining him at Wheaton, to serve there in Administration and the faculty. It would be a big change, reduced income in giving up my role as a partner of a law firm, but as he talked, and as I shared with Judy, it was clear that God was pushing

me through this open door, it was what he wanted me to do. I left the practice of law and spent five years at Wheaton in Administration and teaching. When my assignment was over I thought I was ready to go back to the practice of law but it was at that point that God intervened once again. Not through a crisis, but through the direct involvement of Christian friends, mentors of mine who cared enough about me to get involved in my life and recruited me to join the leadership team at ServiceMaster. We are a company that has grown very rapidly, doubling in size every three to three and a half years and are more than 25 times larger than when I first joined the firm in 1977. Our objectives are, simply stated:

- to honor God in all we do
- to help people develop
- to pursue excellence, and
- to grow profitably.

We employ and manage over 230,000 people and today our services stretch from Karachi, Pakistan to Tokyo, Japan. We are a public company, we are listed on the New York Stock Exchange. Yes, I live in one of those pressure cooker environments where revenue and profits must be reported quarter-by-quarter and our profits have been up every quarter for the past 26 years. The shareholders, to whom I am responsible as a leader, vote everyday on my leadership. They have a choice to buy, hold or sell, but the measure of my success as a leader, is not just in the value of our shares or the profit we produce, the answer must come from the people I work with and serve. See, I have a day-to-day opportunity to witness, live, and implement my faith either as a beacon for the Lord I love, or a light under a bushel. One of the greatest tensions in life, is the tension between knowing and doing.

(Here interject Socrates).