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True Success

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Before I get started let me tell you something. I want to congratulate each of you on the tremendous success it took to bring you to this beautiful city of Vancouver. Such great congratulations are due to each and every one of you, but I wanted to take our short time together this afternoon to talk about your success—your success past, present, and future. We’re going to use our time together to reflect on what I like to call true success—deeply satisfying and sustainable success that gives us the power to make the impact that we’re here in this world to make.

I have to admit the first time I ever thought about this topic or reflected on it or spoke on it was 20 years ago. I was sitting in my office at Notre Dame doing what a philosophy professor does. I was thinking. The phone rang. A big group of really successful people were calling to ask me to come and speak to them on success. I had no idea why they were calling me. I didn’t teach it at Notre Dame; I hadn’t written about it at that time. I thought, “These are very successful people, and they want me to speak to them on the topic of success? I’ll go home and tell my wife. She’ll be really proud of me.” Philosophers have no schedule whatsoever, so I jumped up from my desk and grabbed my coat. I was on my way out the door when the phone rang a second time.

I reached back and grabbed it. By a cosmic coincidence, it was a publishing company asking me if I’d consider writing a book on success—the very same thing. I ran to the football stadium at Notre Dame where I parked my car. I drove the two miles home. I came bursting through the front door. I saw my wife and said, “Mary, you won’t believe it. Within 60 seconds I just got these two phone calls. A group of really accomplished people wants me to talk to them about success. A publisher wants me to write a book on it.” I thought she was going to glow with pride. She just looked real confused. She said, “Wait. Don’t you have to be a success before you can speak and write on it?” I said, “I am not going to get hung up on a technicality.”

I’m a student to the wisest people who have ever lived—Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Confucius, Lao Tzu, Descartes,

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Kierkegaard. I'm going to go through the centuries across the cultures and ask a question. Is there a universal framework for success applicable to every facet of our lives? I've read hundreds of books, thousands of essays. I was stunned to discover there are only seven utterly universal conditions for success. They're going to structure our time together this afternoon. I call them the seven Cs of success for reasons that will become obvious.

1. Conception The first one came to us from Aristotle. Aristotle said in every situation, in every opportunity, with any new challenge, we need first and foremost a clear conception of what we want. We need a vivid vision; we need a goal clearly imagined. Too many people have only the vaguest idea what they want in their lives. Did you hear the actress Lily Tomlin say a few years ago, "I always wanted to be somebody, but now I realize I should have been more specific." I love that. It captures the way so many people think and feel. They want to be somebody. They want to do something. What? They have no clue. Vague thoughts cannot motivate specific behavior. The great philosophers said you should have a clear conception of what you want to make happen.

Seneca, one of my favorite first century philosophers said, "If one does not know to which port one is sailing, no wind is favorable." If we don't know where we're going, we can't take advantage of the things that cross our paths along the way.

The philosophers gave us some incredible advice about goal setting. In fact, I wanted to bring you all today, first and foremost, the greatest piece of advice ever given for powerful goal setting. It's probably the most famous piece of advice ever given. It's the shortest. It could be the most profound, and it might even be the toughest. With one voice Thales, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle said this. It was so important it was inscribed in marble at the holiest spot in ancient Greece. Whatever you do, whatever your challenge is, whatever opportunity you face, job one is always the same: "Know thyself."

Every exercise in goal setting should be an exercise in self-knowledge. Thales said that's one of the hardest things

in the world. Fight to make your goals right for you—your talents, your loves, what you are especially good at, your connections in the world. One philosopher said, "Know your strengths, know your weaknesses, know your opportunities." These combine to give you self-knowledge.

I decided to bring you the second greatest piece of advice ever given from powerful goal setting—not as widely understood in the ancient world, even more important now than it was then. The philosopher said, do not allow what is very good to keep you from what is best. This is so important that I decided to draw you a picture.

Imagine you're out in the woods on a hike. Let's say you're leading a group of other people. Let's imagine you set it as your goal to get to the highest point in the area from which you'll be able to survey all the surrounding terrain. Hill A is the highest point you can see. You want to get to the highest point. It looks like it's hill A, so you climb hill A. You slip and you fall and you pull each other up. Finally, you get to the summit from which vantage point you can now see the much higher hill B.

Let me ask you all a question. If your goal is to get to the highest point in the area and you now stand perched atop hill A, what's the very first thing you're going to have to do to attain your true goal? Go downhill. And what are people going to say when you suggest that as leader? "Don't we know, isn't this universal? What do you mean we have to go downhill? It took us a long time to get up here. Hill A is very good, we can see a lot from hill A." There are so many individuals, there are so many businesses, there are so many families stuck on top of hill A because nobody wants to go downhill. What does that metaphorically represent? Changing what you must recently have been doing.

Getting outside that comfort zone can initially look like maybe you're even farther from your true goal, as you go might need to go down in order to get up. The philosophers say be bold. Set new goals. Life is supposed to be a series of adventures. Get to hill A, throw a party, have a celebration, but let it be your base camp for the next ascent up the highest hill.

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Some of you may be saying, “Wait a minute, here’s a philosopher. He’s talking to us about successes.” So far we’ve just talked about inner stuff. A clear conception, a vivid vision of goal clearly imagined. We’re talking about self-knowledge. We’re talking about inner boldness to set new goals. What’s the relationship in this world between the inner and the outer?

I was with a group of executives in Florida not long ago. My plane was late. The car service was getting me to the hotel as fast as it could. I was running in the front door of the hotel, running through the lobby. Four guys were coming in, apparently from the golf course. One of them recognized me from a poster and said, “Professor, you’ve got to come over here, I’ve got to tell you what just happened.” I ran across the lobby and said, “What? What just happened?” He said, “You’ll like this. I know you’re on in a minute. I’ll be quick.” He pointed to his friends and said, “The four of us have a pact amongst ourselves. Everytime we go to a meeting, anywhere in the world, we find the nearest golf course and play a few holes of golf before we go into the meeting room. We’ve done it for about 10years.” Pointing to one of his friends he said, “This guy was the first one up, professor. I don’t know; he stretches every muscle in his body before he’ll swing a golf club. We don’t know what he’s doing, yoga, what it is. We say, ‘Come on, take your swing we’ve got to go.’ Professor, he stepped up to the ball, he took his swing and, for the first time in ten years, this character totally missed the ball. The three of us just stared at him. And he looked back at us and said, ‘Whoa, tough course.’ Isn’t that the human condition?” I said, “That’s very funny. Thank you for telling me that. You’re absolutely right. We live in a world in which everybody is yelling, ‘Tough course.’”

What’s going to happen with the recession next? How long is this recovery going to take? What about our competition? And what about global terrorism and the upcoming hurricane season and the oil spill? Everybody is yelling “tough course” except the great philosophers of history who were all people who said it’s not the course. It’s what we bring to the course everyday that really matters the most.

Number one, bring a clear conception of what you want to see happen. A clear vision for your future.

2. Confidence In the ancient world, Cicero once said that in this life attitude is almost everything. We need an attitude of confidence. With strong confidence we can attain whatever goal or set of goals we pose for ourselves. You all know this. You wouldn’t be here at MDRT unless you had the confidence to pursue your goals boldly.

A great philosopher, William James, who lived a hundred years ago, is my favorite Harvard philosophy and psychology professor in his era. He studied champions in every sport of his day. He said the things we call sports are so different—rowing, running, football, basketball, mountain climbing, skiing—they all have champions. I wonder if, despite the differences in their activities, all champions share a core of characteristics in common.

He studied every champion of his day and said, “I think there’s one thing every champion shares in common with every other champion, but I don’t think we have a word for it in the English language.” He coined a phrase “precurive faith.” From Latin, *cursive* to run, *pre* ahead of—faith that runs ahead of the evidence.

James said that every champion is regularly challenged to do something he has never done before. Wrestle a new opponent, climb a new mountain, break a new world record. If he just looks in his past history of accomplishments and asks himself the question, “Do I have evidence sufficient to prove I can do this?” The answer will always be no. The evidence of the past is always insufficient to prove the success of the future. James said the champions are precisely the people who don’t let that hold them back. They run ahead of the evidence, precursively, believing in themselves.

He told a story about a mountain climber who slipped and fell during a difficult ascent. A blizzard was coming on. He’d die of exposure unless he made a jump longer than any jump he had ever attempted. James said that if he stood there and said, “I can’t do this, there’s no way out, I’m doomed,” he’d be lowering the objective probability of success. If he engaged in precursive faith, “I can make

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this jump. This is why I've done all my legwork. This is what I've prepared for my whole career." If he engaged in positive self talk, he'd be raising the objective probability of success.

James said, "Now of course, don't get me wrong. I'm not saying you can talk yourself into jumping over this building. Obviously we all have limits." The exciting truth is that he said we don't come near our limits. He told the story because the mountain climber made the jump and lived to talk about it.

I thought to myself, "Have I ever been stuck on the side of a mountain, even metaphorically? Have I had to do this?" Two days later I get a phone call from a big advertising agency. "We're doing a nationwide search for a philosopher to be the national spokesman for Winnie the Pooh on Disney home videos." I said, "Really?" She said, "We've searched the country for a philosophy professor with personality, and we can't find one." You know what I'm talking about, don't you?

I said, with all the personality I could muster, "Well, why are you calling me?" And they said, "Well, we heard you used to play guitar in rock bands. You've done all kinds of crazy things. Maybe you're the guy." I said, "I love Winnie the Pooh." She said, "We've got to get you on video." I said, "I just did a show for The Learning Channel." She had five Disney executives look at this video The Learning Channel had. They decided they wanted to use me for these commercials, but first the writer of the commercials called me up a day before I heard the results. He said, "Tom, they came out of the screening room and said, 'We like this guy, but is there a problem with his southern accent?'" And the writer of the commercials, who was from Asheville, North Carolina, my home state, said, "What accent?" So they hired me.

They called me Monday and said, "You're the man. We're going to fly you to L.A. We're going to fly you first class, put you in a room in Beverly Hills this week. We're going to make some TV commercials." I said, "My family has never been to California. Could you fly them too?" They'd love this. Knowing I taught at a Catholic

university, I was asked how many family members were we talking about? There are four of us. They flew us to California. First of all, they asked me that afternoon to take 24 pictures of my office at Notre Dame. I said, "Why?" They said, "You'll find out, just take them. A guy is coming for your film tonight."

A guy came to my house that night. "I'm from Disney. I've come for your film." I asked, "What's this for?" He said, "They don't tell me anything, I just have to take it back to L.A." Two days later we land at LAX airport. We go to this room 20 times the size of this hall. It's like a huge warehouse, airplane hangar. It's a sound stage in Hollywood. Cavernous and dark, but under spotlights in the middle, my Notre Dame office in every detail. The mess had taken me ten years to make, and they had created it in two days. It was truly impressive. The difference was my desk at Notre Dame was fake wood. In Hollywood, real mahogany. I had a cheap computer; they had a top of the line. I had a beat up electric guitar in the corner; they had a brand new \$3,500 Gibson Les Paul guitar in the corner. I said, "Could I take 24 pictures of this office and send them back to Notre Dame? I could live like this." They said, "Oh, professor, we're spending \$3 million on this commercial campaign." Whoa, I'm having a mountaintop experience. You know how I fell to my ledge? "Could you stand next to your desk so we can focus the camera?" Sure, no problem. Seventy-five crew members emerge from the shadows. All of a sudden I realize they're all looking at me. Suddenly a phrase implanted itself in my brain. The phrase "weak link in the chain."

I've never made a TV commercial. I could blow \$3 million. I panicked until I remembered William James and precursive faith. I started saying to myself, all day long, "I can do this. I can do this. I can do this," no matter what I heard them ask me to do. For six hours of the hardest work I think I've ever done in my life. Well, remember I'm a philosopher. I heard myself say all day long, "No problem, I can do that. That's fine, I can do that." They said, "Oh Tom, this time can you please smile? Not with your mouth but with your eyes." No problem, I can do that. Thirty

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minutes later I hear a guy say, smiling with the eyes, “Take 37.” Thirty-six failures in a row and panic in the eyes is not what they were after at that point. William James, you tell me I’m supposed to have upfront confidence.

What about when I take my lumps? What about when I fail? You all know the most successful people in history have never been people who didn’t experience failure. Often they are the people who failed a lot. But they had a special kind of confidence.

I learned that day in Hollywood that we need two kinds of confidence. In the concept of precursive faith we need initial confidence. But we also need resilient confidence—confidence that can take its lumps and keep going.

Somehow I smile with my eyes. We made two TV commercials for Winnie the Pooh. My kids were proud of me. They call me a Pooh-losopher. I had done something they could relate to. My wife said she was so proud of me; she got her favorite new vocabulary word that day: residuals. I thought I was doing this for free. As we left the studio someone said, Oh, you’ll start getting residuals soon.” I asked, “What’s that?” They said, “You get paid \$500 every time a commercial shows on TV.” I said, “That’s my monthly salary as a philosophy professor. You’re kidding, right?” They said, “No sir, \$500.” We get home. They’re showing it six times a day. In the first six weeks they showed my commercials on network television 159 times. My wife would walk through the room, see my face on TV, and say, “Cha-ching, let’s go to the mall.” Thanks to Winnie the Pooh and thanks to that kid.

3. Concentration I’ll tell you what, we live in a world in which people have goals, and they often have confidence, but they forget number three. We need a focused concentration on what it takes to reach the goal. Zeno, an ancient philosopher, said that from every start point to every goal there is a universally best strategy: divide, then conquer.

Some of you have heard our old football coach, Lou Holtz, speak. I’ve spoken with him many times for NBC Sports. I’ve heard him tell the story so many times about when he was an assistant coach and got fired. He had no

money, no investments, nothing. He said he could’ve been depressed, but instead he got out a bunch of paper and wrote down goals for his life. “One day I want to be head coach at Notre Dame. One day I want to win a national championship. I want to be invited to the White House as a guest. I want to be on “The Tonight Show” with Johnny Carson. I want to make a hole in one in golf.” One hundred and seven lifetime goals he set that day. The biggest things he could think of. And then you know how we are. He took the list to his wife so she could get a sneak preview of their glorious future together. She read all 107 items and said the one thing he would least have expected her to say, “Lou, you left out something. Why don’t you add ‘Get a job?’” Don’t be afraid to start small.

4. Consistency An ancient Chinese proverb says great oaks grow from tiny acorns. Lou had to learn to focus concentration on what it takes to reach the goal. He had to learn intermediate goals and more immediate goals. Little things add up, which is why number four—the fourth condition for success—is in little things as well as in big things. We need a stubborn consistency in pursuing our vision of determined persistence.

Look at the word *consistency* for a second. It comes from two Latin words, a verb that means to stand and a particle that means together. Standing together. Do the people in my office stand together? Do the members of my family stand together? Do my reactions and emotions stand together with my deepest beliefs and values? Or is everybody pulling apart here?

Consistency is not about always doing things the same way. That’s being stuck on hill A. Consistency means being true to your highest goals and deepest values.

The Chinese have a great image of moving water. They say moving water comes across an obstacle. What does it do? It goes over it, goes around it, goes under it. What’s stronger, they ask, water or stone? When I ask my students at Notre Dame that question, they say, “What are you talking about? Water is just liquid and stone is massive and heavy and hard. Dripping water goes through stone.” When circumstances change radically, this liquid

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becomes a solid. When they change radically in the opposite direction, it becomes a vapor, but it never abandons its essential nature. That, the Chinese philosophers say, is consistency. Be like water.

I did a study of failure a few years ago. Why is failure so common in a world full of good advice? The number one cause of failure in our culture is self-imposed self sabotage: people acting inconsistently with their own goals and values. Why would anyone act inconsistently with his or her own goals and values? Laziness, temptation, confusion, diversion. There are so many causes, but people trip and fall and they pick themselves back up.

I got a call from a business once asking me, "We've got persistent inconsistency in our company, and we need you to figure out why anyone would continue to act in a self defeating way." You may have a client with this problem. You may have a child with this problem. You may have struggled with it in the past and overcome it.

I had to use my secret weapon as a philosopher to answer this question. I had to stare out the window for three days, and I came up with the answer. There are three possible causes of persistent inconsistency. Number one: ignorance, failure to think through the consequences of our actions. We're running toward the edge of the cliff and we're not slowing down because we don't see it coming. The company that was calling me knew what was going on.

So could it be number two: indifference. Let's keep this up for a second. This is great. I directed seminars for the best schoolteachers in the United States for eight summers. Fifteen of the best schoolteachers in America would come and live with me for a month. I would be their only professor, and they would be my only students. A teacher of 13-year-old students told me about a fellow teacher with that level class—underachievers, underperforming, outrageous behavior. She finally got sick of it one day and came into the classroom, wrote two words on the board, and called on the ringleader. "Bob, what's the difference between ignorance and indifference?" And Bob actually said "I don't know and I don't care." Absolutely right. She said, "Bob, see what you can do when you set your mind to it?"

Any teacher can deal with ignorance. We provide information. It's indifference that's so much harder to reach. These people were not apathetic; they weren't indifferent. Their problem was number three: inertia. In physics, it's the law that an object in motion tends to stay in motion. An object at rest tends to stay at rest. In human life it's the weight of habit—we're stuck in a rut and can't get out.

The second strongest natural power in human life is the power of habit. The only thing that can overcome it in our natural set of skills is the imagination. If you get people's imaginations on fire, they can overcome the pull of inertia. Get your clients' imaginations on fire. Never just appeal to their intellects. Never just appeal to their reason. Medieval philosophers explained it. The imagination engages the emotions and, in this world, it's the emotions that move the will. You know that don't you, which is why our next condition for success says that we need an emotional commitment to the importance of what we're doing.

I got a big teaching award at Notre Dame. Next semester I had more big people coming to Philosophy 101 than I had ever seen before. Seventeen-year-old freshmen, 285 pounds, 6 feet 8 inches tall coming to philosophy class. I called the athletic department for the first time in my career. "How many varsity athletes do I have? How many scholarship athletes in my class of 300 to 400 students?" They said, "You have 55 varsity athletes." I asked, "Do I have a reputation I do not want to have?" They replied, "Oh no, professor, we don't put them in easy classes at Notre Dame. We put them with professors who have won teaching awards, hoping you guys will get them as excited about their academics as they are about their athletics." I said, "I'm proud to be in a place that works like that. Give me all of your athletes and I'll turn them into philosophers."

Yeah, let me tell you what I learned real fast. You're right.

I gave three exams and five essay papers. The first exam out of 300 to 400 students, we always had 7 or 8 Fs. You know the grading score A, excellent; B, good; C, average;

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D, poor; F, failure. Out of 100 points, 60 or below F. On that exam I had 48 Fs. Of the 31 freshmen football players, I had 29 in that class. Of the 29, 26 failed the exam with scores I had never personally witnessed in all my years of teaching.

Out of 100 possible points, they were making total scores of 7, 9, 11, 20. I said, “These are jersey numbers, not exam scores.” One guy worked for an hour and made a zero. I had never seen that before. I started giving review sessions on Thursday nights so I could review what we had done during the week. I didn’t want to lose all these kids. The coaches would come every Thursday night to make sure their students were there. I’d have 100 students come to review sessions on Thursday nights. I’d preach about hard work and self-discipline. The second exam, nobody failed. People who had made single digits were making B-. People who had made 20s and 30s were making Bs. The guy who made the zero pulled himself all the way up to a completely legitimate D. I had never been proud of a D before, but he convinced me D was for defense, and he said I should get used to it. What, was F for football? I was starting to wonder. It took me half the semester to convince them F was not for philosophy. These guys ended up doing great.

An investigative reporter from the *Chicago Tribune* came to my office to check on whether I was making easy questions on the tests just to help them do better. He saw the second exam that they had done so well on. He couldn’t believe how hard the questions were. “You teach football players how to read these questions?” I said, “They can nail the answers. These are the future philosophers of the NFL. If, on Super Bowl Sunday, any day in the future, you see any player in the huddle in the thinker pose, you know they’ve been in my class.”

5. Commitment How do you do it, professor? I asked the offensive center, “How did you guys turn it around?” He said, “It was you.” I didn’t make it easy. “You came Thursday nights when you didn’t have to. You showed us you cared about us. You were committed to us. And that was contagious. We started caring about you and what

you were trying to do for us.” People are attracted to people who care. If you show up on your version of Thursday nights, you can change the world. If you show people your commitment, you can change their hearts. You can make things happen you had never imagined.

These students that semester were the first I ever talked to about the seven Cs of success that we’re talking about today. They used them the following year to win the national championship of 1988. They used Plato and Aristotle on the football field. Chris Zorich who went to the Chicago Bears, Ricky Watters who set a record for Super Bowl touchdowns. To this day when I see people like Jerome Bettis slip on his Super Bowl ring, I know they know the great wisdom of the great thinkers, and they use it in everything they do. People are attracted to people who care.

6. Character I’m going to tell you all something. People are attracted to people of character. The philosophers said that we need a good character to guide us and keep us on a proper course. Can a bad character have success? For a while, in a limited domain, at the expense of what really matters. The great philosophers have always said unethical success is always self-destructive over the long run. The only sustainable success comes from inside an Aristotle head. He said he thinks salesmanship makes the world go round—the ability to convince another person to enter into a joint project that’s of mutual benefit. He said, “I’ve got to figure out what it takes to be masterful in sales, in persuasion.” The Greek word was *rhetoric*. That’s what he was talking about, what you do.

He said it takes three things, logos, pathos, and ethos. Logos, from which we get logic, know your stuff cold. Think through the implications of what you’re trying to convince another person to do. Pathos is a Greek word for passion. My dad would say this to me. I’ve got to be passionate. My dad had a small real estate business. He said, “I’ve got to be passionate about what I’m selling, but I’ve got to know my clients’ passions, their hopes and dreams, their loves and fears, and then I can do great things with them.” When my dad made a recommendation, people

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said to themselves, “This guy knows what he’s talking about.” He was a master of logos. And they said, “This guy really understands me.” He was a master of pathos. It made him very persuasive. But my dad and Aristotle persuaded me ethos is the foundation from which we get ethics. It didn’t mean rules; it meant character (in Greek). People are persuaded by people they trust.

My dad’s whole business career was based on his professional integrity and after his death, people stopped me all over Durham, North Carolina, and said, “Your daddy was somebody I could always trust. Your father had character. Your daddy was the last gentleman in the neighborhood.” I was proud to hear him talked about like that. I wondered if this is the way people are going to talk about me when I’m gone. If not, I’m not doing the most I can for them while I’m here. Ethos is the foundation.

7. Capacity to Enjoy We need a capacity to enjoy the process along the way. A lot of people say, “How can I enjoy the process of work? I mean, it’s a steamroller, it’s a pressure cooker, it’s a minefield, it’s a rollercoaster.” Is it the course or is it what we bring to the course everyday that ultimately counts. The great thinkers have said survey the history of human excellence. You find people who love what they are doing. For people who don’t enjoy every moment of every day, some days are just tough. But for people who cultivate a capacity to enjoy what can be enjoyed, the good days are even better and the bad days have the edge taken off by this overall capacity.

The Greeks said, “Know thyself.” I wish like crazy they had said, “Enjoy thyself” because when you’re enjoying the process, think about what we’ve talked about. It’s easier to conjure up this clear conception of what you want

next. The confidence is not so tough. The concentration, the consistency, the commitment, everything flows.

It’s really funny. A lady called me in financial services not too long ago and said, “Tom, I’m calling you because, for the first time in my life, my purse was stolen last week in Manhattan” I said I was nowhere near Manhattan last week. She said, “No. Of all the things I have to replace, you once gave me long ago a laminated wallet card on true success—these seven conditions—I read it everyday. It changed the way I live my life. It’s changed the way I do my work. I need a new card.” I said, “I’ll send you a box of cards. The great thinkers would be so proud of you using their ideas.”

We’ve put this list of these conditions on the MDRT website for you all to download. Make yourself a little card, or if you see me walking around, ask me for one and I’ll give you one. It has changed the way I do business. It has changed the way I live my life. I’m not perfect at any of these things, but the philosophers have shown me what to aspire to, what can make a difference.

You all are going to have a remarkable chance tomorrow morning to talk about implementation. Ideas are half the battle. Implementation is the other half. I just want to encourage you in the rest of your time here to meet each other and to think through the way you’ll do things in the next six months, the next year. Use the wisdom of the great philosophers who have come before us. Make your difference in the world.

I just want to ask you one question. Why should we ever settle for anything less? It’s a great honor to be your philosopher. Thank you for asking me. True success to all of you. Thank you so much. You guys are great.