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B'nai B'rith Scholar Athlete Awards
John M. Dunn
May 15, 2012

B'nai B'rith is the oldest and largest Jewish organization in the world with associations in many countries. It began in 1843 in New York and has its main office in Washington, DC. It is a cultural, social and educational organization that also supports hospitals and gives help after disasters. In 1913 it created the Anti-Defamation League to fight unfair treatment of Jews and others. B’nai B’rith means ‘Sons of the Covenant’.

• Good Evening. I want to thank B'nai B'rith for this tradition of honoring promising young people like these who have been recommended by their schools’ athletic directors. This annual event began nearly 50 years ago and many of those honored have, as predicted, gone on to achieve great prominence as leaders in their professions.

• It is my great pleasure this evening to add my personal note of congratulations to this year's 22 honorees. You join a long and distinguished list of past recipients who include the likes of Yankee shortstop Derek Jeter and soccer Olympian Lindsay Tarpley.

• Congratulations on your impending graduation and congratulations to your family members who have helped set the stage for you to become the young leaders you are today. Together you have found and firmly established the kind of balance in your lives that will lead to even greater accomplishment.

• My assigned role this evening is to exhort you and build on the traits that brought you here this evening--to let you know we are expecting great things from you for many years into the future. Consider yourself so exhorted. I think you know what it is you want to do. These next few weeks are your time to relax, sit back, celebrate and savor your successes.
• Your challenge moving forward may be to find a way to hang onto that sense of balance that will keep your academic, community service and sense of personal health and well being in alignment--operating at peak efficiency. You have all the tools. As you begin your studies at colleges and universities around the nation, you'll have the opportunity to sharpen those tools and move into positions of leadership at the college level and ultimately become leaders in the communities where you choose to build your lives.

I do have some advice about how best to make the most of your leadership potential. Here are the five best ways to ensure your continued growth as a leader.

• Listen
• Choose your words carefully
• Take things in stride
• Help develop new leaders
• Make your own health and well being a priority.

• First of all, listen

We tend to get elected or selected for leadership roles because we are talkers--we communicate well and express opinions or ideas that resonate with others. That may be how we secure "leadership" positions. Being a leader, however, frequently means we have to stop talking and spend some time--a lot of time--listening.

I have the privilege of leading one of our state and nation's great universities. When I was selected to lead WMU, it was already one of fewer than 200 research universities in the country and just five in Michigan. A lot of wonderful things were already in place, and I needed to learn about them all.

Instead of coming here with big ideas, I needed to come here with big ears--to spend time really listening to people at every level of the organization. I'm still doing that,
and I expect to do that throughout my presidency. I've found incredibly talented people with good ideas about how to improve and enhance our core mission. Their ideas are insightful and rooted in their experiences at WMU. It makes my job as a leader easier when I find good people with good ideas to move us forward.

And when it comes to one of the tougher parts of being a leader--resolving disputes--listening skills will pay enormous dividends. You simply can't solve problems without really listening to the issues from all sides.

• Second--Choose your words carefully
If you are going to be a successful leader, you need to know that words have great power. Words carelessly chosen or thrown out in an offhanded manner have the power to wound people in a lasting way. The right words, spoken in a caring tone, have the power to make those you lead decided to embrace the goals you wish to accomplish.

Mark Twain put it perfectly when he said, "The difference between the right word, and the almost-right word, is the difference between lightning, and lightning-bug."

Third--Take things in stride
You are part of an organization. You can and will invest all of your energy, hopes and ambitions in some initiative that requires the work of others. Things won't always work out well. When they don't, you'll be faced with the choice of railing against the fates and placing blame--or being a true leader by forgiving and moving forward.

(This would be a great place for the Service Station/"That'll happen" story)
You know, I've never forgotten that moment or forgotten how I felt when, even though I had screwed up, that man acknowledged that things happen, that things go wrong and that it's not the end of the world when they do. "That'll happen" has become something to remember when I make a mistake or when someone in my organization makes a mistake. We get past it and we keep moving forward.

Fourth—Help develop new leaders
Build a team. Nothing makes being a leader easier than finding and recognizing potential in others and giving them some space to do great things. If they're part of your organization, you get to bask in the glow of the success your team members generate. Your organization runs more smoothly, the people within your organization feel empowered because they see good things happen and they know their work is valued and appreciated. Best of all, when you need to step away from your leadership role temporarily or permanently, you can do so knowing that your organization will run smoothly and people will admire the strength of the team you've built.

• And finally, pay attention to your own well-being.
I mentioned earlier that you have established the perfect balance. You are athletes who know that physical well-being enhances your ability to perform in the classroom and provides the energy and stamina to serve community organizations as well. Some of you will continue as athletes at the next level. All of you, at some point, will find yourselves at a point in life that will challenge you to find the time and make the effort to keep physically active and stay in shape. It is one of many balancing acts that will be required of you throughout life. Rise to that challenge and keep physical activity central to your daily life. You will never regret it.
I'd like to close with a story about a political leader--a young man who excelled in academics and athletics in high school and college. At your age, he was a member of USA Today's All-USA High School Football Team. He went on to become a Rhodes Scholar with degrees from Yale, Stanford and Oxford. He came home to become the mayor of a struggling city--Newark, N.J. Instead of moving into the mayoral mansion, he chose to live in one of the city's impoverished neighborhoods because he wanted to stay connected with his constituents and to be able to listen and learn.

On April 13, he came home to find his neighbor's home in flames. The fire department was not yet on the scene when he learned that his neighbor's daughter was trapped in the home. Breaking away from his security detail, he ran into the burning home found the young woman and carried her out--at one point having to break through room of flames in what he now readily admits was a "terrifying" moment. He and the rescued woman were both injured and treated for second-degree burns and smoke inhalation. What was his lasting lesson from that moment? It was a renewed respect for the work of his city's firemen who face such terror every day.

The politician I speak of is Newark Mayor Cory Booker. Following his heroism, digital media exploded with comments about his bravery.

"After the incident, Smoke was treated for Cory Booker exposure," said one Tweet.

"Superheroes dress up as Cory Booker on Halloween," said another.

Last Sunday, Mayor Booker was the commencement speaker at Hampton University. He told graduates that his life philosophy and commitment to community came from listening to the people in his community.
"We must begin in our lives to have the courage to be who we are created to be, not to play small in this world, not to be a carbon copy of the person next to us," he said. "We were born not to fit in. We were born to stand out. Don't die a copy."

Booker further challenged the Class of 2012 to take an oath to improve the world not with words but with actions.

"Swear your oath not with your hand over your heart, but your hand outstretched to give, to serve, to do."

• I'll leave you with Mayor Booker's exhortation. I don't think it can be improved upon. Those of us who are part of your home community will be watching you as you move forward to give, serve and do. Make us proud.

Thank you.