

5/4/05

## Distinguished Professor Speech

### **“Everybody has a story”**

First, I want to thank the university for my Distinguished Professor Award. It was a once in a lifetime award that represents for me a lifetime of work. This opportunity to speak to the university community is probably the only time I will have to share my thoughts and to communicate with many of you, so I take that challenge seriously. Since this opportunity is very precious to me, I will take the risk of being totally transparent for the next few minutes, trying to condense what I would communicate in many conversations over months and maybe years into 30 minutes or less. I want to give you a rough idea of who and what I am, what I do, and what motivates me to do it. In other words I want to share my story with you. One thing I have learned in life is that “everyone has a story”, and in the final analysis everyone wants to share that story with others. I am no exception.

Although perhaps not the first thing I would share with you, but the most important, is my faith story. Fundamentally what drives me is my faith in God, his righteousness and his mercy, first and foremost. It is a belief in the truth that I find in the Word of God, the Bible. It provides a foundation for my daily living as well as my hope and belief in a life to come. It is a personal relationship that guides my actions, convicts me when I stray from what I know is right, and forgives me when I repent. It is a trust that has been proven over and over again. This is the National Day of Prayer and I know the power of prayer in my own life. I pray for this university and its faculty and staff. I pray for my students.

Who would have thought that I would ever be teaching at a university? I am the first in my family to attend college, but that is really not unusual for many of my age in this area. What is unusual is that I had a severe stuttering problem that prevented me from having

much of a social life. The problem was real and after repeated therapy at the Bill Wilkerson Speech and Hearing Center in Nashville, I was told that the problem could not be cured and that all they could do would be to give me accommodations for the problem. I took their accommodations and prayed.

I retreated into academics and excelled, but in high school I found great satisfaction in teaching a small group of 6<sup>th</sup> graders in my church, even with my stuttering problem. From there came a desire to teach, but also a knowledge that I would have to speak better to do this. I continued to pray. I entered college with still no resolution for what God's plans for me were. During my sophomore year at Vanderbilt we had a deadline for declaring a major. I knelt down by my bed one more time and prayed for guidance – thanking God for the gifts he had bestowed on me and asking for an answer to my question – pursue a career in a research lab or teach? To teach I would have to be able to communicate. A peace suddenly came over me and I went to bed somehow knowing that an answer would come. The next morning my speech was vastly improved and it continued to improve in the next weeks, months, and years to the point that many are surprised to hear this story today. I had the answer to my question – teaching. That is why my feeling for what I do is so intense. I teach because it is my passion. It is what I feel God has called me to do. I love research, but it is the joy of communicating, motivating, inspiring students to learn and develop their abilities which provides my greatest satisfaction. And that is why I treasure and value friendships and communications with those around me.

My chemistry family is especially dear to me – Fred, Eddie, Carrie, Robin, Rebecca, Dr. Foote – yes, Dr. Foote will always be Dr. Foote and not John because he was the chair of the department when I came here in 1992 after 14 wonderful years of teaching chemistry, physics and math at Dickson County High School. I still wonder why I got the job with my lack of research publications, and maybe Dr. Foote has wondered that as well through the years. More than anyone else in our department though, I want to thank Donna

Liverett, our office manager. I cannot imagine a better spokesperson for APSU, or a more caring, easy to work with, supportive, positive role model. I was also blessed in my early days here with 2 more excellent role models – Dr. Harvey Blanck and Dr. Durward Harris. Although I see Dr. Blanck weekly, I still miss their day to day wisdom and their general candor about university politics.

Ah, the challenge of motivating students to learn, to develop their abilities. Several years ago I came up with my chemical equation for motivation in the classroom.

An organized confident delivery + enthusiasm + a sensitivity to students' needs yields motivation.

- An organized confident delivery – as I teach scientific principles my mantra is “it must make common sense”. Material must be presented which logically builds on or rebuilds their cognitive understanding of the world. Students must be challenged to think, to take risks in their learning, to reason and analyze, to extend themselves. We all agree on these items, of course. And we all agree that evaluation must be consistent. Whether it is fair may be debatable. Many years ago I ran across a quote from Paul Dressel, “*A grade is an inadequate report of an inaccurate judgment by a biased and variable judge of the extent to which a student has attained an undefined level of mastery of an unknown proportion of an indefinite material*” I am sure many students agree with this and I use it in my syllabus to point out to students that I do not believe grades are perfect.
- But what about enthusiasm. Enthusiasm is what makes the material come to life, the catalyst that convinces the student to inquire more deeply. It lowers the activation energy of the learning process. I suppose my trademark is enthusiasm and always has been. I do believe it covers a multitude of sins in class presentation. Enthusiasm is a highly contagious disease and I try to spread it when I can. I do a lot of outreach to surrounding schools as LABMAN and have seen about 13,000 students and adults in my time here at APSU, including the 50

Houston County Middle School students this morning. I wore my lab coat today so I could show you how my school presentations usually start

. . . *Labman routine.*

People enjoy the energy I put into my show and the stories that I tell and the songs that I sing as I do the demonstrations. I had thought about getting my son Kenneth to play and sing the “mole song” with me for this presentation. It is a crowd favorite wherever I go. For you folks that don’t know about the mole, a mole is an animal that buries in the ground or a spot on your chin that you gotta shave around, but there’s another kind of mole that’s of interest to me – its the kind we study in chemistry. A mole is a unit, or have you heard, containing 6 times  $10^{23}$ , that a 6 with 23 zeros at the end, much too big a number of comprehend. I also am a punster and love to work humor into my lectures. Element puns are especially good, for example what element name would you think would be the answer to this question? What are doctors for? Why helium or curium of course. My favorite is “What element is a stomach-less creature? Nobellium.

- If enthusiasm in the catalyst, we have to keep the reaction going at a reasonable rate so we need to mix in some *sensitivity to student needs*. The first year I taught high school I received some of the best teaching advice I have ever received. One of the older and wiser teachers told me, “Ron, always remember that we teach students, not material out of a textbook”. I try to remember that every day. My job is to take students as far as they can go within their set of limitations. If I can do that , then we are both a success. I do love people and listening to their stories. I feel like it is a part of my job to just listen sometimes to students – it is amazing what you hear. The Rev. John Maxwell once said, “Nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care”. This can be taken too far but I do think that if students know how much you care about them it is motivating and propels them to greater interest in your class. Everyone wants to feel respected and of worth, and the ability to show a sincere interest and love for my students is

rooted in my faith. As the apostle Paul said in Phil 2:3-4 <sup>3</sup>Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup>Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. I think this is pretty good advice for us all.

But there is so much more to share with you. As we would talk I would of course mention other projects that I was working on here on campus. I suppose the latest would be the directorship of the Middle TN Science and Engineering Fair. APSU is now host to this regional science fair that sends 2 finalists to the International Fair to compete against 1200 students from over 35 countries for over 3.5 million dollars in awards. I have been involved with directing student research all my teaching career but the directorship of this fair is frankly overwhelming with my other teaching duties. I hope I am physically able to continue with the fair, and I appreciate very much the support that Dr. Hoppe and the administration has given to the MTSEF. I think it is a great way to bring high achieving middle and high school students to our campus. In the judging students get to talk with our faculty one-on-one – a real plus for us when a student is making a decision on college attendance.

I'm also sure that one of the topics we would discuss is the state of APSU – our likes and dislikes. Perhaps a short list of likes and dislikes is in order. I like salary raises of course, but I also like the beautification of the campus, and the building program that produced the new science building, the UC and soon the new rec center as well as the renovation of McCord. I even like the cafeteria food – which I think has really improved this year. (I must confess that I still love Moss's cafe, Cindy's all you can eat catfish in Dover, Shiloh BBQ on Highway 13, the burgoo at the Wood Shed in Hopkinsville, boiled peanuts, and most any out of the way "meat and 3" place that exists in the South)

But there are also some things that I don't like. I feel compelled to mention two. One is the increased teaching load of the past few years for those of us in the sciences – we

certainly felt we were teaching the same course load as others in the TBR system. I know my increased workload has made it impossible for me to work on research with undergrads -something I do truly miss. It has severely hurt our fledging undergraduate research program here at APSU, a program that we desperately need to encourage, not discourage. The implications and ramifications of this policy have affected and continue to affect the attitude of many of my fellow faculty. They are no longer willing to go the extra mile and give extra hours to the university.

I am also concerned about our cutback in advanced low enrollment course offerings. I know it has affected my son Kenneth as well as others, who will not have the opportunity to take these courses that they could have taken 6 or 7 years ago. I applaud the addition of the biochem and forensic science programs in our department, spearheaded by Dr. Reed and Dr. Brennan, but it is my personal opinion that our graduates are not as prepared for PhD programs in chemistry as they were 10 years ago.

I do have other concerns, but my time has gone. I hope I have chosen my concerns to spotlight wisely. I have not meant to be mean spirited in my remarks; I have only tried to voice my concerns. I believe the administration has been sincere in their goal of putting us on firm financial footing and I do appreciate their successes in doing this. I only hope they also realize the non-monetary cost of the policies they have implemented.

Finally, if and when we meet I would love to speak with you about my 150 acre farm over in Dickson County and my family. I would share with you my experience with testicular cancer in 1997. Kenneth, my son, is a junior here at APSU, and I am very proud of his accomplishments. A chemistry major, he dabbles in physics, math, leadership and religious studies, knows an amazing number of people on campus, and plays a mean piano. Kaci is my daughter; she is a freshman at Dickson County High School, is also interested in the piano and plays tennis for DCHS. Patti, my wife, teaches 3<sup>rd</sup> grade at Centennial Elementary in Dickson and is soon to retire. I love to listen to her

play the piano. She is a wonderful cook and has endured my long work hours for too many years, and I can never repay her for her support. Oh yes, I can't forget the farm, with my beef cattle, the hay fields, and the monster garden. The farm is where I have gotten some of my best research and teaching ideas. I invite you to go to my web site and see pictures of the farm – in the beauty of the winter snow and ice as well as the devastation of a flood. I have been inviting science and math faculty for some years now to a “Day at the Farm” in October, but I now extend that invitation to each and every one of you. If you're interested in hiking, “creek stomping”, or just sitting beside a roaring bonfire or taking an adventure on an “old-fashioned” hayride through 3 counties, just stop me on campus or send me an e-mail and let me know you want on the invitation list. I want to hear your story.

I close with another quote from Paul in Ephesians chapter 4, verse 29 that I try to put into practice everyday, “Let no unwholesome talk come out of your mouth, but only that which is useful for building others up, according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen”

May God bless Austin Peay State University and its mission.