

"Character: The Harder Right" & Lessons Learned To Live By

by Rear Admiral A.B. Cruz III, USN (ret.)

Good morning everyone...and thank you. Chief Master Sergeant Douglas/Chaplain Susan/ChapSu...a special thanks to you for your invitation and for making it possible for me to be here today.

[Thank introducer]

Mr. Eades, Mr. Spicer [or Ms. Hamilton], Faculty & Staff, and Students: Thank you so much for the nice welcome. Today, November 11th, we celebrate Veterans' Day. Did you know that for the last 100 years, since 1919, this is the day Americans pause to honor its military heroes, remember their achievements, their courage and their dedication, and to say thank you for their many sacrifices. We also, on this day, extend our gratefulness to the family members of those military members and veterans....So why don't we start by doing exactly that.

First, do we have any members of the staff or faculty who are currently serving or has served in the U.S. Armed Forces? I'd kindly asked that you stand up and remain standing.

Now, for the students...if any of your family members (your grandparents, parents, older brother or sister) have served in the military, I'd also ask that you stand up.

Alright...These special people have likely lived through very trying times and have often had to shoulder a heavy load to keep things running smoothly at home. So, right here today at SMH, we are in the midst of true patriots and the family members of those who have all nobly served. Let's applaud their service to our country.

Thank you very much. Please be seated.

When Mr. Eades and ChapSu contacted me about giving this talk, I honestly wasn't sure what I could or should talk about. So, I jumped online and opened the SMH website in hopes that something would strike me as being something worthwhile or nice to offer my thoughts on. And then there it was. Just a couple pages into the school's

strategic plan was a nicely designed page laying out the schools four “Pillars of Excellence.” One of this school’s pillars of excellence, along with Academics, Fine Arts, Athletics, is Leadership Development. Indeed, our strategic plan says this about leadership development:

Through the culture of trust and encouragement, students learn to live with honor, to treat all individuals with dignity and respect and to lead through service to others. It goes on to say that SMH helps to develop ethical students with lifelong moral and spiritual values. SMH students experience a safe and trusting culture in which to grow and find their own conviction, voice, passion and strong character.

Leadership development as it is defined here is, in my opinion, the most important of the four pillars of excellence. Without good character, the other stuff quickly becomes insignificant.

Let me tell you, this stuff about character, honor and integrity matter in life. They really do...and perhaps more than you might realize today. And if you think you’re going to learn this stuff they often just call “ethics” in college, business school, or law school, or on the job, let me tell you...well maybe...but chances are you won’t. So, what I’m

suggesting to you this morning students...is that the values you have learned and continue to learn from your parents, your family, your places of worship, and here at SMH, will be the values that propel you through life and will allow you to transcend or rise above even the most difficult of life's challenges...and there will be many in your lifetime.

So, in the brief few moments I have with you this morning (and I promise my comments will be brief), let me share with you what I call "Character: The Harder Right" along with some lessons learned to live by.

Businessman, author and leadership guru, Max DePree, stated emphatically:

"There is no good leadership without good character."

-- Max DePree

Legendary basketball coach, John Wooden, once said:

"Be more concerned with your character than your reputation,

because your character is what you really are,

while your reputation is merely what others think you are."

-- John Wooden

In recent years--especially as my almost 34-year Navy career and my time as an senior executive in the corporate world were coming to an end, I found myself having the good fortune of meeting with people across this great country, from various walks of life and of all ages, and being asked to share stories about life's successes and challenges, and, of course, as a long-time Navy man, to tell my favorite "sea stories" or "admiral's tales" (This morning, my kids, Ben and Ana, told me that I should tell y'all stories). Sometimes these discussions turned into a sharing or passing along of life lessons...that is, those lessons learned as a result of a hard-fought victory or a well-earned achievement... or the ones gleaned through the experience of personal trial, suffering, regret, or failure. Either way, these life lessons become inextricably linked to who we are as individuals. They become the personal core values that help guide us through life in this sometimes crazy and busy world we live.

One topic that often comes up in my conversations is that of leadership. Indeed, on so many occasions I've been asked: "Of all the leadership traits, which do you believe to be the most important?" And if you heard the quotes I just recited, you already know my

answer. That's right...it's character!!! It's all about doing the right thing consistently over time. But it's more than that. It's more than the simple discernment we learn as kids between what is right and what is wrong. It's really more about having the moral courage to repeatedly act in accordance with what you know to be right, even in the face of great adversity [repeat]. Yes, it's about doing the right thing when the pressure is on, stress levels are up, people are counting on you, and you're alone with no one watching you. At its core, it's all about choosing the harder right decision instead of the easier wrong decision when your back is against the wall.

It was when I was a freshman or plebe at the U.S. Naval Academy back in 1976, when I first drew the connection between what the Naval Academy was emphasizing in its teachings on leadership, on the one hand...and, on the other hand, what I had learned here in San Antonio under the watchful eyes of my Mom and Dad, and that my high school, Antonian, reinforced as I moved from being that shy scrawny kid to a more confident student-athlete who wanted to serve his country in a military uniform. This connection was all about choosing the harder right, instead of the easier wrong. Ironically, the concept comes straight from the West Point Cadet Prayer, which

reads in part “...Make us choose the harder right instead of the easier wrong and never be content with a half-truth when the whole truth can be won....” This portion of the prayer is powerfully poignant. Leaders make hard choices. True leaders do so with character. It’s a high calling when shortcuts are not an option. A leader who lives by her/his word can be counted on to do the unpopular thing when it is the right thing to do. Choosing the harder right requires courage, determination, integrity, and self-discipline.

So, yes, I think character is the most important attribute of a leader. For leaders of character, it comes down to having the honor and privilege of serving something greater than themselves and putting the needs of an organization or an important cause above their own. To choose the harder right, a leader must have a moral compass that finds serving the greater good of a larger team or an important calling as more deeply rewarding than leading a self-serving, self-absorbed life. And that is the secret of great leadership. Lead with character and honor and you will be rewarded many times over, I assure you.

In this final minute or two I have left with you, let me leave you with a few of my life lessons, which I’ve accumulated over the many years.

Perhaps one or more of them will be of some help to you as you continue to mature and move upward and onward in life:

- **Serve not yourself, but something greater than yourself**
- **Pursue your passions & always put your heart and soul into them**
- **Seek out challenges, for that's where opportunity lies**
- **Understand your strengths, but also recognize your weaknesses**
- **More importantly, exploit those strengths of yours and shore up those weaknesses**
- **Use every opportunity to demonstrate your leadership abilities**
- **Be assertive, but polite, and remain always humble**
- **Don't burn any bridges; you never know when you might have to cross them again**
- **The best (professional) relationships are those that are established and nurtured at a positive personal level**
- **If you're aiming for a particular job or position. You have to be able to "see" or envision yourself in that position...but, more importantly, you have to "be seen" or envisioned in that position by others**

- **Maintain your sense of humor. If you don't have one, find one.**
It'll help keep you and those around you sane
- **Always take care of yourself, and even better care of those you love (you have to be sound physically, emotionally & spiritually in order to better serve your family and others)**
- **"Aim high, BUT keep your feet firmly on the ground." Rather than dreaming or watching where you're heading, be mindful of the person you are becoming**
- **Never compromise who you are or your core values...character, integrity, honesty, ethics, faith and family really do matter...and it's these traits that will shape your legacy as a person**
- **The honorable course is charted when one makes the more difficult right decision as opposed to the easier wrong decision...at every turn**
- **The presence you create is the presence you command**