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ADDRESS BY GOVERNOR WENDELL FORD  
WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY COMMENCEMENT  
BOWLING GREEN

May 12, 1973

FOR AT LEAST 16 YEARS, AND LONGER FOR SOME  
WHO ARE GRADUATING TODAY, WORDS OF WISDOM HAVE  
RAINED UPON YOU--AT TIMES LIKE A GENTLE SHOWER,  
AND AT OTHER TIMES IN TORRENTS!

BY TRADITION, YOUR LAST OFFICIAL ROLE IN  
THIS UNIVERSITY IS THE PARTICIPATION IN AN EXERCISE  
WHERE THERE IS ONE MORE LECTURE.

I PROMISE A BRIEF ADDRESS!

THINKING ABOUT YOUR CLASSROOM EXPERIENCES,  
YOU WILL RECALL THAT TO REACH THIS PLATEAU, THIS  
CONFERRING OF A DEGREE, YOU HAD TO BE ON TARGET.  
RIGHT ANSWERS ON EXAMINATIONS, THE PROPER RESPONSE  
TO QUESTIONS IN CLASS, AND THE ABILITY TO CONVEY YOUR  
CORRECT PROCEDURES TO THOSE JUDGING YOU, INDICATED  
ACHIEVEMENT.

YET, THERE IS ANOTHER DIMENSION TO INDIVIDUAL  
ACCOMPLISHMENT WHICH IS OFTEN RESTRAINED BY THE  
FEAR OF FAILURE.

SO IF I COULD PASS ALONG ONE PIECE OF ADVICE,  
IT WOULD BE THIS: DON'T BE AFRAID OF MAKING MISTAKES.

YOU'RE GOING TO BE WRONG MANY TIMES BETWEEN  
NOW AND THE DAY YOU DIE. YOU'RE GOING TO MAKE MISTAKES.  
IF YOU DON'T, YOUR EXISTENCE WILL HAVE NO PURPOSE, NO  
MEANING, NO PROMISE. FOR YOU WILL HAVE NO INITIATIVE,  
NO ENTERPRISE, NO INTERESTS.

ONE'S ERRORS ARE THE PORTALS OF DISCOVERY.  
REFUSING TO TRY SOMETHING NEW, OR DIFFERENT, IS  
SHUTTING THE DOOR TO SUCCESS, TO PROGRESS AND TO  
REVELATION.

WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT IS YOUR ATTITUDE TOWARD MISTAKES. LET THEM BE HONEST. LET THEM BE SINCERE. LET THEM BE WORTHY OF THE GOALS YOU STRIVE TO ATTAIN. IF THESE CONDITIONS PREVAIL, THEN IT WILL BE UNNECESSARY TO SEEK EXCUSES FOR YOUR MISTAKES.

LOGIC FINDS AN INHERENT DANGER IN ACCEPTING HUMAN ERROR AS, "ONE OF THOSE THINGS THAT'S BOUND TO HAPPEN." ERRORS ARE BOUND TO HAPPEN, YES, BUT WHAT OF THE INDIVIDUAL WHO HAS NO SPIRIT TO CHALLENGE HIS COMMITTED FAULTS? IN MY OPINION, THE RIGHT TO STUMBLE IS MATCHED BY THE RESPONSIBILITY TO RECOVER.

THERE IS NO IMMUNITY TO PERSONAL ERROR. THERE IS ONLY THE OBLIGATION TO PROFIT FROM ERROR. HISTORY TEACHES US THAT GREAT MEN AND WOMEN REFUSE TO FALTER BECAUSE OF THEIR MISTAKES.

HENRY FORD FORGOT TO PUT A REVERSE GEAR IN HIS FIRST AUTOMOBILE.

THOMAS EDISON ONCE SPENT OVER TWO MILLION DOLLARS ON AN INVENTION THAT PROVED OF LITTLE VALUE.

A WRITER ONCE PENNED: "HE WHO MAKES NO MISTAKES LACKS BOLDNESS AND THE SPIRIT OF ADVENTURE. HE IS THE ONE WHO NEVER TRIES ANYTHING NEW: HE IS THE BRAKE ON THE WHEELS OF PROGRESS."

HOWEVER, YOU WILL NEVER SUCCEED BEYOND THE  
MISTAKE TO WHICH YOU ARE WILLING TO SURRENDER. ONLY  
WHEN NOTHING IS DONE TO PREVENT, OR CORRECT YOUR MISTAKE,  
DOES IT BECOME A SERIOUS, UNJUSTIFIED BLUNDER.

IN THIS NATION ARE MANY FREEDOMS--EVEN THE  
FREEDOM TO GO BROKE! THERE IS THE FREEDOM TO BE WRONG,  
SO LONG AS THE END DOES INDEED JUSTIFY THE MEANS.  
WHATEVER YOUR FUTURE PROFESSION MIGHT BE--SCIENCE,  
EDUCATION, ENGINEERING, BUSINESS, AGRICULTURE OR  
ANY OF THE OTHERS, REMEMBER--

THOSE WHO HAVE PRECEDED YOU, AND SUCCEDED,  
DID NOT SUCCUMB TO THE FEAR OF MAKING A MISTAKE.  
ON THE CONTRARY, THEY DROVE ON, RECOGNIZING THE  
EVENTUALITY OF ERROR, AND AT THE SAME TIME, THE  
REALIZATION THAT DISCOVERY, OR SUCCESS, COMES  
ONLY WHEN ONE FREELY PURSUES IT.

THESE SAME INDIVIDUALS ALSO HAD THE ABILITY  
TO RECOGNIZE THEIR LACK OF PERFECTION. IT IS ALARMING,  
BUT UNFORTUNATELY TRUE, THAT SOME MEN AND WOMEN  
EITHER CAN'T ACCEPT THE FACT THEY ARE WRONG, OR WON'T  
ACCEPT IT.



WHATEVER THE CASE, IT IS A SAD COMMENTARY.  
YOU CAN'T CORRECT YOUR ERRORS WHEN YOU FAIL TO  
RECOGNIZE THEM. I SUSPECT EACH OF YOU IN THIS  
AUDIENCE KNOWS SOMEONE WHO SEEMS OBLIVIOUS TO  
HIS OWN MISTAKES.

HOPEFULLY, MY ADMONITION IS CLEAR. BY  
CAUTIONING YOU AGAINST A RELUCTANCE OF DOING  
SOMETHING FOR FEAR OF MISTAKE, I DO NOT WANT TO  
LEAVE THE IMPRESSION THAT MISTAKES CAN BE ACCEPTED  
AS COMMONPLACE. HERMANN GOERING, IN HIS INSTRUCTIONS  
TO THE PRUSSIAN POLICE SAID IN 1933: "SHOOT FIRST AND  
INQUIRE AFTERWARDS, AND IF YOU MAKE MISTAKES, I WILL  
PROTECT YOU."

SUCH INSTRUCTIONS HAVE NO FOUNDATION OF  
DECENCY. BUT IF YOU SET YOUR SIGHTS ON WHAT IS  
HONORABLE, YOU WILL OVERCOME MISTAKES THROUGH  
PERSONAL ADVANCEMENT AND TRIUMPH.

THE WEAK, AND MEEK, TAKE ONE OF TWO ROUTES.  
THEY LIVE IN HORROR OF MISTAKES, THEREBY PERMITTING  
A USELESS LIFE. OR, THEY CLING TO FRAGILE EXCUSES FOR  
THEIR MISTAKES.

THE BOLD, AND ENERGETIC, HAVE A SINGULAR  
MATURITY ABOUT MISTAKES. THEY RECOGNIZE THE  
PROBABILITY OF MANY, AND BENEFIT FROM THE FEW  
WHICH DO OCCUR.

YOU ARE IN ONE OF THOSE CATEGORIES RIGHT NOW.