

Two Tales to Treasure

Thomas R. Kepple, Jr.

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Thomas R. Kepple, Jr., served as president of Juniata College from 1998 to 2013.

At my inauguration fifteen years ago, student body president Brandon Zlupko expressed the wish “that I might influence the Juniata community, but more importantly that the Juniata community would influence me.” The second part of his wish has certainly come true, as I suspect it has for you as well. For this, and for many other reasons, I am proud to be counted as a member of the Juniata Class of 2013. It is an honor for me to graduate with you and to be invited to deliver your commencement address.

I have had the pleasure—mostly—of having heard about forty graduation speeches during my tenure in higher education. Based on this experience it appears that my responsibility is to give you a few brilliant pieces of advice which you will treasure, and most importantly, to do it quickly! So this morning I want to tell you just two stories. The first is something I learned about leadership as a college freshman and the second is about your future.

When I was a freshman at Westminster College, a place similar to Juniata, the Dean of Students thought it would be good for all freshmen to interact in a casual way with faculty members during orientation. This was way before programs like Juniata’s Inbound orientation program for new students! The activity I selected was a friendly volleyball match with some faculty. I arrived early with a few of my hall mates and began to warm up—I was on one side of the net and they were on the other. Things were going pretty well until my elbow hit something solid. It was a nose . . . and it was bleeding . . . profusely. The most unfortunate thing about the nose was that it was attached to a faculty member, a Religion Department professor by the name of Dr. Wayne Christy. Maybe this interaction thing wasn’t such a good idea!

Now, Dr. Christy was not happy—as a matter of fact, he accused me of being out of control on the court and thus improperly invading his volleyball space during which my elbow connected with his nose. I of course apologized profusely, explaining that I really didn’t see him come on the court. I could tell he was not impressed. As others arrived, we went on with the match, Dr. Christy playing with Kleenex in his nose and a very bloody t-shirt. While the game was going on all I could think of was how I would explain to my parents that I got kicked out of college before I got to my first class. In the end the faculty, with the great athletic ability of Dr. Christy, won the match. As he approached me after the match I was worried about what he would say—or perhaps do! He surprised me by apologizing for blaming me

for the nose incident. He said that he had watched me play volleyball and clearly I knew the game and I really must not have known that he had stepped on the court. What an enormous relief on my part!

So how does this story translate into learning about leadership? First, there was no compelling reason for Dr. Christy to stay to play the game; he certainly could have called it a night and gone home to nurse a bleeding nose. But Dr. Christy was a leader—he stayed in the game. You will get bloodied in the future at times when you least expect it, but to have a fulfilling life you have to get back in the game, even in an embarrassingly bloody t-shirt. The people around you will respect you for it. Second, and even more important, they will respect you for admitting that you were wrong. I know my wife Pat is saying, “He never admits he’s wrong to me.” Well, every rule has an exception! But seriously, life-changing experiences happen at any time and in any place. When Dr. Christy continued to play and then apologized after collecting accurate information from careful observation—something you have learned to do at Juniata—it made a life-changing impression on me. Here was a highly respected faculty member admitting to a lowly freshman that he was wrong. A favorite quote among leadership training gurus is the adage that “leadership is action, not position.” That day I learned I wanted to be a Dr. Christy kind of leader. Entrepreneur Amy Rees Anderson recently wrote: “The journey toward earning . . . respect begins the moment we recognize our mistakes and have the integrity and fortitude to utter the words, ‘I was wrong, and I am sorry.’”¹

The second story is directly about each of you in the Class of 2013. You are far better prepared for the world ahead than you think. And I know some of you think you are pretty good—but you are even better. For the last four years, you have been competing and cooperating with each other in the classroom. The faculty and your fellow students have made you work hard, and you have had great learning experiences inside and outside the classrooms, but you don’t really know how you will do competing against other college grads in the work place or graduate school. You will soon find out that your and your family’s investment in a Juniata education will pay major dividends in your competition with others. I’m sure you are thinking, how does he know this?

Over the last fifteen years, I have had the great pleasure of meeting thousands of Juniata alumni. In fact, I have met 100 years of Juniata alumni and students – from Dr. John Baker, who arrived at Juniata as a freshman in fall of 1913, to the class of 2013. I first met Dr. Baker in 1998 at the age of 102 and several additional times prior to his death in 1999. You also know John Baker, but indirectly. You have eaten in John Baker’s refectory; you have visited the Elizabeth Evans Baker Peace Chapel, named for his wife; perhaps you took courses through the Baker Center for Peace and Conflict Resolution; maybe you happen to have one of the Baker Scholarships; and you will get a chance to know him better by reading the book written about Mrs. Baker that you received. Dr. Baker had a great influence on Juniata over his

lifetime, but just as Brandon Zlupko wished for me, Dr. Baker readily admitted that Juniata had more of an influence on him.

John Baker arrived at Juniata from the small town of Everett, PA. Being the first of his family to attend college, he needed a scholarship, which Juniata provided. Sound familiar? He told me that his Juniata education awakened him to a world of opportunities. After graduating he went on to receive a Master of Business Administration degree from Harvard. He continued his career at Harvard, holding positions as the Assistant Dean of the Harvard Business School and later as the acting president of Harvard during the sitting president's absence for government service during World War II. Ultimately he became the visionary president of Ohio University. He firmly believed that being a Juniata alum gave him a lifelong advantage. This similar conversation has happened countless times all over the world through the stories that Juniata alumni have told me. Like John Baker, who never dreamed he would end up as a college president (by the way, neither did I), you never know exactly where you will end up, but because of what you learned here you will have a lifelong advantage in taking on every challenge and opportunity. There are many graduating around the world this month who took a different route—a cheap education with little substance and little effort. In the end, the world is a complicated place and you can't successfully take it on with a simple education!

As I reach my retirement from the presidency of Juniata, I'm reminded of what another college president, Ernest Boyer, wrote: "The tragedy of life is not death; it is destined for us all. The tragedy of life is to die with convictions undeclared, commitments undefined and service unfilled."² Based on my observation of 100 years of Juniata alumni, few of them have experienced this tragedy because they left Juniata ready to do great things. Go out and do well . . . I'm confident you will!

NOTES

1. Amy Rees Anderson, "Admitting You Were Wrong Doesn't Make You Weak—It Makes You Awesome!" *Forbes*, 5 May 2013. Web. 28 May 2013.
2. Ernest L Boyer, "Retaining the Legacy of Messiah College." *Messiah College*. The Ernest L. Boyer Center, 4 September 1984. Web. 28 May 2013.