

High School Speech

I am particularly honored to speak on this occasion honoring Senator Greg Tarver. He is a great leader for our community and state. He is a tireless proponent of cultural diversity, and equality for all. He is a relentless friend of the underdog, and A great supporter of our medical school and university hospital. I try not to call him too often, and I don't call him about small things. I know he must feel a little dread whenever he is told that I am on the phone because it a real problem. But, I have never asked him for his help that it has not been forthcoming. I am proud to be his friend and to call him my friend.

I have wondered what I could say to a group this young that would have any meaning, that would have an impact on your future. It is obvious that I am an old man. I am almost four generations older than the students in this audience. Most of my life is behind me while almost all of yours in ahead of you. I do not speak the language of the youth anymore. I do not understand your humor so I am afraid to try to tell jokes. Obviously I am a member of the establishment, So why should you listen to me? I am not sure that you should, you have had a lot of bad advice from people like me in the past. But, my intentions are good. I have a very simple and brief message and I hope you will not only listen but also hear.

The history of minorities in this country is brutal, unfair, and unchristian. It was faced by many of our forefathers with great heroism and sacrifice. But, the times really are changing. There is still a long way to go, but good things are happening all over the country leading to hope for a real state of equality in this new century. I grew up in the northeast of Mississippi in the 30's and 40's. It was the poorest part of the poorest state on the Union. A land of hard scrabble farms, poverty, ignorance, and malnutrition. Racism was the staple of that culture, and its chief export. As I think of that place and time I am appalled at the behavior and attitudes to which all young people were exposed. However, your elders paid the price to change that, at least in the eyes of the law. They did it with raw courage, sacrifice, and many martyrs. There is enough residual institutional racism to make some say nothing has changed, but I know that is untrue, there have been lots of changes. I

was there—I know. This country continues to change rapidly. Diversity and tolerance are everywhere in the wind. Your generation will have opportunities never before available. They are yours for the taking. I believe we really have a realistic opportunity of realizing, in this new century, the ancient dream that all men are created equal. But, do not be deceived, that will not guarantee success. Success will not come to you without your personal discipline and work. No one will give it to you, Your only guarantee is the opportunity to strive on a level playing field.

Several hundred years ago there was a group of men who thought that if they could find the right metal they could mix it with base metals such as iron or lead and transform it into gold. Those men came to be called alchemist and the stone they searched for was called the philosopher's stone. Of course, it was never found. The term alchemy has persisted, however, and has come to mean the process of changing something common to something special. At the beginning of the last century a famous teacher of medical students claimed that he knew what the Philosopher's stone was---It was work. If you worked hard enough you could transmute base metal into gold. That may have been about as near to the truth as could be found in 1900, but it is not true today. I have come to tell you what the true philosopher's stone is: IT IS KNOWLEDGE! This century of technology, communication at the speed of light, one world economy, international businesses, etc. demands information, which is almost impossible for you to obtain without formal education. Don't let anyone tell you differently. Don't be misled. You must have it. Of course your might win the lottery, or hit some jackpot, but the odds are one in several million. Education can reduce those odds to 1/3 or 1/2. This is not just my opinion. The following statement recently came from the National Association of State Governors. The best way to compete in the global marketplace is to insure that our citizens are among the most highly educated and best trained in the World. In the constantly changing marketplace everyone is forced to continually learn new skills. Those who can't learn will be left behind in jobs that will change or disappear altogether.

I hope you believe me. I have often marveled and worried over the fact that so many serious and life-controlling decisions must be made by people while they are

so young. The young seem determined to make their own decisions without the advice of their elders. Sometimes it appears that the young seek to find out what their elders advise so they may do the exact opposite. That is a mistake. You should listen to your teachers, ministers, or other people you respect. A good mentor or councilor is priceless. Good advice will save you lots of time and misery. It is true that age leads most of us to be more cautious and practical, we sometimes don't dream the kind of dreams that the young do. The dreams of the young must not be throttled but placed they should be placed in some context with the wisdom of experience. So, I urge you to dream big dreams. But don't think they will come about without discipline, study, and sacrifice.

Perhaps I have spoken too familiarly, but it is the best advice I have. You cannot have too much knowledge, you cannot get too much education. So, start today, Do it now! You are at the ideal age for learning, your minds are agile, and your memories are good. So, go wherever you have to go. Do whatever you have to do. Pay whatever price you have to pay, but do it.

Thank you.