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Switching our core values from taking to giving

By Howard R. Fricke '60



In his address, Fricke urged members of the Class of 2009 to find value in what they give to society, not what they take. Fricke (above) visits with family at The Ames Plaza before the processional. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

The following is an excerpted version of the 2009 Illinois Wesleyan Commencement speech, titled “Hearing Voices,” given by Howard R. Fricke '60 on May 3. President Richard F. Wilson conferred upon Fricke an honorary doctor of laws degree during the ceremony.

Fricke, who was inducted into the Kansas Business Hall of Fame in 2008 by Gov. Kathleen Sebelius, graduated from IWU as an insurance major. He later graduated from the Harvard University Graduate School of Business. Former chair of the board for the Security Benefit Group, he also served as Secretary of the Kansas Department of Administration and as Secretary of Commerce both in Kansas and Illinois. In 1993, Fricke was honored with IWU's

Distinguished Alumni Award. He lives in Reno, Nev., with his wife Sharon (Linton) Fricke '60. Two of their three children are Wesleyan alumni, David '85 and Karen '81.

Like many of you, when I first entered Wesleyan I didn't have a clue about what I wanted to do when I grew up. I thought about dentistry until my freshman zoology class. *Whoa* — cutting up dead frogs — *whoa*. And my zoology professor gently suggested that I really should think about things other than in the science field and I really ought to go talk to Dean Beadles about changing that major.

Well, the short of that story is that I did meet with Dean William Beadles, he became my mentor and he got me interested in insurance and financial services, even found me a part-time job at State Farm, and really started me down a career path.

As I reflect on my four years here, I've concluded there really is something unique about Wesleyan — you have this outstanding faculty that really do take a personal interest in you. They challenge you to think independently, question why things are as they are and wonder how they should be.

And the diversity of the whole institution is really impressive — not just *talking* about the merits of diversity, but actually *living* it. You have met, you have lived with and you've become friends

with people from very different backgrounds, different interests and different goals. Those goals are often dramatically different from yours....

Wesleyan has also afforded you the opportunity to get involved in a number of extracurricular activities, from athletics to Homecoming to Student Senate, and they gave you the authority and the responsibility to make decisions in those activities — although I suspect there were always some faculty and administration folks in the background ready to catch you in case you were about to really screw up.

All of this is the “Wesleyan Experience,” and I’ll submit that hasn’t changed much in 50 years.

The spirit of Wesleyan that was here when I was here, is very obviously alive and well and here today.

In fact about the only change I can detect is the physical campus. And to say it’s much improved would clearly be an understatement. Let me tell you, you didn’t miss a lot by not having classes in the burned-out basement of Duration Hall. And we were all so excited we had this new, modern building called Shaw Hall. Oh, and I think the cost of going to Wesleyan has changed a little bit. As I recall, my last year here, it was right at \$700 a semester. That included tuition and fees, as well as room and board.

But the Wesleyan culture, the Wesleyan spirit, the Wesleyan experience, really hasn’t changed. So with your “Wesleyan Experience,” you’re about to enter the real world. What’s it going to be like? ...

Sometime during the last 50 or 60 years our values as a society have changed. We came to revere money and power as goals to aspire to.

How much money you have or how much power you have became the benchmarks that society uses to determine your worth as an individual. We came to idolize Bill Gates, not for the value Microsoft and its products add to our lives, but for how rich he is. We venerate Warren Buffet, not for the companies he has bought and helped grow, adding hundreds of thousands of jobs, but because he’s a multi-billionaire. The media publishes lists of who the richest people are — not what they’re contributing to society but how much money they hav. It’s as if somehow because they’re rich they’re better people whom we should admire.

So, if society comes to view your net worth as a primary indicator of your worth as an individual, is it any wonder that greed is good and greed, even of the worst kind, becomes O.K.? Getting rich, by any means, becomes *the* goal everyone should aspire to.

And, of course, that produces the Enrons and World Coms and Bernie Madoffs and AIGs and outrageous CEO salaries.

Now, let me hasten to add that most of the CEOs I’ve come to know in my career —not all, but most — share my belief that how many jobs you’ve helped create, how many lives you’ve

helped to enrich and how much you've given back are much more important than how much wealth you've accumulated.

Greed and the lust for power have not only infected the business world but also have extended to the not-for-profit sector and our government. We hear almost every day about some government official who assumes office as a "person of modest means who just wants to serve the people," but along the way gets perks and privileges and riches that most people can't even imagine. Is it any wonder there is so much political rancor — because if I win, or my party wins, then I get more perks and more privileges and more power that leads to more riches?

...I believe historians will look back on the economic crisis we're now experiencing — and on our lack of trust that government officials will act on our behalf rather than enrich themselves — and conclude the root cause of this occurred when we, as a people, began to value more what we take ... rather than how much we give.

Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that accumulating wealth or becoming influential and powerful is wrong. What I am saying is that those things should just be a byproduct of the value you're adding to society.

Somehow we have to get back to where we value the school teacher or the college professor more than the powerful, but maybe corrupt, official or the rich, but maybe overpaid, CEO. Somehow we have to get to where what you're giving back to society is valued more than what you're taking from it.

And I think you, this graduating class, are just the right people to start making this happen.

The ethics and values you started with, honed by your Wesleyan experience, convinces me you can help to fundamentally change our society's values.

But it won't be easy!

I believe each of us has an internal voice and an external voice. Your internal voice tells you what you should do to feel good about yourself. Your external voice tells you what you should do so others will feel good about you.



Graduating Wesleyan seniors (above) marked a new beginning as they and their families gathered in the Eckley Quadrangle in May to celebrate the 159th Commencement ceremonies. A total of 516 students received their diplomas. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

Your external voice tells you what you should do to be admired by the world. ... Your internal voice will tell you what you should do to be proud of yourself.

And you're going to get chances almost every day to choose between the two.

You need to ask yourself — would you rather the world *thought* you were the greatest doctor, or lawyer, or politician, or artist, or businessperson, even though you knew you weren't very good? Or would you rather *be* the greatest, even though the world thought you were a loser? ... I think it's this simple. If your emphasis is on what the world thinks of you (listening to your external voice) instead of what you think of yourself (your internal voice), you'll wind up living your life doing what others think you should do, and your values will be the values of others. And, for too long, those external voices have told us the lust for greed or power or wealth is something to be admired.

So, listen to your internal voice. Cherish those values Wesleyan helped you clarify. Help change our society from one that values greed and power to a society that values what you contribute — one that values how much you add, not how much you take.

I'm sure you can do it! All of us here today are counting on you.