GRADUATION SPEECH

FOR

RICHARD COLEMAN

Hello everyone! To \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, thank you so much for your kind introduction!! The process of being invited to speak today, preparing my speech, and then practicing to speak in front of this distinguished audience was quite an eye opening exercise, so I want you to know that I really do appreciate your poise and eloquence in making that introduction…. more about that later!!! To Colonel Williams, Colonel Dana, Chief Sharp, all of the Group Commanders, Squadron Commanders, Chiefs, First Sergeants, Supervisors, subordinates that are present today, and of course to all of our family and friends: Thank you for being here to witness and share in this very important event with class 14-3. Graduation from NCO Academy is one of those defining and red-letter moments in life. You’ve done some really vital work and the impact of your studies will resonate with all of those with whom you come into contact-your families, friends, and of course your colleagues will have the opportunity to experience the evolution of your impact on the world and in turn they will have chances to observe **their** impact on their worlds as well. No matter the direction your lives may take after graduating from the Academy, rest assured that you have earned those tools that will support you in being an effective communicator and leader.

To tell the truth, graduates, I realize there is only one small obstacle that stands in the way of you actually receiving those hard earned certificates…. and that would be me…. and as I said a few moments ago, this has been quite a process, and I take my assignments **seriously**, so bear with me just a bit… if it’s any consolation, I was told… “Only 5 minutes!!” so relief is in sight! (**Wait for the laugh**).

And now, for the process… I did my research… I reviewed all the tried and true speech-writing techniques…having been to several leadership graduation ceremonies I was fairly sure that I knew the drill…I wrote and rewrote and came up with a sure fire thesis statement… I practiced. I did mirror work…I organized…. edited… practiced some more… again and again and again…in the car…. at the gym… in front of the TV…and just when I thought it couldn’t **POSSIBLY** get any better…. **heck YEAH**… (**Can you say heck**?) …and I KNEW I was ready for the BIG TIME… I selected my number one fan… my guaranteed rooting section… the one person who has my back through thick and thin, my beautiful, intuitive, intelligent and **candid** wife, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, and I asked her to be honest as I delivered the speech that I was SURE would anoint me as the next overnight viral YouTube sensation… I wish you could have heard me…. on second thought maybe not, because after a performance that would have made Orson Welles (**James Earl Jones? Someone more contemporary**?) jealous… you should have heard my range of pitch and the nuance in my inflections… I asked, very simply, “So… Babe… What’d ya think?” She looked at me, and with the sincerity and candor that I fell in love with, she said, “**BULLCRAP!!!”** (**Wait for the laugh)**. Although I was uh… somewhat deflated, that one word inspired a defining moment in my life. I asked her if she was kidding and she assured me that was not the case. I asked her for details and she laid them out. She said it lacked heart and meaning and it sounded canned. **CANNED**!! I licked my wounds and searched my soul for the lesson I needed to learn from this and I had an “**AHA**!” moment that is worth sharing…. Authenticity is what counts, and that breeds self-recognition and awareness. Speak from the heart, be honest, share who you really are with people, listen to that voice in your head that guides you in every situation in life, and inspire by thinking, doing and LEADING.

As I thought about what my wife said, I was reminded of my father’s words of wisdom that he’s shared with me throughout my entire life. He says, ”Son, you have to **stay** ready to keep from **getting** ready.” I realize that all of my practice and working “by the book,” was not the authentic means to be ready. The earlier route I took with this speech was memorization, and really… WHO wants to hear THAT? My dad inspires me every day with simple truths… And I don’t think he practiced and did mirror work to come up with that depth of logic, but his expression is **authentic.** He speaks from his soul and his words stay with me. The truth that was revealed is that I **am** ready. Period. Who I am naturally wants to speak with you from my gut and share the points that inspire ME. I didn’t have to study to be moved by my father’s wisdom, but I do have to be present and aware to acknowledge how his words motivate me. It’s a valuable yet subtle lesson that forces us to think as we look inward, and those are characteristics that need to be honed in order to be an effective leader. The ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu said, “Mastering others is strength. Mastering yourself is true power.”

Today, as you graduate from the NCO Academy, you all stand on the brink of… “What’s next?” Congratulations and welcome to the modern world. The reality is, in this day and age, nothing is certain. Nothing is guaranteed and words like “forever” and “always” should be reserved for fairy tales. In modern times, we may all be more connected than ever before, but times are changing. The good news is that each and every one of you graduates has preparation and training that will distinguish you wherever your journey may take you. Whether it’s as an NCO in the Air Force or in a civilian career, think of the tools you now possess that will support you as you make your way in life!! Remember… “Mastering YOURSELF is TRUE POWER,” and that’s exactly what you have been doing for the past several weeks. Remember to be authentic, pay attention, observe what is actually happening all around you, and don’t forget to empathize with the person or people in front of you. And let’s face it, although my father probably never met Lao Tzu… at least not in THIS life, mastering who you are and the impact you create on this world is the ultimate form of being ready… for anything.

Former United States Secretary of State Henry Kissinger once said, “The task of a leader is to get his people from where they are to where they have not been.” Before you can chart the unknown course for others, it helps to do that exploration within you. Ready is as ready does.

My first version of today’s presentation may have lacked heart, but it was my intention that you really feel the message I chose to convey. Speak from the heart. Don’t just walk the walk… talk the talk… and mean it. Place yourself on the other side of a conversation or scenario and deliver your message in a manner that would really inspire **you.** Bring yourself to every situation with honesty, pride in who you really are, and authenticity. Be candid… but tactful… constructive input is a gift…. and learn how to take the same as you dish out…I gotta tell you… this whole thing has been a real eye opener, but I have to say, there is freedom in truth!! On the other hand, don’t be afraid to acknowledge and empower people when it’s called for. It fosters partnership and enhances teamwork.

Live your lives as leaders-no matter where you are. Be observant, authentic, respectful, encouraging and candid. At the same time, keep your eyes and ears open for valuable feedback so that you too will grow and learn, and with that wisdom imparted, it’s certificate time!!! Thank you all for your patience and attention and may you all have success in all that you endeavor!