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I have made my living with words for a little longer than Christopher Newport has been a college, so you won't be surprised to learn that I try to pay special attention to words and usage.

I'm not a grammatic prig about it, or at least I try not to be. I try not to be like some newspaper readers in my experience who (it seems) read not for content but for grammatical accuracy. You can imagine how it is: You research and think and sweat over some elusive idea, and finally you capture it and tame it into print and wait for the letters that say: How brilliant! What splendid insight! And from one so YOUNG! You know what I mean.

And the chances are you'll get a few of those. But there will be, in any sizeable stack of mail, at least one letter that says "You misspelled 'Khadafy,'" or "You used 'laid' when you should have used 'lain,'" or "who" when you should have said "whom," or "convinced" when you really meant "persuaded." I am convinced -- persuaded -- that if these people read the New Testament it would be primarily for the thrill of catching St. Paul in some grammatical lapse.

That is not what I mean when I tell you that I'm interested in words and their usage. What interests me about word usage is the fact the words you use to describe a thing can influence your feelings about that thing.

It is for that reason that I don't like to read discussions of "single parent families" or "female-headed households." To describe a troubled household as "female-headed" makes it sound as though there is something negative about being female and in charge. You are left with the vague sense that the problem somehow rests with the female. What is usually meant is that the family is "fatherless." In other words, the problem is the ABSENCE of a crucial breadwinner or disciplinarian or role model, not the PRESENCE of a female.

And what does any of this have to do with your reasons for being here this morning? I'll tell you. When I set out to get some information on Christopher Newport College, to guide me in preparing my remarks, somebody told me that Christopher Newport is a "nontraditional" college.

Now what the devil is that? It sounds like an apology. What would you have thought if ----- had introduced me as a nonwhite, nontall, non-Virginian non-educator? You'd probably have found yourselves wondering why anybody bothered to invite me to participate in your celebration.

But he didn't describe me in terms of what I am not but in terms of what I am. I commend the approach to the faculty, students and friends of Christopher Newport College. If you persist in defining yourselves in terms of what you lack and what you aren't, you are very likely to begin thinking of yourself in negative terms. And if you're not careful, you'll find yourself apologizing for having spent so much time here.

I recommend that for a non-apologetic view of what Christopher Newport College is you should take a few minutes (not now but later) to peruse the Silver Anniversary special edition. It is an extraordinarily positive view of what CNC



needs of its students in ways that are unique; 75 acres of suburban beauty, a place of variety with a commitment to preserving and drawing upon that variety; "a regional college with a world view," a college whose graduates are making their mark in an incredible range of fields.

¶The outside world will -- at least until your reputation catches up with the facts -- continue to think of Christopher Newport in terms of what it is not, but don't have to let them infect you with their negative view.

¶I speak from long experience.

¶I was on summer vacation, between my junior and senior years, and I had managed to find a summer job on a little weekly newspaper. I was no journalist, I knew, and in fact had never given any thought to journalism as a possible career. I took the job because it was available and I needed the money to continue my education. But I did consider myself reasonably bright, and I thought I could learn the work if I put my mind to it.

¶Well, my first day on the job, the editor, a grizzled old man named Scotty Scott, assigned me a story to do. I did my background reading, conducted my interviews, and wrote my story. I took it to the editor and waited for him to say how surprised he was that I had done so well. I didn't have to wait long. He took my deathless prose, folded it in half, tore it into small pieces and dropped it into his wastebasket without even so much as glancing at what I had written.

¶"It's your very first story," he explained. "It can't possibly be any good. Now go and rewrite it."

¶I don't remember what my commencement speaker, or any of my convocation speakers said for the whole six years it took me to finish college. But I remember that. Scotty Scott was not talking to some vague, faceless audience. He was talking to me. And though I was furious that this man could be so insensitive to a nervous young beginner, and insufferably arrogant on top of it, I will never forget what he said to me, and how he made me so determined to prove to him that I could be a first-rate reporter.

¶Fortunately, Scotty Scott was not the first adult who had made an impression on me. My teachers, in college and in high school, had made me feel that I was pretty bright, that I was capable. And my parents--my mother in particular--had gone out of her way to build my self confidence. It was her notion that my brother and my three sisters, growing up in small-town Mississippi, would be knocked down by the outside world soon enough and that it was up to her to make sure that we would not be destroyed psychologically when the cruelty came.

¶Scotty Scott was right. My first story was not as good as it might have been. But if his idea was to break my spirit, he failed, because my mother was right, too. I WAS bright and capable. And if my capabilities didn't as yet include journalism, I knew it was just a question of time.

¶I am not going to give you a long speech this morning. I only want to warn you that the world you will shortly be facing is full of Scotty Scotts who will be convinced that because you are inexperienced, because you are products of a small, unsung "nontraditional" college, you can't possibly be any good. Some of those who take the winds out of your sails will be right. The chances are great that your first work won't be much good. But I hope that your years at Christopher Newport, and at home before you came here, also brought you into intimate contact with some people like my mother who made you feel that you are bright and capable, that while you may not possess some particular skill, you do possess the ability to acquire it. I hope that you have learned the distinction between ignorance and stupidity.

¶You are ignorant. Even those of you who are working hard in school and earning good grades cannot possibly know very much of what your employers will need you to know. You are ignorant. But you are, I pray God, not stupid. Ignorance says you don't know yet. Stupidity says you can't learn. Never forget the difference.

¶And don't worry about being ignorant. Learn to think of ignorance as consisting of things you don't know YET. Apart from the minority of you who will leave college with such developed vocational skills as computer science, or who will go on to such trade schools as medicine or law or engineering, most of you will, by the time you are my age, be doing something totally unrelated to your majors here. That does not mean that your years at Christopher Newport will have been a waste; it means only that their value will consist primarily of the generalized information we call liberal arts. What your college education will



Take the word of someone whose major was, at various time, English, history and mathematics: It's all right that you don't know for sure what your career will be. You don't really need to know what you'll be doing 10 or 15 or 20 years from now. Even if you wanted to know, you couldn't. Things are changing too fast. Time doesn't always make ancient good uncouth, but it regularly renders ancient majors irrelevant. Talk to your instructors, talk to your role models, talk to the people whose success and conduct you admire in your communities, and ask them what they majored in. The chances are that their majors have as little connection with their careers as my long-ago math major has to do with my career in journalism.

It is not likely to be much different for you. Some of you will end up in careers that have nothing directly to do with your studies here because you simply cannot know at age 21 or 23 or 29 what you will WANT to be doing at age 41 or 43 or 49. Some of you will switch because you find your chosen careers unrewarding, psychically or financially. And some of you will wind up in fields that don't even exist now.

Some time ago, I happened to speak with the former governor of Delaware -- Pierre S. DuPont, who just this week announced his intention to run for President -- and I'd like to pass on to you what he said to me. At the beginning of this century, he said, half of America's workers made their living on the farm. Today, 4 percent do. "The steel industry was in its infancy; the automobile industry did not exist. Computer technology lay two generations away, in the minds of scientists yet to be born. The transformation of our jobs, the movement of our people, the improvements in our skills over the first 85 years of this century have been stunning. BUT IT IS ENTIRELY LIKELY THAT THE CHANGES RECORDED IN THOSE 85 YEARS WILL BE MATCHED AND SURPASSED BY THE CHANGES OF THE FINAL 15 YEARS OF THIS CENTURY."

Unless your crystal ball is a lot clearer than mine, there is no way you can predict what kind of career opportunities will be available to you five or ten or twenty years down the road, except to say that they will be different from anything you or I can imagine today.

We could hazard some guesses as to what the major SOURCES of the new jobs might be: computer technology, space, gene-splicing. These technological breakthroughs will change our lives, change the way we do nearly everything we do, as dramatically as electricity changed the lives of my grandparents. But that doesn't mean that Grandpa's generation should all have become electrical engineers. The vast array of career possibilities introduced by electricity did not require knowledge of electricity. The careers that space exploration and microchips and recombinant DNA will make possible are unknown and unknowable. You cannot get ready for them in any specific way. I only hope that you will, during your tenure here, learn the art of flexibility; that you learn how to learn. Because that will be your most valuable asset in the years ahead: your willingness to stay loose, and to recognize opportunity when it comes along, even if it bears no direct relationship to your college major.

One more thing: Learn the language. Learn to speak it, learn to write it. For some of you that will mean overcoming years of bad habits, but it can be done with practice. If you have any luck at all, your instructors will make you speak and write. They will not cripple you by letting you waste your time filling in blanks when, by requiring you to write essay answers to questions, they could move you along the road to excellence in English. If you are not so lucky, if you have the misfortune of having a teacher who does not make you practice the language, then practice it yourself. Write something. Your thoughts, your feelings, your hopes and dreams. Argue. I don't mean fuss, I mean argue. Practice the art of organizing your thoughts and your information in such a way that you can win a point in a serious debate.

You may be thinking that I put special stress on language only because I make my living with words. Wrong. Proper use of language is the clearest, most unmistakable mark of an educated man or woman. There are in this very room people who met each other for the first time this morning. They have already made judgment's about one another's intelligence: Not by giving them tests, or quizzing them in their fields of work, but by listening to them speak. You simply cannot listen to anyone who speaks well and believe that they are stupid. And, I'm afraid, you cannot listen to anyone who speaks poorly and believe that they are truly smart. Good English, written and spoken, will open more doors for you than you can dream of. Poor speech and badly organized writing will close



¶I don't mean to tell you that language is the only skill you need pay attention to. I'm telling you a fact of life: Without good English, you will have the very devil of a time getting people to honor the skills you do have.

¶What more shall I tell you this morning? Take courage. I know how tough it is for some of you, spending part of your day as worker, part as parent and part as student. I also know, being the product of small, not-particularly famous or prestigious schools myself, that you sometimes find yourselves wondering whether the reward will justify the sacrifice. Christopher Newport is not a 350-year-old institution like Harvard, with its deeply ingrained traditions and reputation, nor a 150-year-old university like UVA, with its clear sense of self. CNC is a mere 25 years old, and its traditions are still in the developmental process. Whereas with the more famous and prestigious institutions, which manage to bestow some of their luster on their graduates, you are more likely to bring honor to CNC than the other way around. Any particular year's enrollment will leave Harvard and UVA unchanged. What you accomplish here, and after you leave here, will contribute mightily to the honor and reputation of CNC, for better or for worse.

¶That's a heavy burden, but the instinct that brought you here did not play you false. The sacrifice you make to earn your education here will be eminently worthwhile if you will but recognize what you have here.

¶Take courage, and take pride in what you have at this beautiful campus.

¶What do you have? You have what every good college or university has: a school dedicated to giving its students the basics. But you have more than that. You have a school that tries to give its students not just facts and figures, dates and data, but also what might be called the tools for living. You have fellow students who, older than the average, have experienced something of life and can share with you their wisdom.

¶And don't underestimate your wisdom, or the value of your insights. I can tell you in a matter of seconds what it took me decades to learn: that the so-called experts may have information -- the statistics, the theories and the familiarity with the published authorities that passes for expertise. But the insights that grow out of your unique experiences, the wisdom that you acquire by living life, not just learning about the lives of others, are as valid as anyone else's. Never forget that.

¶Take courage, take pride and take advantage. If you take advantage of the opportunities here, no matter how unheralded this infant institution may be, you will leave here with the discipline, curiosity, the openness to novelty and opportunity and the intellectual wherewithal which together make it possible for educated men and women to understand, cope with and perhaps to transform that rapidly changing world out there.

¶Congratulations on your 25 years of earnest effort and committed excellence, and thank you for allowing me to share in your celebration.\*\*END OF STORY\*\*