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## Resetting Our Nation's Moral Compass

The world can be a better place if this year's graduates learn the simple values of hard work and of putting yourself second.

By Marian Wright Edelman

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I think our nation's moral compass needs resetting.

I think we've lost our sense of what is important as a people.

I think too many of our young people of all races and classes are growing up unable to handle life in hard places without hope and without steady moral compasses to navigate a world that is reinventing itself at an unpredictable pace both technologically and politically.

But despite this dazzling change, I believe there are some enduring values. I agree with the late Archibald MacLeish, who said that "There is only one thing more painful than learning from experience and that is not learning from experience."

Since I believe that it is the responsibility of every adult—parent, teacher, community, political, and professional leader—to make sure that you young people know what is important, what we think matters the most, I want to share a few of the lessons I shared with our children, my own three sons, some years ago.

Like them, you can take them or you can leave them, but I will just say them. First, I want to remind you, is that there is no free lunch in life. Don't feel entitled to anything you haven't sweat and struggled for. And help our nation understand that it's not entitled to world leadership based just on military or monetary might, or on the past, or on what we say, rather than how well we perform and meet changing world needs.

Democracy cannot be dictated or imposed. It must be modeled and nurtured.

For those African-American, Latino, Asian-American and Native-American graduates among you, I want you to remember that you can never take anything for granted—even with a Colgate degree. The new racism that is seeping up across our land is wrapped up in new euphemisms, in budget technicalities, in judicial and criminal justice choices, in racial disparities in health, and in education.

Frederick Douglass warned us it is still the same old snake.

I am deeply concerned that the black preschool boy today, born in 2001, has a one in three chance of going to prison before he reaches 30, that we've got 58,000 black males in prison and fewer of them—40,000—who graduate from college each year. A cradle to prison pipeline threatens decades of hard earned civil rights progress for poor children, especially poor males of color.

And if there are white graduates among this group who feel entitled to leadership by accident of birth, I want to remind you that the world you face and live in is two-thirds nonwhite and poor. That our nation, like our globalizing world, is becoming a mosaic of much greater diversity that you're going to have to understand and respect and work with.

I hope you will always keep growing and learning. Your Colgate degree will get you in the

door, it may, but it won't get you to the top of the career ladder or keep you there. You're going to have to work hard and continuously. And I know I don't have to say, don't ever be lazy.

Do your homework. Pay attention to detail. Take care and pride in your work. And don't wait around for anybody else to discover you or do you a favor. Don't assume a door is closed, push on it. Don't assume that if it was closed yesterday, that it is closed today. Don't ever stop learning and ever stop growing and ever stop questioning.

The second lesson is just set to thoughtful goals, and work quietly and systematically towards them. Don't feel you have to talk if you don't have something that matters to say. Resist quick-fix, simplistic answers, and easy gains and slick marketing slogans.

So many of us talk big and act small, so often we get bogged down in our own ego needs and lose sight of deeper needs. It's okay to want to feel important, if it's not at the expense of doing important deeds.

Even if you don't get the credit—and one of the things I've learned in Washington is you can get an awful lot done if you don't mind doing the work and giving other people the credit—you know what you do, and God knows what you do, and that is all that should matter.

The third lesson, which comes from Daddy, is to assign yourself. He couldn't ever stand to see his children idle, and he would often ask us, "Did the teacher give you homework?" If we were to say no, he would say, "Assign yourself some."

The bottom line is, don't wait around. Don't wait around for your boss, or your friends, or your spouse, or partner to direct you to do what you are able to figure out for yourself. And don't do just as little as you can to get by.

Don't be a political bystander and grumble. Vote, and hold all of those you vote for accountable for what they do in your name.

It sounds like you don't need to be told this, but we often need to be reminded: If you see a need, don't ask, "Why doesn't somebody do something?" Ask, "Why don't I do something?"

Hard work, initiative, and persistence are still the non-magic carpets to success, for most of us.

Fourth, I hope you will never work just for money. Money won't save your soul by itself or build a decent family or help you sleep at night.

Don't ever confuse wealth or fame with character, and don't try to live through somebody else—whether it's your children, your spouse, your political leaders, or celebrities.

You're going to be held accountable by your creator, our creator, for your unique gifts that nobody else has.

And please don't tolerate or condone moral corruption, whether it's found in high or low places, whatever its color or class.

It is not okay to cheat, even if any corporate or public officials do. Be honest and demand that those who represent you be honest, and never confuse morality with legality. Dr. King often noted that everything Hitler did in Nazi Germany was legal. Don't give everyone the proxy for your conscience.

Fifth lesson, don't be afraid of taking risks or being criticized. If you don't want to be criticized,

don't say anything, don't do anything, and don't be anything.

Don't be afraid of failing, it's the way you learn to do things right. It doesn't matter how many times you fall down, it just matters how many times you get up.

And don't wait for everybody to come along to get something done. It is always a few people who get things done and keep them going.

The sixth lesson is take parenting, family life, and community life seriously, and insist that even those you work for or represent you, do. We need to make sure that your generation of daughters and sons raise your sons to be fair to other people's daughters, and to share, not just help with family responsibilities.

I hope you'll stress family rituals; be good examples for your children. If you cut corners, they will too. If you lie, they will too, and if you spend all of your money on yourself and don't tie any portion of it to charitable and civic causes, they won't either. If you tell or snicker at racial and gender jokes, another generation will pass on the poison that my generation still has not had the courage to snuff out.

Challenge any practices intended to demean, rather than enhance another human being. Stare them down, make them unacceptable in your presence. We must begin through daily moral consciousness to counter the proliferating voices of separation and ethnic and racial and gender and religious divisions, and gain respectability across our land.

Don't ever confuse style with substance, and political charm with decency or sound policy. Look behind the words and pay attention to what our leaders do, not just what they say.

The last lesson—two lessons—and I'm almost done.

Listen for the genuine within yourself. "Small," Einstein said, "is the number of them that see with their own eyes and feel with their own hearts." Try to be one of them.

Howard Thurman, the great black theologian, said, "There is something in every one of you that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. It is the only true guide you will ever have. And if you cannot hear it, you will all of your life spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls."

There are so many noises and competing demands in our lives that many of us never find out who we are. Learn to be quiet enough to hear the sound of a genuine within yourself, so that you can hear it in other people.

Last lesson: Never think life is not worth living or that you cannot make a difference. Never give up. I don't care how hard it gets—and it's going to get very hard sometimes. An old proverb says that when you get to your wit's end, that is where God lives.

Harriet Beecher Stowe said, "When you get into a tight place and everything goes against you, till it seems as though you could not hold on a minute longer, never give up then, for that is just the place and time that the tide will turn."

Hang in with life, and don't think you have to win immediately or even at all to make a difference. Sometimes it's important to lose the things that matter.

I'll give Shel Silverstein, the children's book writer, my last word, because we do have to have a transforming social movement for our children in this beginning of the 21st century and third millennium, and we're going to have to do it together and with a sense of urgency. So many people keep talking about what can't be done. But Shel Silverstein said:

"Listen to the mustn'ts, child. Listen to the don'ts. Listen to the shouldn'ts, the impossibles, the won'ts. Listen to the never-haves. Then, listen close to me."

"Anything can happen, child. Anything can be."

If we believe in it, if we have faith in it, if we dream it, if we struggle for it, and if we refuse to give up, we can make America's place where truly no child is left behind.

What good does it matter for us to be the richest, most powerful nation on earth and lose our soul?

God speed to you as you go out to face life.

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