

Joe's Last Lecture

Thank you for coming today. It means so much to me that you would take the time to come to a university lecture when you don't have to—and when attendance is not being taken and grades aren't on the line.

I want to make sure to introduce my family. Most of you know my wife Malinda. From the time we first met at Maywood Camp, we have known each other for almost 50 years, including being married for more than 45. Believe me when I say that she is a saint. Being married to me—even tolerating me most times—is not easy. She allowed me to chase my dreams while sacrificing many of hers. There are not *any* words that allow me to express the depth of my love and gratitude for all the years and all the experiences.

Please meet my three children, Shane, Jenny, and Sarabeth, along with their spouses, Natalie, Matt, and Payton. Malinda and I have 7 wonderful grandchildren: Madelyn, Addy, Murphy, Milly, Brooks, Hayes, and Anna Lauren. The aspect of life that I will likely miss most is seeing the women and men that they will become. My mom has been with me from the beginning with unfailing support. And my sister Lori has not been far behind. I'll never understand why they continue to think that I can do little wrong.

Today's presentation is different from most of the ones that I have done. First, it is from a manuscript. I believe this is only the second time that I've spoken from one in over 50 years of public speaking. I'm using a manuscript today for two reasons. One—I wanted to wrestle with what to say and be precise in the saying. The manuscript allows me to stay on point even if my brain, in its current condition, tends to wander. In fact, I have asked my friend Matt Hogan to follow along with me to get me back on track if I digress—but gently. And for those of you who have had me in class—don't worry. I have not digressed enough to have a PowerPoint slide in my presentation.

The second reason today's presentation is different is the nature of the "Last Lecture." By declaring something to be my last, I'm making a claim that I don't have much more to say. However, I am hopeful that some of the thoughts we discuss today will resonate with deep meaning for some of you and will be, to some degree, timeless. The need to say something meaningful and to a degree timeless raises the stakes. At least for me, the stakes are definitely higher.

With that being said, I also appreciate the challenge of *delivering* a last lecture. I don't want it to be comprised of sophomoric platitudes like a commencement address. Nor do I want it to be heavy or maudlin. I want what I say today to be real, practical, and dare I say, strategic. I leave it to you to judge whether I have met this challenge.

So let's dive in. I have entitled this last lecture— "*A Strategy for Life.*"

At my core, I'm a strategist. In reflecting on my career, I have seen strategy woven throughout it, whether in business, higher ed administration, or the classroom. Although the *practice* of strategy can be difficult, the *concept* is really quite simple. In most contexts, strategy recognizes where you are, where you want to end up, and what steps you need to take to get there. Strategy begins with goals. In my experience, where you want to end up—your goal and the amount of attention you pay to it—is strongly correlated to the longevity of what you want to accomplish.

Allow me to illustrate what I'm talking about. Suppose you decide that you want to go out to a nice dinner with friends tonight. That's where you want to end up. Right now, where you are is not out to dinner—that is your reality. So, what steps do you need to take to have dinner with friends? If you don't take any steps, you get to have dinner alone. Just understanding your reality and your goals doesn't get you where you want to be. It requires that you *do* something. However, what you do in this specific situation is not all that important in the grand scheme of things. If you don't get with friends tonight, it's not really that big a deal. You can do it later. You get the idea.

But when we up the stakes a bit in terms of the degree of attention we give to our goals and the longevity we expect from their accomplishments, our perspective changes. Imagine that you graduated from Lipscomb five years ago. Suppose your goal now is to gain two promotions in the next five years. This goal requires deeper thinking because the implications are more substantive. You need to give deeper *attention* to your reality. Do I have the requisite skills and knowledge to gain these promotions? What do I need to do if I don't have these skills and knowledge? Who should I get to help me? What steps do I need to take? In other words, what *strategies* do I need to deploy to move from where I am to where I want to be?

One last illustration before moving on. Suppose you are nearing retirement age, and you understand that many of the decisions you need to make now have to last you the rest of your life. High stakes. How much money will I have to spend? What lifestyle can I maintain? Will I be eating Alpo? How do I deal with the inevitable health issues that will arise? What relationships will sustain me? Strategies to address these questions become even more critical because of the attention they demand and the longevity we expect from their accomplishment.

So far, our illustrations *are confined by time and space*. But it does raise an interesting question—what would happen if we carried these concepts of paying attention to our goals and the longevity we expect from their accomplishments one step further?

“I am dying.” In reality this statement is not unique or profound. We will all die. Our shelf life is limited, even if that limitation looks like a long time. Given the way that we usually live, the impact of this statement, “I am dying,” is theoretical at best. However, if you say, “I am dying of terminal brain cancer,” the statement has profound implications. *It is no longer theoretical. It is existential. And intensely personal.* My potentially long life gets condensed radically. Now, I must view my future through a lens that has much less magnification than I thought prior to my diagnosis.

This new view of the future raises profound, and potentially uncomfortable questions. How should this new view affect the way that I live? How do I make the trade-offs that limitations inevitably cause? How should the potential scarcity of time order my days differently? Or should it do so at all?

In order to answer these and related questions, I needed to consider life at its *fundamental* level. ***Why do I even exist at all?***

Answering this question allows us to give particular attention to truly important goals from which we expect a significant longevity of accomplishment. In fact, trying to answer the “Why do I exist at all” question, I believe, ***rises to the level of purpose and not just goal accomplishment.*** As we illustrated above, desired goal accomplishment is not always clear and often presents itself differently in different contexts. When you are a college student, your goals will likely look different than when you are a mid-career executive. When you are a first time parent trying to keep your head above water, your goal may be to make it through the day and not really ponder on the bigger picture of life. As your age advances and you accumulate additional experiences, perspectives on goals evolve.

As I pondered the fundamental change brought about by my illness, ***I yearned for even more.*** Could I find ***a unifying purpose of life that crossed all temporary contextual realities?*** And if I could, would it rise above platitudes and have practical perspectives on how to actually live? Here’s where I landed.

“My purpose in life is to contribute to the whole-life flourishing of those with whom I interact and to advance the Kingdom of Heaven in my sphere of influence.”

To unpack this purpose statement, let’s begin with its four foundational concepts and definitions

- **Contribute.** We cannot do a *complete* life alone. The best we can do is to contribute. Some of our contributions will be greater than others. Nonetheless, they will all be partial. The real power of contributing comes from the collective and not the individual.
- **Interaction and influence.** Similar to the ideas presented on contributing, we have limited bandwidth to interact and influence. Although there are folks with large platforms, research shows that most of us have meaningful interaction and influence with less than 150 people. The key is quality rather than quantity.
- **Whole-life flourishing.** Lately, there’s been a great deal said about flourishing. For our purposes, I consider flourishing to be when people are doing well in five broad domains of life: happiness, health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and close social relationships. In reality, I’m much more interested in the whole-life concept of flourishing rather than flourishing on just one or two dimensions. To live full lives, we cannot be one-dimensional. A flourishing life demonstrates itself relationally, physically, materially, and spiritually. To the degree we have deficits in any of these areas, we have diminished our ability to flourish.

- The Kingdom of Heaven. Without trying to unpack the nuance of its theology, the Kingdom of Heaven represents our existence outside of time and place. It includes the current, but it is so much more. Essentially, it is the place for which God originally created us.

As I wrestled with defining my life purpose, I realized that I also had to struggle with my identity—what is profoundly important to me. Who I really am. My essence.

We all have multiple dimensions of identity, some of which are more significant than others. And these various dimensions can create ethical implications we must address. For instance I'm a proud left-hander. This is a simple element of my identity unless I begin to assert and practice that my left-handedness makes me innately superior to you, which in fact it might.

It doesn't take much for us to understand that we can quickly go beyond the trivial elements of identity to those that are much more difficult to handle. What does it mean to be male? Or female? What does it mean to be a Republican or Democrat? How do we address the effects of race and poverty on our society? Should we be conservative or liberal? And what do those words really mean anyway? Is being an American superior to other types of citizenship?

The only way I have been able to find satisfactory answers to these and related questions is to address them from a Kingdom of Heaven perspective—a perspective not bound by time and place. Matthew uses the phrase, “the kingdom of Heaven” more than 30 times to reflect God's view of the world as He intended it to be.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said the “Kingdom of Heaven is near.” For me, it is nearer than I imagined a year ago. When I view the Kingdom of Heaven as near, all these other identity dimensions disappear. Will my political views really matter in the overall arc of time? Given the longevity of the Kingdom of Heaven compared to my temporary life, will it really matter that I have American citizenship? Or is Kingdom of Heaven citizenship more significant?

In the same discourse, Jesus also called for His “Kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven.” He is implying that the earthly version of the heavenly kingdom inevitably has distortion compared to the eternal version. I have come to appreciate that this distortion is not what God intended. His call on our lives is to minimize the distortion so we can see the kingdom of heaven more clearly.

For our purposes, the last Kingdom of Heaven statement to consider today is to “Seek first the kingdom of heaven.” “First” implies priority. There is a dimension of our identity that is more important than any other identity dimension. And that is the Kingdom of Heaven—our existence as God intended it to be.

If we understand the proximity, the lack of distortion, and priority in the Kingdom of Heaven we must inevitably look beyond the temporary to something more lasting. And it is in that place we find our *life purpose*.

Thus far, my foundational argument for a “Strategy for Life” is that we must have a keen understanding of where we are and where we want to end up—the first two of three dimensions of good strategy. This understanding should ultimately uncover elements of our core identity that transcend time and place and stretch beyond our earthly lives. Once understood, this core identity becomes our Purpose and all elements of identity that don’t reflect this core purpose must become subservient to it.

For those of you who have had me in class, you know that I like to move from concepts to practicalities pretty quickly. In this lecture, I’ve actually spent more time on concepts than I usually would. But I guess that’s the nature of this beast.

To understand and appreciate my desire to leave you with something real to think about, let’s consider three key take-aways. They are certainly not exhaustive, but they do come from a great deal of reflection over the last five months as I have journaled and considered my recent experience. I trust they can help you to live the Kingdom of Heaven today. Rather than being prescriptive, I present these ideas to you more as a *testimony* from my situation so that you’ll have room to apply these thoughts to your specific situation just as I have applied them to mine.

1. ***Develop Margin.*** I’m a workaholic. For 50 years I’ve looked for the next hill to climb. In many ways, this quest for more has allowed me to accomplish a great deal. But it came at a price. That price was often my inability to be fully present. And my inability to have margin—any unabsorbed space—in my life.

When I had my first seizure on November 29, I achieved margin in spades. If you looked at my calendar for that week and the ones before and after you would see that it was as packed as usual. I actually felt more vital the busier I was. But all my need to be busy was gone in a flash. Instant margin. Nothing to do except survive. No to do list. No calendar. Nothing.

In the time between my acute episode and my diagnosis, I rested. I enjoyed a forced Sabbath. I reengaged with Malinda and my family in a deeper way because all my ability to control was stripped away. And guess what—my level of peace rose exponentially even though my future was increasingly uncertain. I believe this was because I now had room to *be* and not just *do*. I had time. I had margin in a life that was too programmed. And I found that I liked it. Who knew!

After my diagnosis and beginning with my treatment, I have chosen to maintain this margin. In it, I’ve found the space to be present with others and to allow life to happen without its prior intense programming. That doesn’t mean that I’ve quit planning and looking to the future. It simply means that my view of life starts in the present and works out from there—rather than the other way around.

To develop margin, I believe you should come to recognize

2. ***What is essential vs. important vs. not so important.*** In reality I didn't make much distinction between things that were essential and things that were important. I lumped them all together. And then added many "not so important" elements just to fill up my time and feel vital.

To break this cycle, I had to determine what were the activities that I was uniquely capable of doing. Were there actions that only I could do? Upon reflection, especially from a hospital room, there are very few activities that fit this criteria and there should probably be fewer. My goal with the remaining essentials is to release as many as I can so others can grow by addressing them.

Reducing essentials allows us margin to prioritize what is important. And I now believe that focusing on important activities is what will make the deepest impression.

Perhaps this illustration from teaching at Lipscomb will help you see my point. At Lipscomb, unlike large, comprehensive universities, we don't usually use teaching assistants to grade our assignments. We consider it essential that we professors provide feedback and assign grades—and this takes a great deal of time and energy. To address this absorption of time and energy, I've developed a process that reduces my level of grading while still ensuring that the feedback and grading is thorough and beneficial. I then take this "found" time and reinvest it in the importance of learning rather than the essential of grading. What can I do with students to increase their level of learning, which in turn allows them to flourish?

A quick word on the "not so important." Personally, I find it exhausting to always focus on the essential and the important. This gets awfully close to absorbing all my margin. I need time with a game or mindless novel just to let my brain rest. The activity itself is not important at all. But the resulting space may be more important than we realize.

These first two take-aways—develop margin and realize the difference between essential, important, and not so important activities—have focused internally—on ourselves. Our last take-away looks outside of us.

To fully embrace the Kingdom of Heaven life, we should.

3. ***View love and service as fundamental behaviors for flourishing.*** Kingdom of Heaven love is not passive or inherently emotional. It is *agape*—self-giving action for the benefit of others. Paul is clear that *agape* reflects in our behaviors and not just in our emotions. In I Cor. 13, he declares that this type of love is
- Patient and kind
 - Not jealous, boastful, proud, or rude
 - Does not demand its own way, is not irritable
 - Keeps no records of wrong
 - Does not rejoice in injustice
 - Never gives up, always hopeful

As a complement to love, service is taking practical actions that benefit others. In a real sense, when we serve others, we give them the opportunity to achieve their full potential.

One practical way to demonstrate love and service is to celebrate the differences of the people with whom we work and interact. Thank goodness we are not all the same. Organizations are better when we have different skills and talents. When we come from diverse backgrounds. When we experience life differently.

Certainly, all of this diversity can present challenges to organizations unless we choose to act in the best interests of others rather than ourselves. Which brings us full circle to the concept of core identity. If our Kingdom of Heaven identity transcends time and place, then it precludes us from demonizing people who are different from us. And the way we keep from doing so is by loving and serving others.

So let's put a bow on this and call it done. A Strategy for Life looks at where we are, where we want to be, and how we get there. I have argued that the first two dimensions of a strategy for life—where we are and where we want to be—can rise to the level of a unifying purpose of life that crosses temporary contextual realities. This allowed me to develop a purpose statement that says, ***“My purpose in life is to contribute to the whole-life flourishing of those with whom I interact and to advance the Kingdom of Heaven in my sphere of influence.”***

After unpacking some Kingdom of Heaven concepts, we considered three practical testimonies that address the third dimension of strategy—how we get to where we want to be. These testimonies focus on developing margin; recognizing what is essential, important, and not so important; and viewing love and service as fundamental behaviors for flourishing.

As I wrap up today, I want to say thank you. Thank you for being here. But especially thank each of you for allowing my story to intersect with yours at various times in our lives. These intersections truly represent the great honor of my life.

Those of you who have had me in class know that I end each capstone semester in a particular way. This ending comes from two long-held traditions—the giving of blessing and the making of intercession. Since Bible times, people have blessed others by recognizing their needs and calling on God to meet those needs. This calling on God leads to our interceding on behalf of others—not for our benefit—but for their benefit.

Today, as I have traditionally done, I want to combine these two concepts into an intercessory prayer of blessing. I usually pray this over each individual in class—but I don't think any of us want to go quite that far today.

Intercessory Prayer of Blessing