“Dancing with Dreams and Courage”
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By Dr. John Roush, Centre College President

Thank you for this opportunity. I count it an honor to be among you. While it is my privilege to be president of Centre College, Kentucky’s premiere undergraduate college—one where extraordinary accomplishment is an everyday occurrence—I can tell you that I will forever be most comfortable with students your age. I can’t necessarily explain this feeling. It just is true. So, thank you for giving me a reason to be with you today. I have looked forward to this chance.

Being a high school student is an exciting time, albeit a time that is filled with a fair amount of anxiety and frustration and doubt. High school should be among your most wonderful years, and I hope, pray even, that your high school experience is wonderful, though I suspect for many of you it is a roller coaster of excitement followed by disappointment—happiness followed by sadness—success followed by failure. Such is life. Be patient with yourself and those who love you. Keep focused on those things that are good.

I have titled my remarks this morning, “Dancing with Dreams and Courage.” Let me assure you that I will not be breaking into dance or asking you to do so—though that might be fun! The inspiration for my remarks comes from a popular country song of a couple years back, “Life’s a Dance,” by John Michael Montgomery, a musician who grew up about 45 minutes from here.

“Life’s a Dance.” It is the chorus and the second verse that I like best: “Life’s a dance you learn as you go; sometimes you lead; sometimes you follow; don’t worry ‘bout what you don’t know, life’s a dance you learn as you go. The longer I live, the more I believe you do have to give if you want to receive. There’s a time to listen and a time to talk, and you might have to crawl even after you walk. I’ve had sure things blow up in my face. Seen the long shot win the race. Been knocked down by the slamming door. Picked myself up and came back for more.”

Life’s a dance. Actually, much as I like the song and the artist, life is more important than a dance. And, your life is much more important than a dance. Still, there is truth in the words of the song, and especially that second verse.

My First Point—Making Dreams a Part of Your Dance. President Teddy Roosevelt, our nation’s 26th president and the father of our country’s national park system, once said, “Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs even though checkered by failure, than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy nor suffer much because they live in the gray twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat.”

I have always liked this quote—immensely so. I recognize that there are those who believe differently, and I can even affirm that choosing not “to dare mighty things” is
okay and allowable in a free society that values diversity of thought and deed. But, if we are looking to establish why this America has been the model and the envy of all those who live in the world that is not free, I would maintain that Roosevelt’s quote represents one of the major reasons why this nation, with all of its problems, is the greatest in the world.

America’s rich history is absolutely filled with men and women who elected not to “live in the gray twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat.” Our nation’s story is replete with true stories of men and women, and organizations and communities, and cities and states, that were determined to pursue dreams that were seemingly out of reach, not possible, you know, “never gonna’ happen.” But, again and again, people who dared mighty things succeeded in their businesses, with their teams, their campaigns, and so forth.

I have long believed that our country’s preoccupation with sport is clear evidence of our people’s desire to dare mighty things. And, while I would be among the first to suggest that some of this preoccupation is out of control, it does provide an insight into a driving force in we Americans. We delight in being able to test our best against somebody else’s best, whether it is ourselves, our sons and daughters, someone else’s sons and daughters, or at the professional level men and women who make sport their profession for a time. We delight in rooting for underdogs. Most of us even like being the underdog.

Education has long been about the business of helping students discover and pursue their dreams. As a student of the future, albeit an amateur, I can promise you that if we took the rest of this morning, split into small groups and sought to answer the question: What is the wildest dream we could imagine happening in the next 25 years? All of our groups would aim too low. We would underestimate, understate, “under dream.” I know this to be true because it has been true of every generation.

Your teachers and others involved in your life are counting on you to dream very large … and to hold fast to your dreams. You will encounter cynicism; don’t let it steal away your commitment to being your best. You will encounter many people who are willing to accept less than their best; don’t let them discourage you from doing your best—or from dreaming your best.

The progress of our towns and cities, our states and nations, depends upon women and men with the vision and the courage to make their dreams come true. Education is about the business of equipping you to make a difference for good, and we are counting on you. My dreams include the belief that the most remarkable inventions of all will be patented in these next 100 years—that plans and ideas for the best buildings and airplanes and medical cures are tucked neatly away in the recesses of young minds perhaps not yet in college. The most wonderful music is yet to be composed. And that the best doctors and lawyers and athletes and musicians and scientists and teachers and leaders are just now moving into adulthood. Make dreams a part of your dance.

**My Second Point—Make Courage a Part of Your Dance.** Courage is a common theme
in many of my speeches and some of the articles I write. It is a part of the human experience that inspires me. It is sometimes hard to define, but you know when you see it. What do others say about courage? Let’s see. Amelia Earhart, America’s first great female aviator who was lost in July of 1937 as she attempted to cross the Pacific Ocean, said “Courage is the price that life exacts for granting peace.” From Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of our nation’s great authors and poets, “A hero is no braver than an ordinary man, but he is braver five minutes longer.” From Harry Truman, our country’s 33rd president and the man who guided our nation through WW II, “America was not built on fear. America was built on courage, on imagination, and unbeatable determination to do the job at hand.” From Albert Einstein, a last name that is synonymous with genius, “Any intelligent fool can make things bigger, more complex, and more violent. It takes a touch of genius—and a lot of courage—to move in the opposite direction.” From Winston Churchill, Britain’s greatest wartime leader, “Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts.”

Education has long been about the business of preparing its students for courageous living. You should know that there is no personal quality I find more compelling than courage. People of courage live their lives with a sense of freedom because they are determined to do the right thing, no matter what the cost.

Personal courage for me is not the “run into the burning building to save a child” type of thing or the front-page news variety for doing something heroic. I am talking about the every day, it’s-a-part-of-my-life courage that manifests itself in the way you treat other people. It takes courage to include those who may not agree with you or treat you right. And you must be brave if you are going to make good decisions about how you will conduct your personal and professional life.

When I think of courage, I think of people, not acts of bravery or valor. I am reminded of great men and women leaders of worldwide fame like Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi, Helen Keller, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Theresa. I am also reminded of folks unknown to you and whose names will never grace the pages of our history books. These were the men and women who were my teachers, my coaches, my parents, and my friends who taught me firsthand what courageous living was all about. Each of you has encountered such people. Make some of these folks your models for everyday courage.

I promise you that, within the hour, some of us will be faced with the choice of doing the right thing or just “going with the flow.” The challenge to do the right thing will happen right outside these doors. It will be your choice, my choice, and we must summon the courage to do the right thing. My second point—remember it—make courage a part of your dance.

Men and women of dreams and courage have moved this nation and the world forward in remarkable ways over the centuries.

There is every reason to believe your generation and those that follow can and will continue this legacy of high achievement. This lost generation stuff—much of it talking
about today’s young people—is exaggerated, in my opinion. It makes for good magazine, and newspaper, and TV journalism pieces, but it is grossly overstated. It is an idea that sells America’s young people short, and suggests to me that many of us—those over 40—have forgotten about our own adolescence and our high school years.

This is not to suggest we do not have serious problems among our youth, but history would suggest that “youth bashing,” rather popular right now, bears a striking resemblance to what went on 25 years ago, and 25 years before that. I remain optimistic about you, tomorrow’s citizen-leaders, and I do not accept the forecast that our nation and other countries that value freedom are “about to destruct.”

Because I have known other people like you, I don’t think of hope as a childlike view that “everything will get better if we just wait long enough.” No, my hope, my optimism, is rooted in the conviction that people of dreams, people of courage—banded together in spite of the differences that can tend to pull us apart—can make things better. America’s cities are retrievable. America’s youth have not given up, and we must not give up on them, on you. The nation’s problems with alcohol and other drugs and violence can be whipped. Crime, meanness, and terror will not win.

“Life’s a dance you learn as you go; sometimes you lead, sometimes you follow; don’t worry ‘bout what you don’t know; life’s a dance you learn as you go.”

I close with an eyewitness account from New York City. On a cold day in December, a little boy was standing in front of a shoe store on Fifth Avenue. Barefooted and peering through the window, he shivered with cold. A lady approached the boy and said, “My little fellow, why are you looking so intently in that window”? He replied, I was asking God to give me a pair of shoes.” The lady took him by the hand, went into the store and asked the store manager to get a half a dozen pair of socks and some shoes for the boy to try on. She then asked the manager if he could bring her a basin of warm water and a towel. The manager quickly brought them to the woman, who had taken the little fellow to the back part of the store so as not to embarrass him. Removing her gloves, she knelt down, washed the little boy’s feet, and dried them with the towel. By this time, the store manager had returned with the shoes and the socks. Placing a pair of socks on the boy’s feet, she carefully helped him select and then purchased for him a pair of shoes and the extra pairs of socks. As she finished, she took his hand and said, “No doubt, my little friend, you will be more comfortable now.” As she turned to go, the astonished lad caught her by the hand, and looking up in her face, with tears in his eyes, asked this question, “Are you God’s wife”

In our busy lives, I pray we can dream, we can have the courage, we can sustain the hope to lead lives that would cause someone in need to ask us this question, “Are you, am I, a part of God’s family?”

Dreams! Courage! Fill your dance with both as you work to become a citizen-leader of this nation and this world. Know that I and others—to include the men and women here at Louisville Collegiate—believe in you. Godspeed to you as you dance.