“Building Fires and Diggings Wells”  
Asheville School Commencement, Asheville, NC, May 2002

By Dr. John Roush, President, Centre College

Thank you for inviting Susie and me to be part of this morning’s event. We are honored to be included, and I hope in the next 15 minutes or so to share some thoughts about dreams, about hope, and about courage.

I come to you today as an informed, impressed guest. I count your headmaster as a new friend. Two of your classmates are from Danville, and Lanier Prichard is the daughter of our good friends, Louie and Bennett Prichard. And, North Carolina, remains one of the states we know well through our son, Luke, who was a student-athlete at Duke and graduated two years ago this month. We count it a pleasure to be among you. So, let me begin.

I have titled my remarks this morning “Building fires and digging wells”. I will be speaking about three words that I commend to you – easy enough even on a Sunday morning.

My inspiration comes from an old Celtic saying that has rung true throughout the ages and remains true in our new century: We all warm ourselves on fires we did not kindle. We all drink from wells we did not dig.

Each of us has been encouraged, supported, and lifted up by parents, family, friends, teachers, coaches and others who have gone before us to kindle fires and dig wells in order that we might have the opportunity to grow and learn – to be warmed and nourished, if you will – by those who have gone before, and thereby prepared for your future, our future.

And, if being part of an educational community is all about being prepared for tomorrow’s world, what might we know about that world and our nation, in particular?

The face of America will continue to change, quite literally. Ethnic and racial diversity in the United States will increase and become more geographically widespread. Forecasters tell us that the number of American men and women over 85 will double before 2020. Charitable giving by individuals in the U.S. is likely to remain at current levels (Americans give about 1.8 percent of their disposable income to charitable causes, compared to 3.2 percent in the 1950’s). Family life will bear less resemblance to the past. The number of latchkey children will grow, the number of children being raised by their grandparents will increase, and families will continue to do less together. They report that the impact of information technology in our day-to-day life, a concept unknown and unimagined at the beginning of the 20th century, will outdistance anything we might imagine today. They speculate that we may finally move away from our near total reliance on fossil fuels. They report that an environmental disaster or terrorist action of proportions we have never known is somewhere between possible and probable. They
predict that children will be less fit in the next century though exercise equipment will offer virtual reality options that will make one's workout unbelievably lifelike. They speculate that our country's renewed interest in matters of faith will continue to grow even as church attendance declines.

We also know that those who speculate about the future should be heard with some caution. Remember that Charles H. Duell, Director of the Patent Office in 1899, said, and I quote, “Everything that can be invented has been invented.” That Lord Kelvin, President of the Royal Society in 1895, was quoted to have said, “Heavier than air flying machines are impossible.” That Nobel Laureate in physics Robert Milikan said in 1923, “There is no likelihood man can ever tap the power of the atom.” Remember, too, that no one imagined that the telephone, the laser, and the computer would have such a profound impact on our world.

If the history of those who predict the future tells us much, and I believe it does, then the future we might expect will almost certainly be strikingly different than we imagine. And, my friends, there is reason to believe our world's future will be even more extraordinary than the millennium we just left behind. Some of what will occur in the next 100 years will be beyond our wildest dreams, for good and quite possibly for bad.

**Dreams.** But, what might all of this have to do with me. I believe tomorrow’s citizen-leader – like you students here at the Asheville School – must be ones who dream big dreams. Why does this matter so much?

People who dream big dreams are the ones who make fire and dig wells. It is my deepest conviction that our nation must sustain and, in fact, grow in its capacity to encourage men and women who are prepared to dream big 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. Your school has long been about the business of equipping young people to make a difference for good, and your teachers and others here this morning 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 not yet out of high school. I believe that 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. I believe there is a group of men and women who will find peace in the Middle East. I believe our war on terror, though not likely to be over soon, will end with a victory for those who value freedom.

**Hope.** The root of my hope grows from two basic commitments: a matter of personal faith, and two, my own abiding view that we are up to the task of making this world a
better place.

Men and women who live with hope – most often manifested in their commitment to faith – 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 is exaggerated. 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. “From an unknown author we learn of God’s wisdom and the importance dreams play in one’s life. “The wisdom of God is known in that He left the world unfinished – that we might have the interest and delight in taking the raw material and putting the world together. He left the oil in the trap rock, the aluminum in the clay, the paper in the pulp, the electricity in the clouds. He left the forest unfelled, the mountains unsurveyed, the canals undug, the tunnels unbored. He left the music unwritten, the poetry undreamed and the dramas unplayed. He left the mind and character imperfect that we might really be the children of God, created in his own image with latent powers to take the raw materials and put the old world together. Man is made in God’s image and after his likeness. We are partners with God, creatures honored by being allowed to be his colleagues.”

We all warm ourselves on fires we did not kindle. We all drink from wells we did not dig. I count on you being people who will dream big dreams, live with hope.

**Courage.** My third word is more important than the first two. Preparing for your future, our future will require you to make choices – good ones at that. People who make good and courageous choices are the ones who build fire and dig wells.

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 of worldwide fame like Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi, Helen Keller, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Theresa, and the men and women responding with courage to the terror of September 11. 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.

Describing courage often gets reduced to some simple sentences, and this is not a bad thing. One I like best is “Do the right thing.” This is quite basic advice. It sounds easy, but to consistently “do the right thing” is one of the greatest challenges we face, at every age. To be a person of courage is a goal each of us can achieve, and all of us should hope and pray that we would be remembered by friend and foe alike as a person of courage. One who had the courage to be honest, loyal, steadfast, devoted, kind, principled, forgiving, and committed to doing the right thing whatever the cost.

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.

Some of you have been making good choices for some time. Some of you are just getting used to doing this. Some of you need to do a better job of it.

I really wish I could relieve you of this responsibility or at least some of it. These times in which we live make it necessary for young people – even the very young in some cases – to start making good choices, courageous choices. My real prayer this morning would be that God would give you the courage to make these good choices. I am one who believes that young people and people of all ages do understand the difference between right and wrong and even the subtle differences between doing the minimum and doing your best. I know what’s right. So do you. Do I have the courage to make good choices? Do you? God, I hope so.

People of dreams, people of hope, people of good courage are the ones who build fires and dig wells. It’s always been that way. Our future depends on it. And, remember, We all warm ourselves on fires we did not kindle. We all drink from wells we did not dig. Thank you, again, for letting Susie and me join you this morning. Thank you for your kind attention. Thank you in advance for the good things, the important things, the courageous things you will do in the years that lie ahead. Godspeed.