A Full Tank of Gas

I celebrated my 50th birthday last week and I know for you millenials that’s ancient, but for the men sitting behind me I’m still wet behind the ears. It just goes to show that life is all about perspective and that’s what I will speak to in the time allotted to me this evening. Now I understand that millenials have difficulty absorbing anything that’s not in a sound bite or over in 5 seconds so I’ve tried to break it down in small segments to maximize absorption and retention. I’ve also attempted to proffer the information in bullet points in order to increase the likelihood that you will listen to me knowing that there are a fixed number of points and you can tick them off as you do the countdown to your escape from this torture. I also sought to utilize visual aids and props to enhance the experience but it was just not to be; the Chancellor is a patient man but even he has his limits. And in that vein, to borrow a quip I heard from the Chancellor a few months ago, as Elizabeth Taylor said to her 6th husband, “I won’t keep you long.”

So let’s get this over with. I have ten main lessons that I want you to leave here with today and hopefully you’ll recall one of the ten.

1) AGE IS JUST A NUMBER: I know you think I’m saying this because I turned 50 last week and so I’m officially over the hill, but that’s not really the case, (well maybe a little), But seriously, never limit yourself or determine what you will or will not do by some artificial construct of what is considered age appropriate. Who made those rules? Martin Luther King was 39 when he died, Moses was 80 when he was called to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt, Ghandi began his trek at middle age, Jesus died at 33 and changed the world forever, Mother Theresa lived long and never stopped. Do NOT put your life in a box based on a number, God calls people WHEN he chooses irrespective of what the date on your birth certificate may indicate. There is NO expiry date on Gods calling and purpose for your life.

2) CREATE YOUR LIFE ONE THOUGHT AT A TIME: Your thoughts are the most POWERFUL weapon in the arsenal that defines your future. Be VERY deliberate and discriminating about whom and what you allow to occupy the real estate in your mind. Science has now caught up with something that the Bible spoke about
thousands of years ago that, “As a man thinketh so is he.” It is now proven that thoughts are actually physical energy that have the capacity to change the molecular structure of your brain and actively transform your DNA. Vigilantly guard your thoughts, what you allow other people to speak into your life and your own words. I once heard the best summation of this principle embodied in the phrase “if you think you can or if you think you can’t, you’re right both times!” Your words have power! Thoughts create words, words create action, actions create the map of your life.

3) BE OK WITH WALKING ALONE: All of us are social animals; we were created that way so seeking companionship and partners on life’s journey is natural and healthy. Friendships are a good thing and family is the bedrock on which we build our own identities. However, there will come a time, for me more than once, when, if you are choosing to live a life true to your purpose and calling, you will have to reject the comfort of the familiar and the ordinary. You will have to be willing to chart your own course and run your own race, irrespective of those who think you are making a mistake or simply lost your MIND!! And let me be clear, your greatest opposition will more often than not emanate from those to whom you are closest; your nearest and dearest from whom you have drawn wisdom and succor; and that will be the HARDEST part. BUT remember this; your journey is your own. Seek counsel, advice, BUT that still small voice in the inner reaches of your soul is your BEST guide. LISTEN to it and STEP out knowing God has you.

4) BE THANKFUL: This generation has often been referred to as the ENTITLEMENT generation. Everything is immediate, available and yours by right. And in your defense perhaps if those of us who are your harshest critics were raised in the last 20 years, we would suffer from the same mentality. When I was growing up there was one channel, JBC, which signed on at 3pm with Sesame Street, Ernie and Bert were roommates, (not gay) and TV signed off at 12 a.m. with the National Anthem and the flag waving proudly in the wind. Now you can pull up 1000 channels plus Netflix, Hulu, amazon prime, you tube and the entire internet for your viewing pleasure. It is HARD to recognize amid all the distraction that you are sitting here because somebody, many bodies, made an incredible sacrifice for you to be sitting here today. A plethora of individuals, some who you
don’t even know and may never meet in your lifetime invested, planted a seed in your future. Your parents, your teachers, your siblings, your friends, your neighbours, the prayer circle at your Mom’s church that you scoff at, the little old lady who kept reporting your activities to your mother and who you still deeply resent, the lunch lady who gave you the cutters for less money because that’s all you had. Gratitude is essential to LIVING.

5) PAY IT FORWARD: Flowing directly from gratitude is the principle that you must give back; having received you must also invest in the future of others coming after you. The cycle of life demands that this principle be upheld as it is how generations build upon each other’s success. It is an unfortunate cultural phenomenon that I have noted in the Caribbean, the almost pernicious bleeding of our institutions with no commitment to reengagement. I did a quick calculation and if each of you gave 5 dollars today we would leave here with 15,000 dollars, enough to cover at least two scholarships for deserving students. And don’t tell me you can’t afford five dollars because I know that ALL of you have your phone credit at maximum capacity so you can be sending messages and checking your social media while I speak. Take five dollars off of that and you would be part of a movement for change in giving back to your alma mater.

6) SUCCESS IS NOT A VALUE MEAL: I came across a proverb recently that stated “What you value is what you are willing to earn.” When I would get up at 2 a.m. to study for A levels, my Mom would get up and make me hot chocolate or some beverage and she would always recite this quote from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow “The heights by great men reached and kept were not attained by sudden flight, but they while their companions slept, were toiling upward in the night.” When you’re in the midst of trying to memorize lines from King Lear throwing Longfellow in the mix could be a little distracting but I’ve never forgotten it. Sustained success takes hard work, diligence, sacrifice and commitment. Nelson Mandela became President of South Africa after a lifetime of struggle and 27 years in prison, 9 in solitary confinement. It is not an overnight occurrence no matter what the 5 second ad may tell you.
7) RELATIONSHIPS MATTER: I often tell my staff, and young people that I mentor, that one of the greatest lessons I learned while as a young Foreign Service Officer is that relationships can make or break a negotiation. That the end result of the negotiated text that emerges and is heralded by Ministers and political heads is built on relationships of trust and respect among the negotiators at the table more than on the brilliance or erudition of individuals. I have seen countries change positions on hardline issues based on the value they placed on the relationship with the representative of the opposing state and the mutual respect developed between them. For small countries this is critical. It doesn’t matter how brilliant you think you are. As you walk through life one of the most important marks you will leave is on the people who cross your path. TREAD CAREFULLY and with INTEGRITY.

8) FAIL SPECTACULARLY: I had a revelation just last week that sometimes one of the best things that can happen to you in life is to fail spectacularly! Not one of those minor bumps or hiccups but an EPIC failure that everybody knows and talks about and it’s not just a nine day wonder. It comes up years later in conversation. I say this because it is when you experience that kind of failure that shakes your foundations that you also come to the end of yourself. And it is one of the best places to be. Those are called DEFINING moments, for friendships, your core beliefs, your identity and the essence of who you are. In those moments there is no BBM, email, kix, snapchat, twitter, instagram, facebook or whatsapp, just you and God and you will realise that it is enough. And in rising from the ashes then God can show off and take you higher than you thought possible.

9) TRUST GOD’s PLAN FOR YOUR LIFE: Most of you are sitting here as graduates because you are clearly bright, determined, focused individuals who have attained several rungs of success in your short lives. So you’ve made plans, charted a course and I’m here to tell you that sometimes those plans aren’t always going to follow a predictable path. I have heard it said that REJECTION is really DIVINE REDIRECTION; nice words until you feel the sting of rejection. But I will say this, there is not one incident of rejection in my career or personal life that I have not turned around and thanked God for. Sometimes it was a mere few weeks, sometimes it was years, but invariably it has always been the same. I’ll
share one experience, and the irony, given the occasion will not be lost on you. I decided I wanted to become a lawyer when I was 8 years old and my favourite uncle who had just returned from England as a barrister died in a horrific car accident. I was rejected, not once but twice, by the University of the West Indies Cave Hill Faculty of Law in 1987 and 1988. I thought that was the end of that career path. But God just had a different way of working it out and had I not been rejected and taken a different route I do not think I would be standing before you today because it is the linkages that I made in Washington that enabled me make my contribution to this beloved institution.

10) Finally, if you take nothing else away today, I NEED you to take this: that EACH of you is a uniquely designed magnificent specimen of God’s creation; that the God of the Universe, created you for a specific purpose that only you can fulfill. That you are significant by virtue of your very existence and that there has NEVER been and WILL NEVER be another you. The God who made every tear drop with a different molecular structure made you. If you internalize that truth in the deepest recesses of your soul it will revolutionize the way you do life and the world will never be the same.

Go Change Your World!!