

Founders Day, January 18, 2002, Washington and Lee.

This is the fourth time in 50 years I've gotten to speak in Lee Chapel so we'll know in a few minutes whether this will be my last.

The first time was in 1970 when my old fraternity roommate, Bob Huntley, was your president; the second and third were 25 years later - in the Spring of 1995 - when I was teaching here and gave the annual Telford Lecture and a month later made some remarks during the 45th reunion of the Class of 1950.

Actually, the Reunion talk was a recycled version of the Telford Lecture and if you compare the two you'll find the same old jokes about how Dr. Bean hit Dr. Moger with a right cross to the jaw when Moger called Pickett's Charge the most foolhardy act in Southern history and how Ollie Crenshaw was such a slow writer that the publishers had to change his history of Washington and Lee from a sesquicentennial to a bicentennial.

But because the Telford audience and the Reunion audience were very different I figured I could get away with it. Besides, the Washington and Lee Honor Code doesn't say anything about plagiarizing from yourself.

Needless to say, being asked to talk at Founders Day is nothing to sneeze at – especially when in the audience are ODK initiates, their proud families, the faculty and students of my alma mater, the members of the Class of 1960 who are helping create The Institute of Honor and the loyal cadre of Lexington's townspeople.

I notice the post card that was sent out about today's program listed me as "Roger Mudd, Distinguished Journalist," leaving it up to you decide whether being distinguished is absolute or relative.

Thinking about today's gathering, I began to wonder whether the ODK tapping is just as important today as it was for us 50 years ago. What an unbelievable sweat it was back then; how I sat there in Doremus during the ceremony, thinking I was going to make it and then not making it. So I

am delighted to congratulate the newest members of ODK but more determined than ever to find out why I didn't make it.

I also wondered whether the standards for recognizing university leadership have changed when so much else of campus life has changed. Back then, the standards seemed almost quantitative: membership on at least two student boards or councils or teams; socially active; intellectually competent, that is, maybe a 2 point 8; maybe not varsity football but at least golf, tennis or lacrosse and perhaps pretensions at being a writer for the Ring Tum Phi or the Calyx.

But I now wonder whether there might be other qualities that ought to be recognized – not only not lying, cheating or stealing and not only acting like a well-rounded person of gentility but also having intellectual honesty and candor, personal integrity, self-reliance, compassion, reasoned indignation, artistic discernment, religious sensibility and generosity.

Former Governor Terry Sanford has said that the

difference between North Carolina and the other states in the Union was UNC and its graduates. UNC's graduates, he said, have made the difference.

Well, that's true, I suppose, as far as it goes. But unless you regard "making a difference" as a personal commitment, being a graduate of UNC or UVa or Washington and Lee is not necessarily a mark of distinction. It becomes a mark of distinction only if you work at it every day.

A college diploma means little unless you carry with it a core of beliefs that will give your life its strength and your family its continuity, a core of conduct that will give your world its integrity and a core of values that will give your society its harmony.

And what a major step it was when this university added to the curriculum its Ethics and the Professions courses. It was a recognition and a hope that Washington and Lee's simple Honor Code would spread into a larger vision of ethical behavior.

It's not that any of us arrived in Lexington as unformed freshman with no sense of honor but most of us came without having lived in a system where honor was actually codified.

I came from a family which, like most of yours, had an unwritten honor code.

When I was seven I stole a book from our neighborhood book store in Washington, DC and when my mother discovered it hidden under my pillow, she announced her version of the single sanction: I would scrub the two bathrooms in our apartment each week at 25 cents a week until I had earned the money to pay for the book. It took eight weeks, eight weeks of scrubbing and thinking about what I had done. Then she said, "I'll take you to the store but you will go in alone, you'll ask for the manager and you'll tell him what you did. Then, you'll give him your money and you'll tell him that you are sorry and that you will never steal again."

It was all a very quiet eight weeks; there was no heavy or constant lecturing from my parents; only the terror of a seven-year-old boy in 1935 being made, for the first time in his life, to accept the consequences of his behavior.

It was a memorable beginning of what I hope has been an ethical life; and looking back, I think now of another time and place where my own standards, my own view of right and wrong, my own concept of what was fitting and proper, my own code of ethics got an even finer and firmer shaping and it was right here in Lexington in the late 1940's.

Sid Coulling has called the Honor System “one of the chief glories” of Washington and Lee. Donald McCabe, who will speak here tomorrow, has studied college honor systems all over the country and he says, “something happens on this campus that does not happen elsewhere.”

I came to this campus from a world where formal honor codes were unknown: a big public high school, two years in the Army and a municipal college in Kentucky.

What happened to me was not quite a transformation but a realization that I was not going to be the one to let down my peers by flaunting a system that they had so steadfastly and superbly maintained for more than a century.

Some of you will be graduating within three or four months, leaving this sequestered place where honor is as

absolute as any place in the country. You have been living in a clearly uncomplicated, single sanction environment where ethical dilemmas are rarely encountered.

But you will be entering a confusing world where almost every step you take and almost every road you chose can be littered with ethical obstacles, where every decision you must make can be fraught with ethical torment.

It is a world where, at best, honor is relative.

I hope you will not be shocked at what will hit you.

I hope that what John Gunn has called “the utter joy of living in a Community of Trust” will enable you to resist the corrosive influences that await you in politics, in business, in sports, in advertising, in the media.

I found out rather quickly how relative honor truly is when I began my professional life as a journalist, first as newspaper reporter in Richmond and then as television correspondent with the various networks.

It may come as a surprise to many of you to learn that the press does have a code of ethics. But the codes are obscure, voluntary and almost toothless.

What we do have is a generally agreed-upon set of standards: we do not make up stories; we do not fabricate quotations; we attribute information that is not self-evident; we do not publish or broadcast offensive pictures; we do not use obscene words, unless you write for *The New Yorker*; and we acknowledge that each individual has a right to privacy.

But reporters and editors remain divided on how large that zone of privacy should be and to whom it should apply.

Do we photograph without permission? It depends. Do we go through the garbage of public figures? It depends. Do we entrap? It depends. Do we lie about our identity in order to penetrate someone's privacy? It depends. And what it depends on, of course, is whether the story itself is worth the ethical compromise it requires and whether the competition is onto the story.

To be frank, I never truly adjusted to the network life – not that it wasn't an ego-inflating, fame-producing, scoop-generating and money-flowing life – but there was, I thought, always something askew about television's values, about its self-promotion, its catering to egos, its commercial

accommodations, its pressure to simplify, its worship of ratings.

In the end, I think network management sensed my unease and prickliness with television's values and my unwillingness to be a hood ornament on the company car.

So after a career that began with the late Richmond News Leader and moved from the paper's radio station to CBS News to NBC News to the Newshour on PBS, I have now come to rest at The History Channel with my professional honor sufficiently intact that my beloved alma mater has seen fit to ask me to give this particular speech.

So my point is that's what beyond Lexington is not a single sanction world and that all us have to make our own adjustments to it.

But I think I'm right when I say that a society as culturally diverse and non-judgmental as ours would probably lose its cohesion unless honor was relative and ethics situational.

The British journalist, Jeremy Campbell, writes in his new book, *The Liar's Tale*, that the post-modern " society is

not simple enough for it to survive by always telling the truth” in a culture that is “infinitely malleable.”

I’m sure you remember the story of Danny Almonte, the ace Little League pitcher from the Bronx, who turned out to be 14 instead of 12 because his father had doctored his birth certificate. When the League officials discovered the fraud, Danny’s team had to forfeit all its victories and records, including Danny’s perfect game. The League thought the punishment fair and appropriate. But that’s not what they thought in Danny’s South Bronx neighborhood.

This is what Bronx resident Yara Grajales thought:

“If he lied, he lied for a good cause because he wanted to play a sport. This kid loves baseball... Ask any adult out here selling drugs. They would say they wished they played a sport. I’d rather have [Danny] do that than being out here trying to rob my grandmother because he had nothing to do. He wanted to become somebody.”

By now, all of us are familiar with Joseph Ellis, the renowned history teacher, who has disgraced himself and his profession – a one-year suspension without pay from Mount

Holyoke College for fabricating his military record. When the Boston Globe broke the story in June last year, the college president's comments were so tepid – something about the press having the right to pursue the truth – that the national furor that followed virtually shamed her into announcing an investigation. And even though Professor Ellis quickly and publically admitted his lies, it took the college almost two months to fix his punishment.

What are we to make of the sad saga of the Notre Dame football coach, George O'Leary, who resigned after five days after admitting he falsified parts of his academic and athletic record? Apparently, the University was prepared to stick with O'Leary even after they discovered he had never earned his football letter at the University of New Hampshire. Only when they discovered a second lie – that he had earned a Master's degree in Education from NYU – did Notre Dame, where football and academics are dealt with in moral terms - decided that two lies was one lie too many.

Tony Kornheiser of The Washington Post has wondered what Notre Dame would have done had they discovered

O'Leary's lies after he had put together a couple of winning seasons.

And what about the most recent case of plagiarism by none other than that venerated historian, Stephen Ambrose? At last count he has used unattributed quotations in four of his more than 20 books?

One of the authors from whom Ambrose borrowed – history professor Thomas Childers of the University of Pennsylvania – seems unimpressed by Ambrose' claim that he is guilty – not of plagiarism - but of sloppiness in failing to use quotation marks.

“I can't conceive of that,” the New York Times quotes Dr. Childers as saying. “It doesn't take so much effort. Find the words. Write it yourself.”

And yet Professor Childers says he will continue using Ambrose' books in his class, demonstrating once again that honor can be and generally is relative, once you get east of Buenie and north of Raphine.

And that brings me- almost reluctantly – to the strange and perplexing cheating scandal that has hit the

University of Virginia. Strange and perplexing because it involves not the old fashioned kind of cheating on exams – like cribbing from the next guy – when what you did was very personal, very deliberate, very invasive and was, in fact, stealing.

The Charlottesville scandal turns on quite a different question. A 21st Century question of technology: If you and hundreds of others use what's on the Internet and you're paying AOL 20 bucks a month to get at it, then exactly from whom are you stealing?

One hundred forty-eight students students were accused last Spring of using the World Wide Web to cheat on their physics term papers.

But hitting “cut, copy and paste”, with no one watching at this end or that, is so impersonal, detached, cold and antiseptic that it may not seem like cheating.

But it is. Copying is copying and cheating is cheating; and as Professor Robert Boynton of NYU has written, “All the technology in the world won't change that.”

Ideas, he says, seem to be “little more than disembodied entities ‘out there’ in the ether available to be appropriated electronically in any way the users wish.”

For Virginia’s 21 members of its Honor Committee, the task must be overwhelming as they struggle with exactly what constitutes honorable behavior in our brave new high tech world.

But there are moments that give us hope that honor and civility and integrity, particularly since September 11th, can sometimes be absolute.

Close to home, I heard a marvelous story recently about a woman who knew something about honor herself, in addition to being the widow, mother and brother-in-law of Washington & Lee men.

She had driven out in the country west of Richmond to buy a small Christmas tree and she found just what she wanted. But there was not a soul on the lot and there were no prices on the trees. She looked and looked but could find no one. But she had to have that tree because it was so perfect for her home. So she left a note and took the tree. A few days

later she drove back to the lot and this time there was young man on duty. She told him she was the one who had left the note and she had come to pay. How much was her tree, she asked.

“You came back,” he said. “That’s enough.”

So there is no question in my mind that the men and women of this university will continue to take with them a fine sense of honor, the willingness to ask the tough questions, the ability to see clearly and quickly what is a fair, decent and generous and the courage to persevere.

It will not always be easy and frequently you will alone in a society which spends millions to mislead the voter, the consumer, the viewer, the reader and the jury.

But you must and, in my heart, I know you will always drive back to pay for your Christmas tree.

Finally, may I say a word or two about the Institute of Honor and may I offer my congratulations to the Class of 1960 for a gift unique in this university’s history?

The Institute should not exist simply to make Washington and Lee famous or to proselytize about its glories.

Washington and Lee has no more calling to impose its special honor system on other colleges any more than the United States has the right to force its special system of democracy on other countries.

But the Institute does have an opportunity, like no other, to demonstrate by example.

Demonstrating by example is a welcome burden we carry and we've carried it for more than 250 years – through nine generations, through 11 wars, through 6 depressions and 4 recessions.

If your alma mater, your friend, your companion, your shaper and your molder, hopes you learned one thing it is that an ethical life, an honorable life can also be a liberating life.

But remember what Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote:
“The louder he talked of his honor, the faster we counted the spoons.”

