

# Chalkboard

By

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As I have done for the last several years, I offer my graduation address as one of the school year's final Chalkboards. If I had to give it a title it would be – "You can change the past!"

To the parents, relatives, friends, and school staff that have assembled here tonight to honor this 2004 graduating class, I offer my sincerest congratulations. Truly this is a fine group of young men and women that sit before you tonight. You have every right to be proud of their and your accomplishment. On the other side of that coin, I say to you, seniors, that you have every right to be proud of you parents. You may never know the sacrifices that were made by them in order for you to sit here tonight.

Seniors, I am not sure what you want to hear from me tonight. I suspect that you expect to hear thoughts about you going to college or going to a trade school, or joining the Marines, or going to work, You might very well be disappointed if I did not spend some time telling you how proud all of us here tonight are of you. Maybe you want to hear inspiring words about how you can change the world?

All of those are important issues. Most of those topics have found their way into remarks I have made to seniors for the last eleven years.

But tonight I would rather talk to you about changing the past. No, you did not hear me wrong. I did not say changing the future. I said changing the past.

But first, I want you to think how many different answers you have given in the last 16 or so years to this question- "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

It may be hard but try to think back to when you were five years old. If you went to kindergarten, that would have been about the age of 5. Life was probably mostly fun. There were so many new things to learn. There was so much time to play and laugh. It was a time to make friends, have friends, and be a friend.

You probably never worried too much about anything because someone was watching over you. You did not have to concern yourself with what you would eat, what you would wear, or even what time you would go to bed. It was a time of few responsibilities.

At age five I suspect that if you thought at all about the future, the future was only five minutes away. If someone asked you “What do you want to be when you grow up?” the answers might have been what 12 mothers I asked said their child wanted to be- a Dallas Cowboy football player, or a cheerleader, a teacher, a coach, an ice skater, an automotive engineer, a preacher, a church “song leader”, a Marsha Sites Sunday School Teacher, a fireman, an astronomer, or a beautician.

Now some 13 years later if I asked you what you plan to be, the answers would probably be different. Actually I did ask some of you and the answers are almost all different. It really comes as no surprise to me that most of you I asked really were not sure what you want to do for a life profession.

Here is my point. I want you to hear it well. You can change your past. But you can only change your past by the decisions you make or do not make while living in the present.

Did you understand that thought? Let me tell it to you another way. Some people tell you that you need to prepare for the future. I think they are wrong. You are not ever going to make it to the future. You cannot because the future is something that has not yet happened. Life happens in the here and now, not tomorrow.

I say to you that you need to be preparing for your past. I say that because while you are never going to live in the future, you are going to have a past. For that matter, you already do. Whatever you have done with your life to this point is in the record books. It’s official. There is absolutely no changing what happened between your first breath and now...no, now...no, now....okay, you get the idea. What once was future, quickly becomes the present, and rapidly becomes the past. One more time- you will change the past by the decisions you make today.

I have one more homework assignment for you. Like everything else you did in school, some will find it easy to do, some will not. It is two questions I want you to ask your parents, or grandparents, or somebody you admire who is at least 32 years older than you.

The first question is, “If you could go back into your past to the age I am now, what would you do differently?” If they say, “Nothing” then keep on asking them until they tell you the truth. If they are honest with you, you may be surprised. You may learn something about the people who love you that you never knew.

Here are some of the answers you may hear. I would wait longer to get married. I would not have got into a serious relationship so soon after high school. I would stay in school. I would go to college. I would go to

work with Company X instead of Company Y. I would put some money aside every month for my own children to go to college. I would not party so much. I would party more. I would have listened when my parents and other people tried to tell me things. I would have gone to church. I would have never started drinking, or smoking, or “toking”, or whatever. I would not have been “easy”. I would have worked harder sooner.”

When they get through talking to you, then I want you to ask them the second question. “Would you really want to go back and change your past?” I will predict that many will say to you, “Only if I can take back with me what I know now!”

Seniors of 2004, here is the good news. You can know now what they wish they could take back with them to your age. All the things they would like to have done different, you can do different. For that matter, all the things they did right the first time you can choose to follow that example. Your past belongs to you and to you alone.

Good or bad, the persons you asked the questions cannot change what has happened in their lives up to the age they are now. But you can change what your past will look like when you are their age. But you have to do it in the here and now not the someday and maybe.

This summer I will celebrate my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. That seems impossible to me. It seems almost like I should be sitting down there in one of those chairs with you. But I am not. The last fifty years of my life, the things that I have done and the things that I have not, are unchangeable.

Someday, if God wills, you too will be fifty years old. Thirty-two years or so from now you will look back at your past and think of the things you did or did not do. The things that will make up your past record are still to be decided by you now in the present. Maybe not tonight, but soon you need to be forming a mental picture of what you want your past to look like when you are fifty (50) years old.

The future belongs to no person but your past belongs to you.

Understand this—today is yesterday’s tomorrow but it is also tomorrow’s past.

May God bless each decision that you make and may your past be as bright as your future.