

## 2000 Presidential Address

# WHAT MATTERS MOST

DAVID A. WHETTEN  
Brigham Young University

In the process of preparing this talk, I gained a new appreciation for Samuel Johnson's observation "There is nothing that focuses the mind like being hanged in a fortnight." I want to express appreciation to my dear friends and colleagues Kim Cameron and Bob Quinn for helping me understand yesterday at breakfast why this podium has appeared so gallows-like in my mind for much longer than a fortnight. With their wise, gentle, but persistent probing, they pulled from me an admission of fear. The prospect of speaking to my colleagues was not intimidating, but the unresolved tension within me between what I wanted to say and what I was terrified of expressing had a death grip on my thinking and my feelings. Although I had already prepared several different presidential messages, Kim and Bob helped me understand that I was using the pretense of crafting a better expression from my head as an excuse for ignoring what I wanted to say from my heart.

My association with Kim and Bob has spanned three decades. As master's students in the sociology department at Brigham Young University, we shared a common teaching assistantship. Our supervising professor had an owl-like visage that seemed highly appropriate for a man of profound

wisdom. At the beginning of the semester, it was our lot as TAs to handle the myriad complaints from students about the professor's teaching objectives. You see, as we had learned from others in the department, there was a high negative correlation between the age of this particular professor and the amount of canonized sociological content he taught in his courses. By the time we came on the scene, he was near retirement and much more interested in sharing with his students sound, enduring principles for creating effective relationships—within families, formal organizations, and even communities—than in teaching them the reigning sociological pronouncements on these matters.

My response to the disgruntled students was something like this: "You must decide how important it is to you to learn the content of this course as it was described in the catalogue. If you need this information so you can be prepared for upper division classes or graduate school, then I suggest you switch to another section of the course. However, if you are willing to release your professor from his obligation to teach you the discipline of sociology and, instead, allow him to teach you what he believes matters most, this class could change your life."

Today I would like to make a similar request: that you release me from the obligation of speaking to you as your president so that I can share with you some of the things that have changed my life.

To begin, I wish to acknowledge that Kim and Bob have been a large part of not only what I have to say today but what I have said in academic settings for the past thirty years. But more important, they account for an even larger part of who I am today as a person. Indeed, I wish to use our thirty-year relationship as a model for the kind of associations among professionals that I hope become more common within this professional association.

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Members who attended the 1998 Academy of Management meeting in San Diego may recognize this as the theme I selected as program chair. In my introduction of the theme in the conference program notes, I referred to a conversation I had with Lou Pondy, my mentor at the University of Illinois. After reflecting on my complaint that no matter what teaching method I used I was not succeeding as a teacher, he said, "You will warrant the title 'professor' when you discover what you are willing to profess." Building on the notion that this provocative advice to a young professor seems equally appropriate for a young profession, I continued, "What matters most is that we come together to discover what we are willing to profess." I view my presidential remarks as a personal response to the charge I issued to the Academy as program chair, as well as a tribute to my deceased mentor, Lou, who gently prodded me to speak from my heart.

The modern terminology for describing social intercourse among academics includes words like colleague and college, which are formed from the Latin root *col*, meaning "together," as reflected in the Latin word *collegium*, meaning "a fellowship." These terms suggest that the business of academe is best accomplished when it is encompassed within a social fabric characterized by open, honest, and trusting relationships. Although some might argue that "compassionate intellectual" is an oxymoron, it has been my experience that rigorous reasoning is best accomplished among academics-as-colleagues, whose interest in one another extends beyond "picking brains" and testing wits.

My understanding of this subject was enriched by a novel experience Saturday night, when Anne Huff; my wife, Zina; and I had dinner with members of the "PhD Project." As many of you probably know, this is a group of about 100 students and supporting faculty who are predominantly African-American. This support group is the result of the vision and commitment of a senior KPMG partner, Bernie Milano.

After being extended the traditional gracious academic greeting normally offered to senior members of the profession—something like "I read your article on such and such"—Zina and I found ourselves quickly drawn into conversations about children, extended families, summer vacations, hobbies, and former jobs.

Following dinner, the group "hooded" twenty-two members who had received their doctorates this year. Many said this was a more meaningful graduation ceremony than the one they had just completed at their respective universities, because it included their academic support group. After this activity, the student introducing the guest speaker fainted. She was attended to by EMT personnel and taken from the room; the elected president of the group, Jeff, then came back and gave the following report: "Pat is fine. She is speaking, she is coherent, and she doesn't want us to worry. They've taken her to a hospital nearby, but I'm not going to tell you which one, because I know you'll all want to go there as soon as the dinner is over, and they can't accommodate a group this size. I will call the hospital regularly, and you can call my room for updates. Either myself, or my roommate, Greg, will be there to take your calls." (Incidentally, Pat is fine, and yesterday she chaired a conference session.)

Later that evening, as I reflected on this experience, I thought how ironic it was that this group of academics, who feel marginalized and who are striving so hard to become integrated into the mainstream of their profession, has actually created a model professional association. I saw in that setting the kind of relationships longed for by many established members of this profession.

The holistic form of social intercourse I observed Saturday night brings to mind something I learned from my wife many years ago. While living in Urbana, Illinois, Zina taught disability awareness in the local schools. Her teaching objective is captured nicely in the notion "If you know one blind person, you know one blind person," meaning the experience of every blind person is different, because each is a different person.

As part of a program called "Kids on the Block," Zina used life-size puppets to help elementary school children view their disabled schoolmates as whole persons. One of her favorite puppet characters, Mark, had cerebral palsy and was in a wheelchair. He introduced himself by saying, "Hi, I'm Mark, and I have a birth defect that makes it difficult for me to do some things. But there is more for you to know about me than the fact that I can't walk." He then proceeded to describe his interests, his hobbies, his dreams, and his worries. Before long, the audience was laughing *with* Mark and not *at* Mark. The timeless message those elementary school kids learned from Mark is that we dehumanize our relationships when we restrict our awareness of others to a single characteristic, attribute, or role.

Admittedly, our primary purpose for traveling to Toronto was not to attend a convention for parents or gardeners or mountain climbers, or to participate in a support group for grandparents of newborns with birth defects, or of sons and daughters who have recently buried their parents, or of individuals whose spouses or significant others are dying of cancer. Yet, these are but a few of the facets of the human condition present in this room today.

I remember hearing a colleague describe his highly enjoyable and productive professional relationship with a colleague as "nonredundant." By this he meant that what they did together and what they shared with each other went beyond the typical, common forms of professional discourse and association. These two colleagues had chosen to move beyond a one-dimensional view of each other—to not be satis-

fied with a superficial professional relationship, circumscribed by the typical identifiers of name, rank, and university affiliation. In brief, it's as if they were saying to each other, "Hi, my name is Mark, and I'm an academic, but don't hold that against me. There's more to my life that I think you'll find interesting and important."

All the examples of professional relationships I've highlighted today share at least two things. First, the participants released one another from the obligation of acting within a particular role or acting out a single characteristic that constrained them from sharing their struggles and their successes—the messy stuff that characterizes holistic associations, the kind that are wonderfully nonredundant. Second, these relationships were characterized by mutual trust, including appropriate expressions of support and intimacy.

Intuitively, we understand that the gift of trust involves the choice of forbearance. We trust others because we believe they won't take advantage of us. They won't use their understanding of our vulnerabilities to embarrass or to denigrate or subordinate. The reciprocal of the gift of trust is the gift of disclosure. By exposing more of ourselves to others, we give them the opportunity to become trustworthy. Unfortunately, most professional relationships are so burdened by the complications of presumed competence and confidence—and the accompanying implications for power and status—that the level of disclosure required to establish norms of trust is seldom reached. Studies of organizational transformation show that in order for norms to change, they must be broken by those who have the most to lose from the resulting social instability. Paradoxically, these individuals are often those in positions of power and high status.

This brings us to the admission of fear that Kim and Bob had to pull out of me. I was not afraid of speaking to a large group; I do that for a living. The reason I kept writing new drafts of my presidential address, each of which looked remarkably like the others, was that I was terrified of breaking our professional norms governing scholarly discourse. I wanted to speak from my heart—to address the experience of Academy members who consider themselves to be marginal members because they feel so removed from the experience of the successful—but I was concerned that this might appear self-serving or disingenuous and feared that some would be disturbed by such an uncharacteristic presidential address. So, you can either thank or

blame Kim and Bob for what is to follow, because without the encouragement of these trusted colleagues, I would not have had the courage to be so personal in this setting.

Let me begin here by telling you a story. Soon after I was elected an Academy officer, I was visiting with a master's student at Brigham Young University who was leaving to enter a doctoral program at a leading university. He had taken a class from me and had served as my research assistant for a year, so we had developed a close professional relationship. Toward the end of our conversation, as he rose to leave, he turned and made the following astonishing observation: "I wish there were some basis for hoping that in thirty years I would be as successful as you. All I see behind you is success, and all I see in front of me is struggle." In response, I invited him to sit down and listen to "the rest of the story." I felt it was important to share with him the personal and professional struggles that were at least as typical of my life as the successes he presently admired. Absent a more complete understanding of the relationship between struggle and success, I feared he might become discouraged and give up when he encountered a rough patch in his life's journey, thinking that because he was struggling, he would never be successful.

Following are some of the highlights of that conversation. At the conclusion of my first year as a doctoral student at Cornell, I did poorly on a comprehensive exam. I'm grateful to my advisor, Howard Aldrich, for giving me a second chance, although he had no empirical support for such an action. During my last semester at Cornell, my wife died unexpectedly. As a single parent, with no extended family in the area and in the process of interviewing for jobs, I decided to send my two children to live with my parents, not knowing when or how my family unit would be restored.

A few months later I felt extremely fortunate to be hired by the University of Illinois. Unfortunately, I made the mistake of telling my professional associates that I had been hired to replace Jeff Pfeffer. I soon realized how inappropriate it was to compare myself with a highly productive scholar. While the two other new hires in organizational behavior churned out article after article from their lab studies, I was lost in an impenetrable forest of my own making; although I had succeeded in collecting the largest data set on interorganizational relationships for my dissertation, I had failed to figure out how to combine my theo-

retical questions with my empirical findings in an article-length format. It was three agonizingly long years before I received my first acceptance from a major journal. As an aside, based on the empirical data I collected during three cycles of reporting "0" publications on my annual productivity report, I am convinced that, despite what the mathematicians might claim, the distance between "0" and "1" is greater than between any other two numbers.

I remember how difficult it was to attend professional conferences during that time, feeling as though others viewed me as a fizzled rising star. And although I'd like to report that while I was off to a slow start as a researcher the students loved me in the classroom, I was equally clueless about how to teach organizational sociology to undergraduate business students.

But things turned around. I finally arrived at a much longed for, long-overdue deflection point in my downward trend. I learned how to consistently publish in our top journals, and my teaching ratings steadily improved. Along the way I was supported by many wonderful colleagues and friends. My struggles allowed them the opportunity to show their humanity, and this cemented our professional associations on the foundation of truly human relationships.

Please don't misunderstand the intent of my personal disclosure today. My point is not to make my professional accomplishments appear heroic, nor do I assume that my challenges and struggles are comparable to others. But I do hope that those of you who are feeling discouraged because you weren't drafted by your favorite university, or because you have just struck out in a particular inning of your career, will not take yourself out of the game of scholarship because of the misconception that those you consider successful are strangers to profound struggle.

I am, by nature, what my wife would graciously refer to as a "tender-hearted" person. So, I tend to be rather emotional. But I have even surprised myself at how often my voice has quivered the past few days as I have welcomed new Academy members, given Anne Huff her plaque as the former president, and conducted my last Board of Governors meeting. This morning, as I reflected on this pattern, I realized it stems from a profound disbelief during the first decade of my career that I would ever amount to anything professionally. I truly hope that my presence here today will serve as a lasting source of inspiration to those who feel

discouraged, who wonder if hard times will be tempered, and, most of all, who might believe that success comes without struggle.

In conclusion, I'd like to return to the title of my talk. What I believe matters most to the future of this organization is predicated on our willingness as individual members to share with one another what truly matters most to us as complicated, complex, sometimes internally inconsistent, but always aspiring to be better, human beings. Specifically, I believe that one measure of our success as an organization is our ability to continually spawn collegial relations like the one I've shared with Kim and Bob and expressions of support like those I observed among members of the PhD Project this weekend.

This is not an easy path. I expect that the Academy of Management will continue to grow and that our large size will continue to prompt complaints about the impersonal nature of the sociality among members, especially during our annual conference. If we let nature take its course, so to speak, I am troubled by the prospect that those who are new to our field, or who bring different academic interests or training, or who are venturing out on the professional stage for the first time, might leave their encounters with us feeling socially unconnected and professionally unfulfilled. Fortunately, members of our profession have identified numerous remedies for the harmful consequences of large organizational size on social relations. Hence, I invite all those who have influence over organizing decisions within the Academy to act in accordance with our best understanding of how to build social processes that foster interpersonal intimacy as an anecdote for organizational anomie.

But to only treat this as an intriguing, difficult organizational challenge would be inconsistent with the tone and intent of my remarks. Ultimately, the quality of our collective experience in this professional association is based on how fulfilled we feel in our individual associations among fellow professionals. To that end, I believe that along with expecting rigorous reasoning from one another, we should also offer one another unconditional, positive regard and acceptance, one conversation at a time, one encounter at a time, one relationship at a time. In this manner, each of us can contribute to building, from the bottom up, an academic professional association that reflects the truest expression of *collegium*—a fellowship among colleagues.