

A Responsibility to the Future, To Others, and to Self

by
Governor Olene S. Walker

*LDS Business College Forum
September 29, 2004*

What a pleasure it is for me to be here today and spend a few moments talking to you about issues I feel are important.

It has been a remarkable experience being governor of the state of Utah. I'm very honored to serve as governor. I had the opportunity just last year of stepping in when Governor Leavitt left. Probably the transition was easier than any other change of government because for ten and half years we've worked very closely together. Some said, "Well, you were all of a sudden asked to prepare the budget for the last legislative session." If the truth be known, for the preceding four or five years, I've done all the budget hearings because there wasn't any money available during the economic turndown. And so Governor Leavitt just said, "Olene, why don't you do all the budget hearings." In many areas it was easy to step in being governor.

I had to make a decision at that time of whether I was going to be a caretaker governor and just get by with a minimum of effort, or whether I had an obligation as the first female governor of the state of Utah to put forth some initiatives that could be accomplished, or at least put in place in the 14 months I knew I would be governor. It became very obvious that for the future of Utah I needed to step in and make a difference. So I began the process of putting forth initiatives.

I think that you are in a process of making determinations of what you want to be in the future. Do you want to get through life just as a caretaker, doing the minimum but getting by, or do you want to step up and look at issues, look at problems, look at people you could help and then put forth the effort to make it happen. You know, often it is easy to slide by and do the minimum of effort. Certainly in your classes you're taking opportunities, but in life it is very true that you can meet situations where people are in great need and you can say let someone else help them, I have other things to do, or you can get in and solve problems. We live in a democracy

Probably some of you have heard me tell this before, but it is such a good example. I often visit schools. I happened to be in an elementary school and because I was then lieutenant governor and I was over elections, I was talking about elections and democracy. I asked, "What does democracy mean?" One young boy just blurted out, "It means the people rule so everybody's got to do something."

I don't know that there's a better definition in any textbook than that. I happened to major in political science, and then at Stanford got a masters in political theory, and I've never heard a better definition than that. And I think that it talks about life in general.

We live in a democracy and as I've traveled the world, I know of no other country that has the opportunity of becoming whatever you want to be than we have here in his country. But it's based on the fact that every single one of you has a basic responsibility to your neighborhood...well, let's start with your family. Make that family a better

operating family because you're a member of it. It starts with your neighborhood: no matter where you live you have the obligation to make your neighborhood a little better because you are part of that neighborhood. Then extend it to cities, towns, counties, states, and country. And certainly, if everyone met that obligation, all neighborhoods would be more desirable to live in, all cities and towns would have better government, as well as state and national.

That basic obligation is what makes government great. We in Utah are very fortunate because we have a higher percentage of people volunteering than any other state. I don't know if there's anyone here from Tennessee. It's called the "Volunteer State," but I think they nabbed that term before Utah could get it, because in every survey we lead the nation in number of people volunteering. In one survey it was as high as 80% but I think that was a little warped because you could count church service—if you taught a class or had any responsibility—no wonder we got 80%. But in another survey, that was not included, and we still ranked high with 43% of people volunteering every month.

That's what makes Utah great. That's what made our Olympics great. You can talk all you want about the great venues, and they are great. You can talk about the great security we had and that was great. They organized and had better security. But the thing the press internationally noted was volunteerism: people were willing to step up and make a difference. But that wasn't all that was unique. I happened to meet the Queen of Sweden, and she said, "At first I thought you had done a remarkable job of training your volunteers, but then I went shopping and no one knew who I was, and the people were still kind, caring and willing to help."

I thought, "Yes, Yes!" I worked in the convention tourism efforts for a long time and that's a remarkable thing we always hear, that people are friendly, willing to help. And the very nature of making our state great is one of its greatest attributes.

It was driven home again to me when the Chinese delegation came when I was still lieutenant governor and working on the Chinese Olympics, which is still in the future. The governor wasn't there and so I had the privilege of meeting with them. The first question they said was, "Tell us about volunteers. Did you order it?"

I proceeded to tell them about volunteers in our country, of how we have volunteers to help cure diseases, like heart and lung disease and diabetes and Alzheimer's, and how we have volunteers in our school helping students read. We have volunteers that clean up neighborhoods, and that work in a lot of service organizations. He said, "I think it would be easier to order it."

You know, that's really what makes our country great. The people are willing to care about each other. And I'm hoping not only because we live in a democracy and you have that obligation. I hope that in your lives you are recognizing, along with successes you might have, that service to others will probably bring you greater pleasure and greater rewards than either power or money. I've often told people who come to visit me with problems that seem overwhelming, the best thing I can recommend is go find someone worse off than you are and offer to help them.

I think that in your lives, if you are looking at career priorities, to really be successful you have to remember this basic thing: that service to others will bring far greater happiness than either power or money. I think there are some other things that are important.

I think, as you are choosing careers or patterns, of the old adage that Robert Frost put so well that two roads diverged in the yellow wood, and I took the one less traveled, and that has made all the difference. It isn't that you always want to avoid the roads traveled, but you always want to be on a road where you're comfortable with your decision, and what you might call integrity.

Living in the world of politics, I find the one thing that still makes the difference between a politician and a statesman is integrity. What is integrity? It has many definitions, many words, many connotations. It is that you are what you say you are and that your word can be trusted. I don't know of any better definition than that. You don't pretend to be someone you're not. You don't pretend to produce something you didn't. You don't write resumes that are not exactly true. You don't make statements that you have to remember the next day and the next day after that and the day after that because you tell a different story every day. It is living a life that you can have exposed to the front page headlines and feel comfortable about. It's being true to those around you. It is being true to your beliefs. It is being true to your values, and that isn't always easy to do.

In my life I can look back at the times I've remained silent when I should have spoken. There are times when I've seen situations that I should have righted, but it was easier to let go. The times I like to remember are when I've seen wrongs and I've been willing to step up and do something about them. It is when I have spoken up about a situation that I worked out that I should have spoken about it. It is times when I've befriended those that are least "befrienable." Does that make sense? Sometimes you have individuals who need help who you need to reach out to, that you can make a difference in their lives. Sometimes those situations are easy to ignore. But if you look back on your life, the ones you will remember are when you took the time to help someone less fortunate than you.

Everyone fortunately is different, and everyone sees a different road, a different path, a different way to serve. Most all of them are valid. But I find more and more the countries around the world that are succeeding and evolving and are at the forefront of having strong economies are those that develop a strong middle class, and there is hope for those below the poverty level to always move upward. When I visit countries (and I've had the good fortune of visiting many) that have the few rich and powerful and many, many in poverty and very little middle class, there's a heaviness of heart because I recognize that's the wrong direction to go. We as a society have to expand our views beyond Salt Lake City, beyond Utah, beyond the United States, and care about what's happening in Haiti, what's happening Africa countries, what's happening in Indonesia, what's happening around the world, and not only in the military or political sense.

I think something that is great about our Church that many of you believe in and I, is not just spiritual, it's humanitarian. I think as long as we keep that humanitarian aspect and reach out and are willing to serve, to share what we have with others, we will remain strong. But once we become content to say, let others get by on their own, then we will lose that greatness. That doesn't start with leaders at the top. It doesn't start with the governor, it starts with individuals like you sitting here, making determinations to travel, perhaps, that less-traveled road to get where you want to go, with an awareness that you have the obligation along that road to always be serving others.

I did visit Haiti and it made a lasting impression on me. I happened to head up a team, I believe in '96, to go down and be an oversight committee along with two

congressional people and one reporter from both *The New Times* and *The New York Post*. We arrived there to observe their elections. Immediately we knew there were problems. We had been asked to meet with all the ones running for president, and six of the eight called and said they could not be there because they had been threatened with their lives if they attended. We visited 104 polling places and we saw less than 4% of the people voting. I asked why and they said “It doesn’t do any good. All government is corrupt.”

I went into a building that I would have guessed was a deserted building. I can’t really describe it because you won’t believe me. There were steps missing. There were huge holes in the roof and floor, and not one window. And I said, “Why would you hold polling places in such a building? A deserted building?”

The Haitian that was with me said, “This isn’t deserted; it’s our school. And I said, “What parent would send a child here?” He said, “Listen, 65 percent of the parents in Haiti would give anything if they could afford to pay the seven dollars a month it takes to send a child here. And because they can’t afford it, that’s why we have 65 percent illiteracy.”

Now I wish I could have had my children, my grandchildren, and all of you in that situation, because I learned a great lesson. We have advantages, you have advantages which put a greater obligation on you. I guess it’s the old adage that where much is given, much is expected. It gave me a great sense of obligation to make certain government works for the benefit of people. Unless you, as you’re young, are willing to step up and assume roles within the leadership not only of the church, but leadership in your counties, in your cities, on library boards, on mosquito abatement boards, whether you’re willing to step up and run for office, run for legislature, city councils, school boards, if we are not willing to step up and do those things, then we cannot make democracy work. And elections become a farce, as they were in Haiti.

As we’ve looked at what’s happening now, it’s with heavy heart that I determine things have gotten worse, not better. But if we don’t step up and assume those obligations to do the best we can to provide public service in those realms, democracy won’t succeed. Too often we assume that it’s someone else’s responsibility and obligation: “Let someone else do it.”

In Utah, years ago, people 18 to 21 felt they were deprived because they didn’t have the vote. The vote was given, and guess what? Below 20 percent in Utah of the 18 to 25 years old vote. Less than 20 percent. Now I don’t claim that as a criteria of being negative, but it’s an indication that maybe we’re not doing sufficiently—those that are a little older—of giving to you who are in that age group the important obligations of democracy.

Now, voting is the easiest thing you can do. Getting involved in campaigns, making sure you have the right candidate, being willing to serve on committees, and actually running for offices, that’s more difficult. But the future is going to be yours and whether that democracy continues to thrive, whether we in Utah continue to get awards for being the best governed state, whether we’re fiscally sound, and whether we have the right principles and values in our legislation and the laws we live by will soon be your obligation and responsibility. You will have that obligation in the relatively near future and so I hope that each one of you will take very seriously your obligation to serve, to commit to principles that will make our state and our country strong.

A final thing I think is very important as you make decisions is try to find work in an occupation you enjoy. I love going to work every day. I know the whole world can't have this opportunity. All my children are married now, and some of them love their work, some of them tolerate, and for some of them, going to work every day is a chore.

I hope each one of you can find some career or, if not, some avocation that you can get excited about every day, because that's really what makes life worthwhile. You are probably searching for where you are going as you go through your education. I hope each one of you can find joy in service. Now it isn't always being top CEO or the getting on an NBA team that brings that joy. One of the happiest individuals I've ever known was a postman who felt he was doing a service, as he was, in bringing mail to everyone with a smile. So find something you really enjoy, and if that isn't possible, then find something in your off times that you really enjoy. I'm reminded of an ad—I believe it was a BMW ad—that showed a car going by and it said, "If life is a journey, make sure you enjoy the ride." I think that's very applicable.

I'm probably nearing the end of my career. However, I have to let you know I've had four or five really good job offers. I think, "What are they thinking, offering a 73-year-old woman a job?" But the truth of the matter is, I enjoy going to work every day.

If you can love your work, if you can feel reward from your work, life is far better. But if you don't find it in work, find it in service, find it in other things, because life can either be very burdensome, a trial where you get up every day hating to do what you have to do that day, or you can get up thinking, "Today's another exciting event and I will have opportunities to help people along the way and have some exciting times.

In a way I envy all of you starting out perhaps in new careers or adding to your capabilities by going to school and bettering your education. I think all of you have been very wise in choosing to do that. I hope you have a rich and rewarding career ahead of you. I hope that all of you can look back and reflect that the trip has been an enjoyable ride. I'm not ready to say that of my life yet, because I feel I've got thirty more good years ahead.

I think there's certain value in always looking ahead and not back. As I finish being governor, I look ahead to many opportunities I have to spend more time working on projects I enjoy. I hope I always have the ability to find something exciting, waiting to be done, some effort that needs to be expanded, some work for the future. I spent a good hour and a half this morning working on something that probably most of you would think is very boring. It's looking on the future of developing transmission lines for electricity and energy, not only in the state of Utah. We belong to partnerships with states around us. As I sat there, I thought, none of this is going to happen while I'm governor. But the prospect in 10 or 20 years is that they'll look back and say, "Aren't we glad that we did something about it," or "They did something about it at that time." The whole idea started with one individual emailing the governor of Wyoming with an idea to share future development of transmission lines. The governor of Wyoming got excited about it, got Governor Leavitt excited about it, other states have joined, and good things will happen in the future of the whole region because one person was willing to share a good idea. So don't sit back when you have good ideas. Share them. Make things happen. Make the road easier for those that follow.

I have certainly enjoyed being with you. I enjoy the fact that so many of you will go out and do remarkable things in your lives. I hope you always have a responsibility to

the future, to others, and to yourself. We are those that have been very blessed. We have a real obligation to ensure those blessings continue, if not increase. We have a responsibility to make certain others have the opportunities that we have. Thank you for allowing me to be here today.