

Sen. Jean Carnahan

Commencement Address
University of Missouri-St. Louis
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Thank you for that fine introduction and for the chance to be on campus, which I always enjoy.

When Dean Womer asked me to speak today, he said I only had to do three things: Show up on time; put on a robe, and give a speech of no more than ten minutes. So far, I've done the first two admirably well. Now it remains to be seen if I can do the latter.

They say the formula for a speech is a joke, three points, and a poem. I know you will be saddened today to learn that I have only one point. But it's such an important one, I don't want to crowd it out with anything else. I want you to remember it, to treasure it, like you would a golden nugget and to act on it in the coming weeks.

Some years ago, I read a book entitled "Built to Last." In the book, the writers—Jim Collins and Jerry Porras—made this claim: "All successful businesses and all successful people have one thing in common: they have a B-HAG. It's an acronym for Big, Hairy, Audacious Goal.

A B-HAG is always bold, clear, and compelling. It's energizing. It requires extreme effort. B-HAGs cannot be achieved by continuing to do what we did last year and the year before. We're forced to think differently, to work differently, to study differently. To break away from the past.

One of my favorite companies is Starbucks. Some years ago Starbucks created a B-HAG. Here's what they came up with: "To be one of the most well-known and respected organizations in the world known for nurturing and inspiring the human spirit." *They sell coffee, for heaven's sake!*

But sure enough, they created thousands of stores in fifty countries and became one of the best-known and respected companies in the world, not by accident, but by design.

Listen to what Amazon, the online book seller came up with: “Every book, ever printed, in any language, all available in less than sixty seconds.”

Twitter is even more outrageous. Their goal is to become the “pulse of the planet.”

One of the most audacious goals in all of world history was uttered in 1961 by President John F. Kennedy. He said, we will put a man on the moon and bring him back by the end of the decade. At the time, it was technologically impossible, but in 1969, we did it.

B-HAGs are not just for countries and companies, they are for people like you and I. Truth be known, we all have a B-HAG, or two, floating around inside us. We used to call such thoughts impossible dreams or sometimes just sheer foolishness.

I have a collection of Don Quixote figures. As you recall, he was the fictional character, who inspired the song that goes:

To dream the impossible dream,
To fight the unbeatable foe,
To bear with unbearable sorrow,
And to run where the brave dare not go.”

But Don Quixote was a foolish, old man, who wrapped himself in a suit of dented armor, put a metal bowl on his head, mounted a bony, old horse and set forth to right the wrongs in the world. He didn’t succeed and people laughed at him for the attempt, but he gave hope and help to a number of people along the way. He changed lives and situations.

Those who take on such incredible tasks can relate to a teaching of the ancient rabbis. It’s called “tikkun olam” and it means “repairing the world,” that is, taking responsibility for correcting the damage done by people to each other and to the planet. It is the idea that we should leave the earth a little better and brighter for our having been here. What a worthy goal for anyone! As graduates of UMSL, you have acquired the knowledge and skills and, hopefully, the desire to perform some of those repairs.

Looking back on my own life, I realize I had a kinship with Don Quixote. I, too, had an audacious goal. Ever since I read my first book, I wanted to write a book. I remember when I first got up the nerve to tell my mother I wanted to be a writer. She told me that writing was an “idle pursuit with little hope of return,”

and she was right, but I kept on writing. It would be more than a half century later before I would publish my first book.

My goal didn't sound nearly as audacious as the one I heard when I was fifteen and dating a boy in our high school who was also fifteen. On our second date he told me he intended to marry me and run for Congress someday. I laughed. That was the most ridiculous thing I had ever heard. I had second thoughts about going out on another date with him. But five years later, we were walking down the aisle in the same church in which we met. It would be a half century later before he ran for Congress, but he never gave up on that dream. That might explain why, in the year 2000, when he was elected to the U.S. Senate following the plane crash, I felt it important to go to Washington in his place.

It was an incredible two years that included the 911 attack, a decision to go to war, the Enron scandal, and an anthrax attack on the Capitol. During that troubled and uncertain time for both me and for our nation, I often thought of the words of the slave woman Harriet Tubman. She would turn to the frightened slaves, she was leading to freedom and say;

If you're scared, keep going;
If you're hungry, keep going;
If you're tired, keep going;
If you want to taste freedom, keep going.

"To keep going," despite everything, became my goal—my mantra. But after retiring, I realized I no longer had an audacious goal to propel me into my advancing years. I thought: "I'm 78 years old, why do I need a Big, Hairy Audacious Goal?" But I couldn't resist, so I came up with one. My current B-HAG is even more ambitious than book writing or my struggle to keep going in difficult times.

Here it is:

"To do all the good I can;
Whenever I can;
For as many as I can;
For as long as I can
... and never get caught!"

Am I able to do all that? Not entirely. But I take some consolation from an old saying: "Aim for the moon. You may not make it, but at least you'll fall among the stars."

B-HAGs are more than just words. They have the power to inspire and to lift the spirit. When we can define a goal and express resolve, we energize each other and we are able to do things we never thought possible.

I hope this week you will give some thought to coming up with a B-HAG, or two, and that you find ways to help others, who are working on some audacious goals of their own.

Let me end with one of those poems, that I earlier said you often find at the end of a speech. I use this particular one mainly because I need to hear it from time to time.

It's entitled: "Anyway"

People are unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered.
Love them anyway.

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives.
Do good anyway.

If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies.
Succeed anyway.

Honesty and forgiveness make you seem weak.
Be honest and forgiving anyway.

The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow.
Do good anyway.

People favor underdogs, but follow only top dogs.
Fight for some underdogs anyway.

What you spent years building may be destroyed overnight.
Build anyway.

Give the world the best you have and few may ever notice.
But give the world the best you have anyway.