

**Commencement Address
Sunday, May 19, 2019
College of Education**

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To the provost, chancellor, deans, associate deans, faculty, staff, graduates, families and distinguished guests – it is an honor to have this opportunity to share in this commencement ceremony.

Picture this...

A first grade teacher sits in a chair with a crowd of young scholars gathered in a semi-circle on the carpet in front of her. She really loves the book she is reading to the children. One scene in the story is particularly funny, so she reads that scene as animated as she can. As she finishes, all of the children burst into laughter. In that moment, she suddenly realizes, "They all got it. They all experienced this humorous moment together. They all shared in this cognitive experience."

She was able to create this shared moment by reading to them! The shared moment was a glimpse of her "why." Children must experience reading in ways that create joy! This teacher went on to receive a master's degree in reading instruction, which led to her becoming a reading specialist who would work with struggling readers in our schools. That teacher was my wife, Betty.

She had found her "why."

Simon Sinek stated in his TEDTalk – "Start With Why" – "Most people can tell you 'what' they do. Most people can tell you 'how' they do what they do. But most people cannot say 'why' they do what they do." Today, I take this opportunity to provoke your thinking about this concept of "why."

You are receiving a degree in education today, or you are completing a certification that positions you for your next goals in life. This degree, or certification, and the content you have learned answer the question, "What?"

As a new graduate with a bachelor of science in art education degree in 1974, I had a solid knowledge base in design theory and studio art. I studied the classic disciplines – drawing, painting, printmaking, and two and three-dimensional design in a variety of mediums. I had a knowledge of the pivotal movements and periods in art history. I studied how to effectively model drawing and painting techniques. I used the "under-explanation" teaching strategy to cause students to ask more questions before they began a composition. The content was my "what" and the instructional strategies were my "how."

Fall 1974, I began my teaching career at Normandy High School as an art teacher. At the end of the first semester, I had roared through every concept and all of the studio content that I learned in college. I had taught contour line, gesture drawing, color theory... I had a lot more learning to do. I had to expand my "what" in a hurry!

But my “why” was forming. I did not just want to teach students to draw, and paint, or be accomplished printmakers. I wanted to teach them to think, to view the world critically, and to ask the questions, “How might I see this differently, draw it differently, or redefine the genre of portraiture?” I wanted my students to be critical thinkers who not only had a love of art, but who interacted with the world differently. My “why” was developing.

To further prod your thinking on this concept, and help you clarify your “why”, I pose two critical questions to you – “What problem in the world do you most want to solve? What people in the world do you most want to help?” These two questions can guide you to a personal understanding of your purpose. Your “why” is your purpose.

My personal answers to these two questions have evolved. My graduate work in education moved me from thinking about my own classroom to instructional practices in all classrooms to how those classrooms connected. My thinking moved to how a group of adults can develop the collective efficacy to make a difference in the lives of all students in every classroom in a school.

“What problem in the world, do I most want to solve?” The lack of educational equity for children of color. As you know, children of color, children from urban backgrounds; backgrounds often filled with poverty and trauma. These students must, nevertheless, be equipped to excel in this century, or they will be doomed to second class citizenship in the world. To not educate them is morally wrong. Second class citizenship is unacceptable.

My “why” compelled me to pursue my doctorate in educational leadership so I could more effectively lead the adults who would teach children and meet the challenge of facilitating educational equity for the underserved.

“What people in the world do I most want to help?” The 3300 students in the Normandy Schools Collaborative. Our students must see themselves as having the power to defy stereotypes that may have been placed upon them by recent history or socio-economic labels. They must see themselves as ethical individuals who are critical thinkers, purposeful collaborators, effective communicators, and creative problem solvers. They must see themselves as solutions not problems. They must be able, and willing, to act for the greater good.

It is our “why” that has caused Normandy to redesign the district itself – build a new early learning center to serve pre-school to kindergarten students; convert 1-6 schools to the innovative 1-8 EleMiddle Model that will provide more nurturing environments for teaching and learning; and realign the high school curriculum to student interests and regional career needs. We are clear about our “why.”

Now, as superintendent of schools in the Normandy Schools Collaborative, I know “who” I am. “What” I need to know keeps expanding daily. My “how” is guided by a set guiding principles – our pillars – professionalism, accountability, collaboration, trust and respect. And I am fully cognizant of my “why.”

Michael Fullan, in his book “Leadership in a Culture of Change,” calls this drive, this why, “moral purpose.” Moral purpose means you see a wrong that needs correcting. You realize that you are the one to correct it. You live to make the lives of others better.

I challenge each of you to start with your “why” today.

Your “why” will compel you to challenge assumptions about the current structure of education in the region and the nation.

Your “why” will cause you to visualize schools that integrate with the world through technology and artificial intelligence.

Your “why” will cause you to challenge inequities in both resources and opportunities for all children.

Your “why” will compel you to take risks, because the status quo is no longer acceptable.

Your “why” will connect you to other allies who share your passion, your purpose, your drive to improve the lives of others.

Please, repeat after me: “What problem in the world do I most want to solve? What people in the world do I most want to help?”

And after you answer, passionately act on those answers.

Make life better for others! Live out your “why.” The world awaits you!