

# The “What it Means to Be a Man” Speech

Crossing the minefield of your career and your life

by MajGen W.F. Mullen III

Being a senior leader in the Marine Corps of today is both an honor and a privilege, but along with those things comes a great deal of responsibility. One responsibility is to see to the continued success of our institution, but another and perhaps more important responsibility is to ensure the well-being of our most precious assets—our Marines. On a daily basis, we, at this end of the command spectrum, get a report that lists all of the activities occurring within our ranks that do not comport with our professed values of honor, courage, and commitment. It can make for some discouraging reading. Many times, as I have been reading these reports, I have been struck by the thought that if I could only talk to these young men and women to get them to see the consequences of their actions or, better yet, if I could talk to them before they make poor decisions that take them down the wrong path, we would not see so much of this sort of destructive behavior. I want to help them learn and be better Marines and people because that is one of my obligations as a leader. Then, I remembered one of my favorite movies and an approach depicted in that movie that I believe could help us.

In 2003, the movie *Secondhand Lions* was released, starring Robert Duvall and Michael Caine as two crotchety old brothers who live together and are decidedly antisocial. They have their young grand-nephew (Haley Joel Osment) dumped on them by their niece who wants to go off and party, and the story takes off from there. It is a funny and thoroughly enjoyable movie, but what impressed me most was something referred to as the “What it Means to be a



Passing along advice can help Marines focus on becoming better people. (Photo by LCpl Tojyea Matally.)

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Man” speech. Robert Duvall’s character gives it to young men in an attempt to get them to grow up and be good men instead of the knuckleheads that they were before he spoke to them. You never actually hear what he says in the speech, but you see him giving it to a group of teenagers. The character played by Haley Joel Osment spends the rest of the movie focusing on ensuring that Robert Duvall’s character will be around to give him the speech when he gets older.

Both my son and I enjoy the movie, and he asked me recently what I would

say if I were to give a “What it means to be a Man” speech. While I have thought about the advice I would pass along, I have not passed that advice along as much as I should and certainly never put it in writing. I do so now because I believe that we all have flaws, some small and some large, but if we can all focus on becoming better people in life, it will likely help mitigate those flaws. I think that if our younger Marines, especially of the male variety, take the things I write below on board, internalize them, and use them to not only be better Marines but, more importantly, better men, then we can be a much better Marine Corps overall. In writing these things, I want to ensure no one thinks that I believe I have all the answers or live up to what is written to the fullest extent. I do not, but I do try

to do so. Life is tough and frequently seems like a stroll (or dead sprint, at times) through a minefield where you can see some of the mines, sitting above ground, and others are hidden from sight. What I provide below are things that I believe in and that have kept me from a close encounter with those mines as I move through my life and career. I offer them in the hope that they do so for others also.

To start with, I believe that the root of all success as a human being is self-discipline. I have seen more people ruined by the lack of self-discipline than just about anything else. A woman once came up to Gen Robert E. Lee as he was coming out of church after the Civil War. She had a baby in her arms and asked the General what she needed to do to ensure he grew up to be a good man. His response was, “Teach him to deny himself.” When he himself was a young man, his peers at West Point called him the “Marble Model” because he was so self-disciplined. I believe that to this day, he is the only person to get through four years at that institution without getting a single demerit. While I deplore the choice he made to join the Confederate forces during the Civil War, I still look to him as a role model for personal discipline and attention to duty.

I have also found that true happiness in life comes from doing good deeds for those around us. The pursuit of happiness via the acquisition of material things is always fleeting. While they are nice to have, we soon find ourselves wanting more or other things. Also, people rarely remember us for what we have accumulated in life, but they do remember us for what we have done for them and/or others. I equate this to the eulogy test—what will people say about us at our funeral? Will it be about how we have touched other people’s lives and made a positive difference in them? Those are lasting memories, and the personal sense of warmth and good feeling that accompanies altruistic actions are rarely matched in life.

The cultivation of a professional attitude about the accomplishment of one’s tasks in life is also important. Some people figure this out early in

life and give every task, no matter how mundane, their best effort. Many never figure it out and focus on doing as little as humanly possible, then wonder why they get left out or left behind. A professional attitude means that we understand that everything we do, or do not do, says something about the person we are. If we always deliver to the best

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### ***A person’s character is very important ...***

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of our ability, then we have personal satisfaction as well as the good opinion of those around us—at least those who are not jealous because we are making them look bad by comparison.

We should never seek to compete with our peers. Excelling at every task we are handed, with the pursuit of personal development/improvement as our goal, is always the best course of action. Our peers have the ability to do the same, but it is a choice that some do not to take. The journalist Thomas Friedman wrote in his book *The World is Flat*, “There is no such thing as lifetime employment anymore. There is only lifetime employability.”

I believe this means that we maintain our marketability because of the skills we keep sharpening and bringing to the table in any environment. One of my sisters does this, and every time she has left a position, she has been sought after by other companies and always has several to choose from. She has even been recruited while in jobs. For those who have let their skills atrophy or become totally outdated because they settled in a comfortable place instead of continuing to strive to improve, I would imagine that the silence that accompanies getting let go from a job is pretty deafening.

A person’s character is very important, and it is demonstrated on a daily basis through personal habits, regardless of who is watching. Doing the right thing every time, no matter what, is what each of us needs to strive for. We get this way through making sure that every choice we make, every day, is a good one—good choices consistently become good habits and leave one with no regrets. I have watched some very talented and intelligent people make a wreck of their careers or lives because they had little or no character. It shapes our lives as we grow older; it is the moral compass that guides us true north, or, with the lack of character, spins lazily and points in any direction that seems



***Do our personal habits identify us as Marines with character and a strong moral center?*** (Photo by Cpl Santino Martinez.)



**We keep sharpening our skills.** (Photo by Cpl Christian J. Robertson.)

convenient or desirable but wrong.

One of the largest mines in the minefield I wrote about above is peer pressure. This force is very strong when we are younger, and it is generally trying to point us in the wrong direction. We must always try to remember that other people's opinions are largely irrelevant, especially if we need to do something bad for them to have a good opinion of us. When we are good, solid people, other good, solid people will be attracted to us, and the bad ones will just fade away. They may be popular now, but five years from now, they will likely be getting nowhere in life because of the poor choices they have made. Always remember—*We* choose what we will do or not do every day.

When we do stumble or fall, we need to get right back up. No one is perfect, and we will all stumble or fall at some point in our lives. What is important is not that we do so but how we handle it. Getting back up, brushing ourselves off, learning from the experience, and continuing to march are key. Life moves pretty fast and has never been fair, so we just have to get over it and on with it. Just remember that quitting is a choice, and if it is allowed to become a habit, it can become a permanent condition. One last point here, as Nicholas Nassim Taleb wrote in his book *The Bed of Procrustes*, "For the robust, an error

is information; for the fragile, an error is an error."

I also think that what other people say about us is really not important either. Those who make fun of or bully others, I believe it helps them feel better about themselves and is pretty pathetic if you ask me. The only opinions that should matter to us are those of our close family members, good friends, and, most importantly, our own. Feeling good about ourselves and being confident in our ability to achieve whatever we set as a goal for ourselves are two very important factors in how other people see us. This is a personal battle with that voice inside our head that is telling us negative things. What most people never realize is that we have total control over this. Start with telling it to shut up whenever it says negative things, and then push it to say positive things like—"I've got this." In the end, the only person who can ever keep us from achieving our goals is ourselves. If we are willing to put in the hard work and persevere in the face of any obstacles that get in our way, then we become truly unstoppable. As the old baseball coach, Tommy Lasorda, once said, "The difference between the impossible and the possible lies in a man's determination."

Ego is the enemy; our own ego is another mine. Again, I have seen more people ruined, or who have ruined peo-

ple around them, through unchecked egotism than just about anything else. It makes for toxic leaders and poor followers who care for nothing other than what personally benefits them and their pursuit of self-gratification. You can hear it in the things they say—when there are a lot of "I's" and "Me's" mixed in their words, and whenever bad things happen, it is always someone else's fault, never their own. It always seems to me that people are on a journey from the completely self-focused, "I am the center of the universe" beliefs that you see with babies and very young children to an understanding that this attitude leads nowhere. As with the professional attitude, some figure this out early, and many never do. Mother Teresa strikes me as someone who had this idea completely figured out and lived it out in her life every single day. Genuine humility is attractive and admirable—egotism is one of the biggest turn-offs in existence.

Always be a critical thinker—we should never take things at face value and never assume someone is completely right or completely wrong because they either agree with what we believe or hold a totally opposite view. We learn more by being objective and trying to see issues from all angles than we do by participating in what people today call "echo chambers," where we only engage in discussions with those who think like we do. Blogging is a good example of the proliferation of echo chambers, and it seems to be driving people to opposite extremes in our country. It is not a healthy trend. We did this once before, and it ended in the Civil War. We need to do our homework, get a second opinion from a knowledgeable source, purposefully question our beliefs, and never assume we are smart enough. I finish, on average, three books a week because I am convinced I will never be smart enough. I also cast my net as widely as possible in the attempt to avoid being in an echo chamber. This does not mean that we should not have our own opinions or beliefs on things, but we should never assume we are absolutely correct, especially when we see a lot of evidence, if we are really looking, that we may be wrong.

Listening, truly listening, instead of thinking about what we will say next or of something else entirely, is hard to do. That being said, it is also one of the most important things we can do to help others, as sometimes just listening to them is enough to alleviate their troubled mind. Listening tells others that we genuinely care, and we never have to say a word—actions speak much louder. I think this is why we enjoy talking to our dogs so much. They are listening with their whole heart; they never interrupt you, and they never betray a confidence. We also learn a great deal more by listening than we do by talking.

The Golden Rule still means something. If we treat others as we want to be treated ourselves, we will never be far off course. This is especially true for those people who cannot help us in return. Do we know the name of the people who clean our building or do other menial tasks around us on a

daily basis? Saying hello to them, by name, and asking how they are doing can mean the world to them. No matter how far any of us go in life, or how high a pedestal we get placed on, we will never be above treating those around us with respect and dignity. This goes back to character and is a good way to observe someone's character in action.

Smiles are contagious and have a tendency to make people feel better. They are also free of charge.

Lastly, we should always seek to mentor those coming along behind us. At some point, we move on and either get out or retire. We will leave the business end of this life to those coming along behind us. If we do not like what they are doing now, we can influence it while we are still here. Once we have retired or departed, our influence drops considerably. I always tell officers and SNCOs that we get the kind of Marine Corps that we expect, enforce, supervise, and mentor. If we do not like how things

are going, we have only to look in the mirror to find the source.

In the end, it is up to each of us to do the best we can to help each other and to make the world around us better because we are present in it. Though I never heard Robert Duvall's speech in the movie, I would like to think that it is not too far off from what I put above. We all only get one shot at this life, and as we get older, we realize how fragile and fleeting it really is. Life is a great opportunity, and it only happens once for each of us—we cannot afford to waste it.



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