

# Kent College Commencement Speech

*The following is the full text of a speech made by Charles G. Neely to the graduating class of the Kent College of Law.<sup>1</sup> The speech was published in the Chicago Journal of Law Weekly, May 29, 1896.*

The Kent College of Law held its fourth annual Commencement Exercises in the auditorium of the Association building in the presence of a large, attentive and appreciative audience yesterday afternoon. There were many features deserving of special mention the most notable of which was the unique and meaty address of Judge Neely, which merits the publication in full given below.

*Mr. President, Members of the Graduating Class, Ladies and Gentlemen:*

I have decided not to talk to you upon any subject of the law. You have been studying law, and thinking about law, and today it will not be unprofitable for our thoughts to be turned in another direction. This is an occasion of vast importance to you. You have finished your preparatory studies and are about to enter upon the real work of your life. The time for active participation in a great profession has come. You are not to cease study, but to begin it. Principles which have been set before you, you are now to put in use. What you have read, you are to do. It is a joyous, and a solemn hour. This is a crisis in your life.

Standing here looking into your faces we wish you happiness and success. There is ever a charm about youth. The faces of the young inspire hope. In the presence of youth we forget failures, and remember only successes; we are unconscious of discouragement and think alone of victory. We lose all sense of weariness, and feel strong; we are unmindful of wrong, deception and fraud, we love right, justice and truth.

The choice of a profession is something of an indication of the spirit of a man. There is something about, around, and in every calling, that is not the work itself, but is a separate, different thing. We may call it the philosophy or soul of the business. There are great lives in every profession, along which success runs, as there are great roadways that lead over the mountains.

You are looking for those highways to-day, and will be making inquiry all through life for the way that leads to honor and success. You cannot have chosen the law, without recognizing the opportunities it has per se. I doubt not but that each of you has his plans and dreams. I have chosen something to talk about that I hope may interest you, because it is about yourselves and your work, and I shall group what I have to say around the topic, Leadership and Life. I shall put my theme in the form of a question. Is knowledge alone, power?

Leadership and life is a large subject, and we can only hope to make suggestions, leaving it to you to follow them out for yourselves. The topic and the theme raise the issue of the failure or success of each of you in your chosen

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<sup>1</sup> This school is now called Chicago-Kent College of Law: <http://www.kentlaw.iit.edu/>

profession. Will the fact alone that you have information in your profession now, and are to acquire more, in and of itself give you power? We know upon the highest spoken authority, and by the test of experience that the saying is true that: "Knowledge is power." But are not conditions imposed? Is there not something to be taken for granted? Is there not something to be understood? In order that knowledge may be a force in the world it must be used. The simple acquirement would give no power. It would create a sense of fullness, but not of power. All the books in all the libraries would be of no value unless they were taken from the shelves and read, and the reader afterward told what he knew, and did what he had learned to do.

The telling and the doing make the power, that moves the world. Children begin anew. They do not commence where their fathers left off. The increase of learning and opportunities give each succeeding generation the advantage over the last. There is a momentum of progress, as there is of a train of cars.

Knowledge then is, in and of itself, a power when applied. Knowledge is power when made to operate in the right direction. The form of procedure is important. This statement will appeal to every one of you, as lawyers. The law is a question of procedure. Law is a rule of conduct.

The way in which one does the work of his chosen profession is an indication of fitness for the work. You have taken the first step, you have chosen, today are taking the second step. This step involves the issue of your life. The contest you enter now becomes one of leadership. Leadership is a great quality. It is a constant force. All ambitious men desire to be leaders. You have some such purpose, and it is a very noble thing. The leadership of which I am speaking is not what we commonly think of as leadership. That idea includes praise, pomp, display, honors, public preferment. Very few of you, perhaps none of you, will be such a leader. Such leadership is not necessary to satisfy high ambition, or gratify large hopes, or meet great expectations. It is not essential that we command an army, or represent a political faith, or be the founder of a state, or the master of a science in order to be a leader. It very often happens, that leadership places a man in such a position, but this is the result of leadership, but not leadership. By leadership I mean the careful, conscientious work that produces good results. By leadership I mean thoroughness, clearness of thought, and a recognition of duty and conscience. You are entering upon the pursuit of an ambitious calling. Its rewards are large and satisfying, its labors are great and constant. The law is an open door set before you, if you but know how to enter in. It is as broad as human affairs, as intricate as human motives, as deep as thought can reach, as high as hope can aspire. It is greater than all battle fields combined. It demands the highest order of leadership. In no business or profession is there such constant and relentless play of intellect on intellect. The successful lawyer must have forces and know how to command them. He must be resourceful. Do you expect to win? Then you must be trained and disciplined for every trial.

Leadership is necessary for the lawyer, because he is always opposed. The moment a lawyer begins to work, some other lawyer is working against him. You

need only to think for a moment of the vast enterprises in the business world, the spirit of rivalry, and competition, the selfishness that seeks gain, to form an idea of the generalship requisite to meet such emergencies. Fine leadership can arise only out of mental, moral or spiritual conditions. In the profession of the lawyer, these elements are always present. The questions of right, involving the issues of justice and truth make large demands of brain and heart. Your study is a great contemplative one. Over its problems you will spend hours of searching thought which will enrich and ennoble your life. In patient work, in constant application, in the mastery of principles lies the true hope of success.

What a leader does must be along large lines, and in a broad and catholic spirit. Lofty ideals, noble conceptions will point the way. Truth must be in all you do or say. The master of men, when upon earth, said to his Disciples, "The Kingdom of God is within you." So also: The kingdom of man is within man. The moment one realizes this truth he is born again. This truth emancipates from environments and renders failure impossible. It is natural and logical to expect very much from surroundings and incidents, but these alone are not sufficient. You desire power, not position. The force must proceed from you, not tend toward you. Power is a centrifugal, not a centripetal force. You must make the circumstances which gather around you, and not expect to be made by them. In every law suit which you conduct alone all the forces and influences on your side of the case will centre in you, and proceed from you. If you are prepared, if you are ready and resourceful, if you set right principles in motion the whole case will revolve around you; court, jury, and all the atmosphere of the trial will be drawn to you as the centre. It is common even to cheapness to hear men say circumstances made the man. This is sometimes partly true, but who made the circumstances? Or where was the fortunate one when the circumstances arose? Close study of these two questions will show that the hero had much to do with originating the conditions, or was keen-sighted enough to recognize the genius of the time or occasion and allied himself at once with it. This is leadership. I am out of patience with the insipid idea that mediocrity can advantage itself of opportune conditions as easily and certainly as talent and genius. Great crises demand great men. Momentous events call for splendid leadership. Sometimes the great leader appears, and the world knows him at once. Often no one answers, and the event is postponed. Great centuries have always had great men. Art, Literature, War, Peace, Discovery, Invention, Religion have advanced when a master appeared. A great law suit, a great advocate, a great decision follows: a large question, a skilled lawyer, a learned judge. In my own experience I have known the presence of a distinguished attorney to change the atmosphere of a court-room, not alone by the power of his skill and knowledge, but by the force of his character and the influence that surrounded all he did and said. I have known the presence of a witness in the chair to shed a flood of light over complicated facts, by the clearness of his testimony, and the force of truth he spoke. In such men there seems to be something greater than the living person. Such presence affects and influences all about it. Great highways seem to open before such characters, and lead to the truth of things in which they are

interested and concerned. The real worth and work of a great character, reflects it, represents it, stamps it.

When the Pharisees and Herodians sought to entrap the Master, they asked him: "Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar or not?" He asked for a penny and inquired: "Whose is this image and superscription?" And when they told him Caesar's, He said: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's." The image and superscription of every man is upon his work, and unto each shall be rendered the things that belong to him. Plato and Aristotle stand for a noble philosophy. Phidias and Michael Angelo represent a divine art, and marble speaks and breaths, temples are built and adorned. Raphael and Leonardo de Vinci represent beauty of form and color, and galleries gather. Hegel, Copernicus and Galileo appear and the firmament speaks. Harvey, Jenner and Pasteur make discoveries and the law of life, health and disease are written. Hannibal and Napoleon teach war; Caesar, Charlemagne, Phillip II, Frederick the Great, Gustavus Adolphus,<sup>2</sup> William the Silent,<sup>3</sup> Cromwell, Washington and Lincoln, develop government. John Knox, Martin Luther, Wesley construct ethical systems. Moses, Lycurgus, Blackstone, Chitty, Coke, Story, Marshall give and codify laws. These are but a very few of many who have shaped the affairs of men. Poets and authors have sung and written the life of the world. Consider for a moment the millions of the earth who since time began have labored on the details of the world's work to put human concerns into shape and order.

Human affairs are more complicated to-day than they have ever been, and require more thought to understand and arrange them. Present conditions demand the highest order of leadership. Leadership means more than generalship. Like the law, it is a rule of conduct. By the word rule a great deal is meant. When in your practice you have hunted through many authorities, unsatisfying and contradictory, you will find great delight in finally being able to discover a "rule," which shall guide you.

Leadership is not an incident or accident, but a rule of life. As law is a rule of conduct, so leadership is a rule of life. So far we have considered the rule of life, now let us consider the life itself. Your profession and your life cannot be separated. You will not live the life of a lawyer and do the work of a lawyer as distinct things, but you will live the life of a lawyer and do the work of your profession as a mixed question of law and fact.

The living is by far the greater and more important part of anything men attempt to do on earth. Take the highest order of merit in the noblest profession, and what genius accomplishes there is not so necessary or important as the life of the man who has been so nobly at work in the profession.

Life comes before leadership and is above it, and higher as material comes before the work. Forests grow before houses are built. People and nations precede

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<sup>2</sup> Gustavus Adolphus (1594-1632) was King of Sweden.  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustavus\\_Adolphus\\_of\\_Sweden](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustavus_Adolphus_of_Sweden)

<sup>3</sup> William the Silent (1533-1584) also called William I, Prince of Orange, was a Dutch leader of a revolt against the Spanish. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_the\\_Silent](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_the_Silent)

history. Life is first essential, and greatest. It is so common to remark how busy the world is. What a great hurry men are in. It is because there is so much life. Population has increased, the relations of men are so multiplied, the struggle has grown so fierce. The life of the world is intense. Debate is heated. Vexed questions disturb the peace of society, and refuse to be settled unless settled in the right way. There is a general feverishness and excitability. All this is equally true in private life and work. Not so noticeable as in public affairs, but present. How shall this condition of life be met? By character. The test and truest expression of human life is character. The life must be stronger than the work, or both will be weak and ineffectual. The force of character must predominate and control. In order that the work of any may be true. Character is the record of a life; and lawyers learn to know how important the record is. As leadership is a centrifugal force, so character is a centripetal force. The movement of these two forces make a well rounded life. To build a noble character the life must take in through every gateway every knowledge, and remember to care for the mental and spiritual nature, thus laying the foundation for a true and wise leadership.

Truth is the greatest thing on earth. It is the universal force. It is the ultimate purpose of science. It is the great emancipator. It has developed the world. It has led towards liberty, unshackled thought and conscience. It makes men free. It is the essence of character.

Life sweetens work. You are not to rent an office, place your books on the shelves, sit down in front of a desk and grind away in a practicable, cold way all your life. Run out into all your work the great truths of life, which when all your work is done are the real objects to be attained. The large principles of justice and right for which you are sworn to contend, must be fed by the great springs of a pure life. Who can speak for principle who does not live it? Who can be heard for justice whose deeds are wrong? Who shall stand for truth who does not know it? How can a man practice what he does not preach? How can one secure for others their rights if he have no true conception of the rights, and no just standard by which to measure them. Will you think for a moment of any illustrious man whose life and character has not been greater than his work? Work is but an incomplete expression of the life. Work slackens and stops. Life is eternal and immortal. Some work has so much of the life and character of the one who did it, projected into it, that it can never die. There is one great question in the life of every man that relentlessly exacts the most careful attention. There is one vital question in the life of each of us that commands us by day and by night, gives us our place in the world, and continues our memory when we are gone. This is the question of failure or success. How men do fight against the one, and for the other. The issue is seldom, if ever, probably never satisfactory. Success and failure are relative terms. Success is relative, related to many things, circumscribed by conditions, limited, qualified. Failure is relative for the same reason. Who can say whether he has succeeded? Who can say or dare to say he or any one has failed? The child one year old, who in trying to learn to walk, has balanced and over-balanced, started and fallen times without number, until at last it takes one step or more has succeeded. But how

many failures are behind him. These have made toward success and failures (they were not failures) are forgiven and forgotten. In the school, confronted by problems, which are conquered, the little hero and heroine advance toward victory. Home days, school days, college days over the youth and student, enters the real battle ground and faces with high resolution, the spears and swords of war. What calling, business or profession shall be taken? Upon the decision depends a livelihood, culture, luxury and reputation. The choice is made. The issue waits on time and opportunity. The horizon of that life flees before it. Here is the big, round world, rich in history, venerable by age, dignified by story and achievement. All the past belongs to each of us. Men are tenants in common of this heritage. The future stretches away inviting us. There each must go, and win or lose, fail or succeed. It is the case of one man, standing in the midst of men asking for recognition.

What is failure? What is success? There is no standard definition. There is no arbitrary rule by which these are measured. In fact, no man or woman is the final judge of whether his or her life has been a failure, or a success. Posterity must decide.

To make money, to accumulate riches, is an indication of success. To do neither may be the greatest accomplishment. To win fame, to attain honor, to build reputation, may seem to be success. To do none of these things may be the greatest achievement. To a business man, to establish a large trade, to visit the markets of the world, to control them forsooth, may be to hold a large place in the eyes of men. To conduct a small enterprise, to be unknown beyond a locality, may be to grandly succeed. Success is not a temporary thing. Failure is not eternal. Think for one moment of the thousands of soldiers, who in all the wars of time, have melted away from the earth, in the red heat of battle, their names and graves unknown. The cause for which they died was victorious. The principles for which they contended have lived. These soldiers are the heroes of poetry, prose and song. Their deeds are the inspiration of every age. They did not fail.

Run the eye over history, where are the templed cities, the seats of learning and government? They are gone. Their glory has perished as the beauty of the flower. Have they failed? Have their civilizations been forgotten? No! They taught a better. They gave place to a higher civilization. They are ash heaps. Upon their ruins successive generations have builded. Literally, they are the foundations of greater cities. They did not fail. The seasons swiftly come and go. Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter. Has any of these ever failed? Dying, has not each given place to a more beauteous time? Success and failure depend on conscience. This is the emperor. What place has fame, or honor, or seeming success, where truth holds not her court? Is fame fame, or honor honor, or success, success where truth or conscience are not supreme and regnant? Never! Here is a man, with wealth and ease, and a name, all gained by dishonor. He seems successful. There is a man, humbler, with simple home and life, hard working every day, his life seems successful; which of these has failed? Which has succeeded? In every calling there are temptations. Questionable methods are sometimes indulged in on the grounds that "It is business." After long planning, opportunity offers to make a

name, and a fortune, but the means are questionable. Personal honor is involved. What shall the man do? He decides not to take the advantage. Has he failed? He has not made the fortune or won the fame, but he has kept his integrity. 'Twas a successful failure. Most successes are secret, private and unknown. Carlyle has said: That an Englishman's idea of hell, is failure. This idea is not confined to the English. It possesses men to an undue degree. Seeming failure is often success, and even failure is often highly honorable. The thought of success is captivating. It nerves the arm, it strengthens the heart. Patience is an indispensable element of success. Large enterprises require time. The seeding, growth, and ripening of fruit, the bloom and burst of roses, teach this truth. Will power is the forerunner of success. Some things must be put behind us if we would succeed. Discouragement, regret, lack of confidence, discontent. These are all devils, and to them we must say: "Get thee behind me." It is right to desire to succeed. We owe it to ourselves to grasp every lawful means to make our way upward. Failure is to be shunned. Success like our prayers, should lift us up. We owe it to our friends to aspire and succeed. We owe it to the good and true within us to live "On the Heights." Responsibility comes with success, and requires character to meet it. In truth and in fact, character is the summit of human life. Nothing abides without it. Like charity it beareth all things, boasteth not itself, and without character, any apparent success is as a tinkling cymbal, and sounding brass. When fully equipped, the successful man must know how and when to seize on opportunity. What a world of hope that one word stands for. It means everything to have opportunity if we can use it. Opportunity is the great Continental Divide between Failure and success. Opportunity is the Gulf stream of human affairs. Like the trade winds, it blows our ships toward port, if we but know how to set our sails. I leave the thought of opportunity with you with these stately lines:

Master of human destinies am I;  
Fame, love and fortune on my footsteps wait;  
Cities and fields I walk, I penetrate  
Deserts and seas remote, and passing by  
Hovel and mart and palace, soon or late  
I knock unbidden once at every gate !  
If sleeping, wake, if feasting, rise before  
I turn away; it is the hour of fate,  
And those who follow me reach every state  
Mortals desire, and conquer every foe  
Save death; but those who doubt or hesitate,  
Condemned to failure, penury and woe,  
Seek me in vain, and uselessly implore,  
I answer not, I return no more.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "Opportunity," a poem by John James Ingalls (1833-1900)