

A Thousand Miles

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Greetings

Good afternoon. There are a thousand miles in my message today. But before I start, I hope you will indulge me and give me a chance to express some of my gratitude.

First, to my lifelong friend, Shane Robinson, thank you! When Shane called me about a year ago, I didn't really take him seriously. When he asked me to do this, I didn't feel qualified. I don't feel qualified. His words of encouragement were key, and it quickly took me back to those days in Gentry Hall in that grad office and the conversations that we used to have. It was a critical and transformative time in my life. And so, I'm grateful to Shane's friendship. I'm so excited for AAAE, and for Oklahoma State to get to benefit from his leadership. And I appreciate you, my friend.

I do know from experience the sense of responsibility that comes with this task, because just a couple of years ago, in 2019, I felt that same weight on my shoulders when I got to select the distinguished lecturer for this event. You guys recall, I chose Tracy Kitchel. COVID got us that year, and so it took a while, but when Tracy finally had a chance to bring us his message, he did it in a fantastic Tracy Kitchel way. I hope you take something from my remarks today, but I can assure you that they won't be as good as Tracy's.

I want to acknowledge another group before I get too far into this and that is those that have given the distinguished lecture in the past. I've never really thought I would be associated with this group. This group is full of people that I have admired and respected and looked up to as role models for my entire career. A couple of recent examples are Rama Radhakrishna and Suzy Whittington.

I want to tell a quick story about Rama. Some of you might have heard me share this before. My first real experience in graduate school was a journal article critique assignment. You guys probably know the one. Your professor says choose a journal article, any one, something that you're interested in. Write a scathing review about everything they did wrong and everything they overlooked. Turn it in and they write a scathing review about everything that you missed and all of the style points that you missed. I chose a journal article written by Rama Radhakrishna. In those days my eyes were wide. The literature, as I was coming to know it, was endless in my mind. It was the volume of the ocean. And to choose a single journal article was like picking a single drop of water out of that ocean. I've since concluded that our literature, while meaningful, is very limited, measured. It's more like a bucket or a barrel. But if you think about it, that actually makes each drop more potent.

Shortly after that class (and I got an A on my assignment, Rama), shortly after that class, I attended my first research conference, the North Central AAAE Research Conference in Columbus, Ohio. I walked in with wide eyes. I gave my name at the registration table. Hello, my name is Scott Burris. I'm a doctoral student from the University of Missouri. And Rama Radhakrishna welcomed me. I was starstruck. It was the author of my drop of water. What I appreciate about this profession is that in the years that have followed, I've actually had a number of opportunities to work closely with Rama. I consider him a friend and a colleague. Rama, I'm honored today to join this group with you.

I met Susie Whittington at that same conference, and I know many of you will relate to this experience (I wish she was here to hear these comments). I walked into that conference and Susie greeted me with a warm hug like she had known me for 25 years. You can hear her words “Hello, Scott. I'm so glad you're here.” I don't recall a single time in the nearly 25 years that have followed that Susie hasn't greeted me that exact same way. This group of distinguished lectures is full of people that I admire and for whom I hold great respect, and whether I deserve it or not, it will be one of my greatest honors to be associated with this group.

I have another group that I want to mention. Just as Rama and Susie helped induct me into our association, my Missouri crew had a lasting impact on me. Rob Terry, I wish he was here today. Some that are, Brian Garton, Bobby Torres, John Ulmer. Paul Vaughn.

A lot of you guys don't know Paul Vaughn so let me tell a quick story about Dr. Vaughn. When I went to grad school, this is a true story, I did not own a suit - straight up. My wife took me to a department store. We bought a suit off the rack, and that was for the most special, most professional occasions that I would encounter at the University of Missouri. I'm so thankful to Brian Garton and the standard that he set for professionalism in the department. I learned what it meant to be a professional. Dr. Garton taught us all how important it was to model those things that you were trying to teach. I wore a tie every day as a graduate student to the office. I've always carried that lesson with me and tried to live up to it. But even as I transitioned into my role as a department chair, I found myself needing to dress a bit differently in order to represent the department in the capacity that I needed to. My measure for that was my memories of Dr. Vaughn.

I recently attended a meeting with our Director of Institutional Advancement for the Davis College at Texas Tech, Matt Williams. Matt happens to be a classmate of mine. He and I were in the same graduating class at Texas Tech. We were in the same student teaching group. Today, he does a terrific job in our college leading the fundraising efforts. He had set up a meeting for us to meet with some retired Ag teachers in a part of the state where we were trying to establish a scholarship fund to try to attract students from that region to Texas Tech, so that we could return them to their home region to be Ag teachers. It was an informal meeting that we had set up at the afternoon session of the state teachers conference in Corpus Christi. So, in the middle of August, Matt and I jumped an afternoon flight headed to Corpus. As we got to the airport, he looked at me and he said, “You're a bit overdressed, aren't you, my friend?”

I said, “Matt, do you remember when Dr. Vaughn was the chair of our department?”

Matt said, “Man, do I?”

And I said, “Do you ever recall seeing Dr. Vaughn when he wasn't wearing a suit?”

Matt looked at me and he said, “You look great, my friend.”

I owe a great deal to Dr. Vaughn, to the group at Missouri. That entire group was phenomenal. I hold those experiences dear to my heart during a very formative period in my life.

As you guys can already see, I'm an emotional person. Sometimes that has served me well, not always. I'm also a storyteller. I love a good story. So today, I've chosen to share some things with you through stories. The stories that I've chosen have a common thread. And that thread is they are all milestones in my journey, a journey that seems like 1000 miles. They're all moments, or events, or interactions that impacted me, changed me, taught me. Maybe you can relate? Maybe not. But hopefully, you'll understand me better because of them.

A thousand miles. There's another reason I chose that title. There are literally a thousand miles in my comments today. My happy place is running. My best thinking, my deepest thoughts are on my morning runs. A typical run starts for me at 5 am with a cup of coffee, a few headlines from the local news, and out the door at 5:30. Okay, maybe 5:45. How far and how fast varies. But that's actually the least important part. I'm a creature of habit. I like to run the same path. No headphones. In the dark. Just me and my thoughts; a chance to slip into deep reflection. The best runs are the one where I suddenly snap back to consciousness, and I have no idea where I am and no recollection of how I got there. But I have the thoughts that have filled my mind.

So for 11 months now, those deeply reflective sessions have been my preparation for today. It wasn't intentional at first, but early on, I realized that that's where my thoughts were going to come from and originate. So, I actually purposefully embraced this. I went so far as to set up a computer at my house, so that when I came in from a morning run, I could sit down and capture all of the thoughts that had filled my mind during that time. At least two dozen stories, at least three dozen stories made the list, only to be culled. Today, I've chosen three that I want to share with you. Each one of them has a special meaning for me, and hopefully a message for you.

Before I tell you these stories, though, I have a couple of disclaimers that I need to share. Many of our past distinguished lectures have drawn from wisdom and experience to provide meaningful direction to our organization. Yeah, I don't have that. At best, I've got some lumps and bruises that I've learned along the way. I'm going to share a few stories and try to connect them to the things that I've learned. I love a good quote and one of my favorite quotes is “the most meaningful lessons in life are the ones that leave a scar.”

Second, I mentioned I'm an emotional person. So, the stories I've chosen today are personal. Actually, very personal. I taught high school in a small West Texas community called Idalou. If you're a red dirt country music fan, you might have heard of a guy named Josh Abbott. Josh is from Idalou, even sings a song called Idalou. He sings another song that's more relevant for me today. It's called “I ain't cryin, that's West Texas in my eye.” So, as I tell stories, if you see me begin to get a bit emotional, just remember that I ain't cryin, that's West Texas in my eye.

Finally, the stories I'm going to tell you are about people. They're about people, but they're also about experiences that I had with those people. And they're about lessons, lessons that began with me thinking that I understood something, but because of an experience with a person, I learned a better way to be.

I teach an introductory data analysis class at Texas Tech. I have for almost 20 years. There's actually a pretty good number of people in the room here today that have had that class, so they won't be surprised at all that true to form, here I am 30 minutes into class and I'm just now to the objectives for the day.

Three Stories

Mary Lou

The first story I want to share with you is a story about Mary Lou. I became the interim department chair at Texas Tech in 2016 in a very sudden turn of events. I didn't have any experience. I had very little qualification. And it was evident early on that I was in over my head. That's not entirely true. Dr. Frazee was our department chair and he was called to serve as the interim dean. And if you guys don't know, Dr. Frazee and I go way back. Dr. Frazee was actually my academic advisor when I was an undergraduate student at Texas Tech. He was on the search committee that brought me back to Texas Tech as a faculty member. And he brought me into his teacher preparation team, only to turn that team over to me when he took the department chair position at Texas Tech. So, our department really wasn't in jeopardy with Dr. Frazee's oversight, but from my personal perspective, I was in over my head.

I wasn't prepared to deal with the type of administrative responsibilities that came across my desk on a daily basis, but I had Mary Lou. Mary Lou Flom was the senior executive administrative associate. That's the kind of title you get when you've been there so long, that there's nothing else that you can be promoted to. Mary Lou retired a few years later, with over 42 years of service to Texas Tech, most of them in our department. I was actually an undergraduate student in our department when Mary Lou was the departmental secretary, so you can imagine how excited she was when they announced me as her new supervisor.

For the record, everyone loves Mary Lou. Whenever I meet people that have a connection to our department, it only takes about three questions for the conversation to get back to Mary Lou. It goes something like this:

“What do you do?”

“I work at Texas Tech.”

“Oh, really. What department?”

“Ag Education and Communications.”

“Is Mary Lou still there?”

So, luckily for me, as interim chair of the department, I had the wisdom and experience of Mary Lou to keep me on track. She may not have been thrilled to have me, but I absolutely loved having Mary Lou.

She knew everything. Anytime I was about to make a mistake, she had a very discreet way of suggesting that there might be a better choice. She might come in and say something like, “Dr. Burriss, we need to pay the invoice for such and such, what account do you want me to use?”

I might say, “Well, Mary Lou, why don't we use the Garrison account?”

And she would say, “No!”

I would say, “Okay, how about we use our general operating account?”

And she would say “No!”

I would say, “Okay, Mary Lou. What account do YOU think we should use?” And I would learn something.

So, one day, at the end of the day, Mary Lou came into my office. She was frustrated. I could tell that she was upset. She said, “Dr. Burriss, there's a chair missing from 107”, one of the classrooms in our building.

I said, “Mary Lou, how do you know it's missing?”

She said, “because every day, I count the chairs in the classrooms.”

And I said, “Mary Lou, do you know where the chair is?”

She said, “Yes, it's down at the end of the hallway where students gather.”

I said, “Can you put the chair back?”

She said, “No!”

And that was late in the day, and I was tired. And I said, “Fine, Mary Lou, I’ll put the chair back.”

She said, “No!” She said, “If we don't help people understand that these are the only resources we have, and we have to take care of them, no one will take care of anything.”

I was tired. I was frustrated. She watched me disappointed as I went to the end of the hall. I put the chair back in the classroom. I didn't sleep much that night. I was worried that I had made the wrong decision. As an administrator, I was worried that Mary Lou was not happy with me. And as I thought about it, the next morning when I got to the office, I just said “Mary Lou, can we talk?”

She said “Yes.”

I said “Our faculty work hard. I want our office to support them, not make their job harder, make it easier. I want to do things to help our faculty. However, I understand your position. I would have never thought to count the chairs in the classrooms. I'm so grateful that you do. I'm sorry I didn't hear you yesterday. And I will talk to our faculty.”

Mary Lou taught me that everybody needs somebody to count the chairs. Especially, those that aren't good at counting chairs. I learned that day that everyone brings something to the team and their contribution is valuable. It's even more valuable when it's something that you don't have on your own.

Taylor

I want to tell you a story about Taylor. In early August one summer, I met a young lady named Taylor. At Tech, we have a crazy process for students who were unsuccessful on their first attempt at college. If you've been placed on academic probation, you have to serve your designated time out. But, you can't be readmitted until you meet with the department chair, and the department chair approves you to return to the department.

When I started this job, I had no idea how to do that part of it. I even called over to our dean's office and said “what am I supposed to be doing here? What are you looking for?” The response that I got from them was “Oh, whatever you think. Use your best judgment.”

From my intro, you may recall that I was not the best college student. So, I quickly developed a pattern and a philosophy that I used in these meetings. Most of them went about the same. What did you do to get in this position? What have you learned from this? What has changed? What are you going to do differently? Inevitably, I let them all in. I would rather be judged on my mistakes of giving opportunities to people who weren't ready than taking away opportunities from people that were. And then I met Taylor! I said to Taylor that morning, “what did you do to get in this position?”

She said, “I partied. I never went to class.” I thought, sounds familiar. “I got in a bad place. I started abusing prescription medication.”

I thought, “Oh, wow, this is personal.”

“I lied to my mom about being on academic suspension.”

I thought, “Wow, this was bad!”

And she said, “I was using her tuition money to party. I even forged my grades and my tuition bill so she would continue to send money.”

I thought, “Oh, wow. This IS bad!” And then I thought, “If she lied to her mother, she'll lie to me.” I said, “Taylor, Does your mom know what's going on?”

And she said, “Yes.”

And I said, “Prove it. Call her.” I don't know if I can do that or not. But I did.

As her mom fought through emotions, she shared with me that she was aware. She asked me to consider an opportunity for Taylor to have a second chance. We hung up. I continued my conversation. I said, “Taylor, what's changed since your last attempt at Texas Tech?”

And she said very frankly, “Well, I've been to rehab. My prescription medication is back under control. I'm in the process of separating from some of the friends that have been a bad influence on me, and I'm looking for a job.”

And I mean, I was just thinking, “Oh, my goodness.” And I said, “Taylor, do you think you're ready for this?”

Through tears, she told me “I'm really scared. I don't know if I can do this. I HAVE to make this work.”

And I said, “Taylor, I don't think you're ready for this. But I'm not going to be the one that keeps you from being successful at college, I'm going to let you in. And if you don't succeed, it'll be on you. Not on me.”

I saw Taylor a couple of weeks into the semester, and she was really excited to see me. I said, “Taylor, how's it going?”

And she said “Man, it's tough. I'm making it. I'm hanging in there. But it's tough. I've only missed class three times!”

I said, “Taylor, it's only the second week of the semester!”

She said, “I'm working with my professors, it's good.”

I saw her a couple of more times in the hallway over the course of the semester, but like a lot of problems that come through a department chairs desk, once they're out of sight, they are out of mind. And I forgot about Taylor as the semester ended.

And then in January, I got an email. And the subject line said Academic Progress Report. It's a report I know well, Excel spreadsheet, three tabs on it. Tab number one has a list of all the students from our college that are on the President's list, 4.0. The second tab, Dean's List, all the students that have a 3.5. The third tab, all the students on academic probation and academic suspension. I always go right for the third tab, open it up, scan the list and look for students from my department. There were some names on there that I recognized, usual suspects. But there was a name missing and it was Taylor's. I flipped to the

first spreadsheet and don't get too excited. I recognized a few names on the 4.0 President's list and Taylor's name was not on there. But I flipped to the middle spreadsheet. And there it was, Taylor, on the Dean's list. I fought back tears that day. Much like right now. As I crafted an email to her that said, "I'm so proud! I can't believe that you have done this! I'm so happy for you! Keep up the good work!"

It took about 45 minutes for her to come to my office. And with tears in her eyes, she said, "your email made me cry."

I said "Taylor, it made me cry."

She said "You believed in me!"

And I said "Taylor, I didn't believe in you, but you did! And that's the most important thing."

Taylor made the Dean's List two more times before she graduated from our program. She took a job in the ag industry. And while I don't talk to her regularly today, I love to see the updates on social media. And if her social media accounts are an accurate reflection, she's absolutely crushing it today. I'm so thankful that Taylor taught me that even when you're certain that someone won't make it, they'll prove you wrong. And when you bet on someone despite incredible odds, and you see them win, it's amazing!

Martha

Some of you know my last story, and I apologize if you've already heard it, but I want to tell you about Martha. I help run a program at Tech called Bridge Adventure. It's a USDA HSI funded program that actually came about from an excursion in 2019 at the Western Region AAAE research meeting in Anchorage, Alaska. I had been out fly fishing on the Kenai River with a couple of faculty members and graduate students from our department. At the end of the day, we stopped on the way home to get something to eat and over a beer we laughed that when we tell everyone back at the conference that we spent the whole day in freezing cold rain, they'll never appreciate how amazing and transformational our day had been.

We came up with the idea for a program that would take college students, put them in seemingly uncomfortable and challenging situations, and ultimately result in personal growth and development and respect for the natural environment around them. That idea was not funded, but with a few tweaks, it became the successful Bridge Adventure Program. So today, our program selects students through an application and interview process. It's pretty well known and competitive to get in the bridge Adventure Program at Texas Tech. But I'll be honest, the first year, we took everybody that applied. Martha was one of those students

Our program has monthly activities that lead up to a big adventure every year. Year one we had applied for and receive permits for our group to spend two nights at Phantom Ranch, the collection of cabins at the bottom of the Grand Canyon. We had a few glitches in our plan. First, we had tried to build in activities that would simulate the experience. But we hadn't done a very good job working around schedule conflicts, or arranging alternate makeup experiences, so that we had confidence that our students were prepared for what they were getting into.

We also had a permit for 12 at Phantom Ranch, but there were 15 in our group. So, a few of us group leaders, myself included, had a camping permit to stay in the adjacent Bright Angel Campground. But that meant we had to carry everything with us that we needed for that trip.

I don't know if you guys have had this experience or not. When you review a federal grant, the scoring guide has an item on it for qualifications of the project team. I don't know what we scored on that

section, but it might have been a bit generous. In fact, on the morning that we started our hike to the bottom of the Grand Canyon, we had a quick impromptu leader meeting where it occurred to us that it might be a good idea if we had a plan on how to spread out our group leaders among the group. Nathan Gill, one of my close friends and colleagues in Bridge Adventure, agreed to take the point. He would lead them all and keep everybody behind him. I volunteered to bring up the rear. My objective, keep everyone in front, we would contain our group between us. I'm also the camp cook, and it's my favorite job and so I didn't mind bringing up the rear. That gave me a little bit of extra time to clean up from the breakfast that we had that morning, go through my gear, and make sure I had all of my equipment in order.

I'm a pretty seasoned backcountry hiker. But even so, I made a few mistakes that day. I estimated a four-hour hike to the bottom. Easy, for an Ironman. I took just enough water for four hours, didn't want to carry the extra weight. The group had about a 45-minute head start on me when I hit the trail. So, you can imagine my surprise when I caught up to the slow hikers in our group about a half a mile in. For those of you that don't know, the South Kaibab trail in the Grand Canyon is seven and a half miles of stairs – nonstop!

It was clear when I caught up to the slow group that Martha's physique, and physical conditioning, or lack thereof, was more formidable than we had estimated, and that this was going to be tough. In fact, over the next eight hours, it proved to be too tough. And about three miles in, Martha reached her limit - and she quit!

This didn't happen suddenly. I had watched it build for hours. As each step went from being uncomfortable, to exhausting, to painful, and finally, intolerable. So, there we were, on the side of the canyon, three miles in, and I left her!

I went for help, even though I wasn't sure what helped look like. I headed down because I didn't want to go up. And about three quarters of a mile down the trail, I ran into Nathan. Nathan had already made it to the bottom, dropped his gear, and welcomed all of the group into camp. And when we didn't show up, he grabbed a small hydration pack and headed back up the trail to check on us. He wasn't expecting to have to go four miles to find us. More than halfway back up!

We were excited to see each other. That excitement quickly dissipated when he asked the obvious question, "Where's Martha?"

I said, "She didn't make it." I think he misunderstood my answer.

You can imagine how proud of me he was when I told him I had left her on the trail. He shared that we were about a quarter of a mile away from a rest area on the trail known as the Tipoff. It has a shaded covered area, vault toilets, an emergency phone. As we debated what we should do, I said "I think we should go get help."

He said, "I think we should go get Martha."

He convinced me and the two of us returned to where Martha was on the trail. Nathan was masterful when he said to Martha, "I believe in you, you can do this." And she got up, and we slowly made our way to the Tipoff.

That process took a few hours, and I had a funny conversation with Nathan. As the tipoff came into sight, I told Nathan I was going ahead to the rest area. I had been out of water for a while. I hadn't had any food since breakfast. I needed a little time by myself. "I'll meet you guys at the rest area."

I sat and watched about the last 250 yards as Nathan and Martha came down the trail. They would take a few steps, and then they would stop – for a long time. They would take a few steps, and then they would stop again. When they got to about 50 yards from where I was sitting, Nathan finally left her to finish on her own and came to where I was sitting. I had taken my shoes off. I was catching the last bit of sunshine and warmth right before the sun set in the bottom of the Grand Canyon. Nathan looked at me and said, “I don’t think she is going to make it to the bottom.”

I said, “Nope.”

He said, “I think we probably need to call for help.”

“Yep.”

He looked at me and said “Do you want to do it?”

“Nope!”

This story has many layers. But, for time and purpose, let me skip to how it ended. We agreed that Nathan would go back to Phantom Ranch and stay with the group. Martha and I set up a survival camp at that spot on the trail. The idea was that we would spend the night. The next morning, we would start trying to make our way back out. That night that we spent together, we had a very raw, genuine, vulnerable conversation with each other. Among other things, we shared our own personal tragedies. Martha made a very personal commitment that night, not to me, to herself. But it was a commitment that I witnessed.

Our plan the next morning fell apart about as fast as we had put it together. And eventually she was evacuated on a helicopter. Just so you know, if you call for help from the bottom of the Grand Canyon, they don't just send the helicopter. That comes after hours of negotiation. In fact, about the fifth or sixth time I called the 911 operator that morning, she answered the phone like this, “Hey, Scott. How's it going down there?”

I said, “Not good.”

And she said, “Okay, I'll patch you through to Ranger Jeff.”

Martha was fine. She was taken to Flagstaff Medical Center. She was diagnosed with fatigue, exhaustion, and an acute panic attack. We tried to keep Martha engaged in our bridge Adventure Program. She actually came to a meeting after, but she was embarrassed, disappointed. She dropped out of the program, and we lost contact with her.

My wife, commenting about the experience afterward, had a pretty critical assessment of us as program leaders. She said, “Y'all are stupid! You shouldn't have taken her down there in the first place. If you didn't know she could do it, you shouldn't have taken her down there.”

And although I appreciate that perspective, my response to her then and my response now is, if that's the way you feel, you're confused about the goals of the program. The goal was never to make it to the bottom of the Grand Canyon. The goal was to challenge yourself, to learn something about yourself, to be better because of what you learned about yourself. The whole point of the program was to take people to the exact place where Martha was.

I'm sad that Martha did not stay engaged in our program. But I can report that Martha has honored the commitment that she made to herself that night on the side of the canyon. Her lifestyle has completely changed, and her health and well-being continue to improve to this day.

I changed also. I learned that the lessons that we're trying to teach aren't always the lessons that are learned. And those that we're trying to teach them to aren't always the ones that learn the lessons.

Conclusion

I want to close by saying thank you to a couple of more groups today. First, I'm on an amazing team. Many of them are here today, some of them are not. To my Texas Tech folks specifically, you guys are awesome. I love you. I wouldn't trade my place for anything.

I also want to say thank you to my wife Kendra, who is here today. If you get a chance, I hope you'll introduce yourself and meet Kendra. If you've ever heard me tell stories about Kendra, you know she's a badass. She's a tremendous business person, a great administrator, amazing at taking care of people. I have learned so much from her that I take to work every day. She's also an amazing mother and a phenomenal role model to our two wonderful daughters. My oldest daughter Lexi is a trade policy officer for the USDA Foreign Ag Service. She and her husband, Sam, live in Washington DC. My youngest daughter Hilary is a graduate of the University of Arkansas, Woo Pig! She'll start law school in August. Kendra and I are beyond blessed. Kendra, thank you for your unconditional support. I love you!

I have a thousand stories that I would love to tell. I chose three today, because they all left a significant mark on me - a scar, if you will. I'm thankful to Mary Lou, who taught me that we all need somebody to count the chairs. I'm thankful to Taylor, who taught me that even when you're certain that someone will fail, they will prove you wrong. And I'm thankful to Martha who taught me that the lessons we are trying to teach aren't always the lessons that are learned. And the ones we're trying to teach aren't always the ones that learn them.

So finally, today, I'm thankful for my time with you and for you giving me the chance to share this with you. God bless. I can't wait to see everybody in Lubbock and 2025!