

Keynote at KCA Graduation June 5, 2009

by V.J. Manzo

As many of you know, I am a PhD candidate at Temple University. Those of you unfamiliar with what PhD means—it stands for Permanent Head Damage which I must have for wanting to be in school this long.

Your high school years are over or coming to a close, and you are now been pushed “out there” wherever “there” is. It’s important during this time to have something to aspire to, some goals that you look forward to and pursue. When I graduated from high school, which doesn’t seem like a long time ago, but it was, I sat down and wrote out a 5 year plan for my life—what I wanted to be doing in 5 years, what I wanted to look like, and a number of other goals that I wanted to reach in 5 years. It wasn’t a wish list, but it became a plan for how I was going to accomplish my goals. After I wrote down what I wanted to be doing at the end of 5 years, I wrote down the steps I needed to take to get there. So if you want to be a lawyer, you need to get on the path to pursue law school. If you want to be a Bible scholar, you’ve got to go to seminary. It’s not enough just to say “I want to go to be a Bible scholar”.

Many people reach this point in their life—graduating high school—and don’t know exactly what they want to do with the rest of their life—that’s normal. Most adults feel this way, too. That’s why you see so many adults asking little kids “What do you want to be when you grow up”—we’re looking for ideas!! Often, you don’t know what you want to do because you don’t know what’s all out there--you’re parents and teachers and YouTube can only model so much for you. There are lots of career paths and jobs, so you have to see what’s out there, you have to expose yourself to situations where you can see what’s out there.

Sometimes it's best to know what you don't want to do. You don't figure that out unless you try things and realize you don't like them. For example, for a short period of time I pursued writing music for film, nothing big, mostly artsy independent films, and it was nice, but I didn't like it, so I knew I didn't want to do that. That's a good thing to know.

I knew I never wanted to have an office job--not knocking it, but I just don't like wearing ties. I really like music and I like writing music and performing music, talking about music the whole bit. So my career choices, as I began to see them, were get a job that will either support my desire to pursue music in that way, or get a job where someone would be willing to give me money to pursue music in that way --and that's how academia became an option for me.

I pursued Music Education because it seemed like a teaching job would support me financially to do what I really wanted to do which was to play Aerosmith songs all day. During my undergrad years, a research methods teacher said that as a teacher I'd never make money. He pointed at me and said, "You should applaud Mr. Manzo because he's doing a very brave and selfless thing being an educator"...."and he'll never make any money". I was ready to knock him out.

Don't let money be an issue for your education because it's the most valuable thing you can ever do for yourself. Solomon asked God for wisdom over money and God rewarded him with both. I'm convinced that's how it works if you work it that way.

Higher education is awesome and it's a lot of fun and it's not really that scary. It's a new experience and that can be scary, but the difficulty is largely in learning how to be independent—how to schedule your work life and your home life and your school life and your love life. For some

of you that last one is more difficult than others, but it's got to be done.

That's part of life. When you're in high school, you have projects in school and outside of school that take a few days to complete, maybe a week or so. As you move out of high school, you have things that you want to complete that take a few weeks or months to complete. As you continue moving forward, you're working on projects that take years to complete. This is why it's so important to always have a 5-year plan for your life—written down, somewhere—at any age.

In high school, if Mrs. Botelho gives you the evil eye because you showed up late for her class that meets every single day, it's because she cares about what's going on and she doesn't want you to fail. If you're in college and you should up to one of my classes after cutting class for a week and the class only meets twice a week, I'll smile and make jokes the whole time, and be normal me, because you're an adult and you're paying for this (well, really your parents are paying for this), so if you don't wanna be there or you can't be there it's your own business, so don't be there. But if you fail my exams I'll give you an F and I'll still be smiling me when I do it. The difference after high school is in your accountability to yourself and not your teachers or even your parents at that point because you know your grades better than everyone. This is a concept that I believe the KCA faculty tries to instill in all of the students. You should know your grades better than the teacher. Personally, I just teach—I don't pay attention to the grades I'm giving until the semester's over--*then* I add them up and all of that, but I know who's likely passing--the ones who show up and ask questions.

Education is more than getting a grade. Unfortunately the system is skewed so that A is considered an average grade even though C is the middle of the bell curve and if you don't get A's you could lose financial aid. But I know people with degrees from outstanding institutions--they

don't know that they don't know. And this is the point that I'm getting at:

It's very easy to be in love with this idea that you can just educate yourself: in college, by reading books, by listening to teachers and preachers and Wikipedia, but, in my academic experience which I have had the honor to see from both sides: professor and student, not many people are actually willing to put in the incredibly time-consuming effort to learn something.

It's very difficult to put wrinkles in your brain and it's tough. Most often, people think reading is learning or even sitting in a classroom is learning and it's just not the case. It's a process that takes a really long time and you've got to approach it from a number of angles. It's not good enough for me to just be good at music or one part of music, so you've got to pursue fields that are related to what you think you're interested in and fields that are seemingly unrelated because that's just what intelligent people do.

Take Michael Jackson for example--somewhere along the line someone should have told him that it's not enough to know how he feels about what he thinks is appropriate behavior, but he should also know how the rest of the planet feels about what he thinks is appropriate behavior. Even if he disagrees with the rest of the planet, it's whole lot easier to communicate with people when you have somewhat of a shared vocabulary. Intelligent people always do well if they can transfer the knowledge they have acquired to things that are unfamiliar.

So on the one hand, you can be the type of ivory tower academic where your research and field of study is inaccessible to most of the world below. The sons of Isacchar knew the times and we're able to teach the

people, so if you don't necessarily know what is happening in the culture, you could have a difficult time reaching that culture, if that's your objective. So you don't want to be an "ivory tower" type of person. But you also don't want to be the type of person who lives in a closed system—they only read what they read and they only get information from where they get information, and they hardly every put in the effort to work through something they disagree with or don't understand. When these people open their mouths it's just a runaway train of ignorance. Ignorant because they are just uninformed—they just don't have all of the information.

Uninformed people are targets for liars. For lack of knowledge my people perish. It's one thing to know the Bible, and it's another thing to know Biblical concepts and how they should effect your reasoning and your work ethic. Uninformed people can't often spot lies or half-truths or they live in a closed system where the truth can't get in because it's found in foreign sources—for Christians, these are often secular sources that are disregarded. For example, If you need specific financial advice, go to a legitimate financial counselor and pay him to speak with you for an hour or so, don't just go to the Christian book store and buy "Prayer of Jabez: Money Edition".

There are three types of lies: lies, dirty lies, and statistics. People misuse statistics all day long and uninformed people fall prey to these lies all day long.

Here's an example: in 1987 there were 13,508,700 crimes in the United States. In 1993 there were 14,144,800 that's an increase of 4.7%. So CNBC says that crime has increased 4.7% with a Republican President in Office—vote for Bill Clinton. But the number of crimes in the U.S. is not

the only that changed in those six years. What else changed from 1987-1993? The population, so the same crime rate stats per 100,000 people show that crime has actually *decreased* 1.2% from 1987 to 1993. So Fox News says crime has decreased 1.2% with a Republican President in Office—re-elect George H. Bush. Neither station is lying, but only a person who really searches the matter out, or really wants to search the matter out, discovers the truth. It's much more convenient to have other people dictate what the truth is than to go out and actually look for information, and then reason with it until it makes sense. Science says it's a 4 billion year old earth; you can make sense out of that from a Biblical perspective. It just takes some thought.

“Four out of Five dentists recommend Trident chewing gum”. Well, how many dentists did they survey? Five? That's not a big enough sample size. If they interviewed 5,000, that's 1,000 dentists who didn't recommend Trident chewing gum”. Sort of loses its effectiveness. Get the idea? This misinformation is everywhere.

Learning is about Aptitude and capacity.

Aptitude is how much you can learn. It's the potential to learn anything. Some people have this bigger than other people, but you can expand it—all you have to do is learn stuff and it'll get bigger.

Capacity is like the environment for learning. It's the "How well are they going to do in this academic environment". You can have all of the aptitude for knowledge in the world, but if you don't have the capacity to foster learning, the environment, it's going to be difficult to learn.

At KCA, the environment is what we probably do best.

It takes a village. Ever heard that phrase? When I was little, if I was

misbehaving outside with my friend, my friend's parent would yell at him and then yell at me. Then I'd go home and if the other parent told my parent what we were doing, I'd get yelled at again at home. I'm not certain if that happens any more. In the same manner, my friend's parents would also make sure I was safe while trick-or-treating and would bandage us boys up when we fell out of trees fighting alien soldiers and saving the world.

My parents raised me but it was also a community of people--it takes a village. Teachers play a big part in this village.

At KCA we try to provide an environment where people can learn. Like all schools, our teachers are busy and are largely disinterested in learning for you, so we give homework assignments and point you to where the information is, and then it's up to the students, as intelligent people, having been presented with the information to acquire knowledge, to go out and do the work to make that knowledge theirs—to fit that knowledge into their mental framework as it exists and make sense out of it. That's learning and it can't be done for you. People who want to learn stuff do that.

Again, without the environment for learning, the capacity for learning, the individual's aptitude can never be reached. And school is not the only environment.

Home life is crucial. I have a colleague who is deathly afraid of rollercoasters. He's just completely terrified of rollercoasters—always has been. But when his kids came of age where they wanted to ride rollercoasters, he didn't want them to have the same fear that he did, so when they'd ask him to go on rides, he would model good rollercoaster behavior. He'd scream and laugh and wave his arms in the air and the whole thing—modeling proper rollercoaster behavior even

though on the inside he was completely afraid to be on the rollercoasters. Well, his kids grew up and they're not afraid of rollercoasters.

Parents, you've got to model desire to learn, ambition for goals, motivation, and persistence even if you don't necessarily feel like it—remember learning is always taking place at home. So you're modeling something for your kids.

What do we teach at school anyway? Here's the biggest secret in High School--you don't learn anything, you learn how to learn

You learn little things, but you don't really learn anything. You don't. We teach one skill really well.

There are so many things that we could spend 4 years trying to teach you. In my lifetime I've seen academic trends come and go. In the 80's, teaching phonics was dumped--ten years later they brought it back--then the dumped it again--does it even really matter? Why do we teach cursive handwriting? The only time you're ever asked to write in cursive is your name "wow real hard" and it's usually when you're buying something. Have you seen what you're handwriting looks like--it's totally illegible--you ever sign for a UPS package on that little thing? Totally useless you may as well draw a snake or something. Schools in California are dumping cursive writing in their programs--maybe we should teach a typing class. Academic trends change and we can't possibly teach you everything you need to know.

The truth is that waiting out there for you is a crazy storm where you will be required to learn new skills fairly regularly. So, at KCA, that's what we teach you, how to take something that looks foreign and adapt. "So this kid is going to consistently be in this place where people

are gonna make him learn new things over and over again, so let's prepare him for this by giving him something he knows almost nothing about, like Algebra, and let's see how he does with it." "Here ya go kid" look it has letters and numbers but it ain't English. Can you learn to make sense of this strange thing that I'm presenting you with?

Everyone always asks "How is this going to help me in life" and this is how. When some boss says to you we just bought some new software and we need you to learn how it works and explain it to us--can you do it? Then you'll say, this software makes no sense to me now, but I've gotten a lot of practice picking up things that don't make sense and don't really have a strong direct bearing on my life's goals and making sense out of them--"Yeah, I can do that"--aching!!! Forget software—can you get this photocopier to work or the new coffee machine.

KCA has existed for 28 years and there's nothing we'd love more than to put the burden of learning right back on the student, the burden of administrating on the administration and the burden of teaching to be shared between the parents and the teaching faculty. You don't want us to teach your kid everything--you definitely don't want me to teach your kid everything, but there are areas where it's not our place to teach, so you do that, and we'll work on the academic side. It takes a village to make that happen. Congratulations graduates.