

"The Facts are Not Enough: Generating a Different Future"

Speech by Commissioner Russell G. Redenbaugh
to First State Project with Industry

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I must hear a dozen or two invocations a year, but today's invocation by Rabbi Yoshkavitz was the first one that I have really listened to in many years. I was so moved by the expression of gratitude for life that was conveyed in his invocation that I want to include this in what I say today -- that is, how fortunate we all are to be here, and particularly how fortunate I am to be here.

I never imagined that I would be here today. I came from Salt Lake City Utah, and I never imagined, especially when I was a boy of seventeen and I blew myself up and became blind, that I would attend The Wharton School, or manage an investment company or be the president of a computer software company. I never imagined that I would be appointed to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights which I didn't even know existed, even up until and including the moment in which I was offered to be a Commissioner.

I was just a guy, a seventeen year old high school kid with keys to the '56 Chevy and pimples, living in Utah in the early 1960s. I didn't know there was a Pennsylvania. I had heard of Philadelphia, but I didn't know of Pennsylvania. I really didn't know anything.

I never imagined that the accidents of life would bring me here to speak to you today, and that the Rabbi would give an invocation that so filled me with gratitude for being alive. But we are here and I will do my part to use well the time we have together.

I want to talk a little bit about the following topics:

- * how I arrived here;
- * history and historicity (probably the biggest word I will use today);
- * the advice I give to people who are disabled; and
- * what is disability?

I am absolutely convinced that we do not understand what disability is, and if we did understand what it was we wouldn't have the prejudices that we have and would not need to have passed legislation like the ADA. Then I will conclude with two paragraphs on ADA, adding a little bit to the mountain that has already been written on ADA.

I am here by accident. It was really intended that I would live in Utah, or after it became clear that I was going to go to graduate school to study business, it was intended by the fates, I am

sure, that I live in California, have a pool and a suntan. It was never intended that I live in Philadelphia. There has been a horrible mistake. It has turned out badly for the Phils too.

However, something happened, something intervened, things didn't go the way I had planned at all. Being from Utah, the furthest away from home that I could ever imagine going was California, that was only 749 miles. Stanford fit within that radius, so I thought I might attend the business school there. I applied to Stanford and they declined, twice. The first time they said to me that I couldn't manage to get through our program because they knew that anyone who was blind couldn't make it through a program which is as difficult as theirs. I asked how they knew that, had anyone who was blind ever failed? I knew the answer to the question already. No one who was blind had ever attempted the program.

So, at that point I reapplied for the program, knowing that they obviously had the wrong criteria for assessment. That time they said, 'Well you probably could get through our program. Your academic record is really quite remarkable, and all of your professors have been beating on us and have us convinced that you could get through the program. However, we can't waste our resources training someone who will be unemployable.' This occurred in 1967, this was not the middle ages, yet it was the middle ages in terms of some of our attitudes about persons with disabilities.

Simultaneously I applied to Harvard. They replied, 'You know it is very expensive to even apply here, so rather than take your application and the \$25 fee...' (laughter) I thought at least they understand ROI. So, they didn't even accept my application and I got to keep the \$25. That was great because \$25 was and still is a lot of money.

At that point I applied to Wharton and the rest is history, except that when I finished Wharton I couldn't get a job. I was graduated at a time when my classmates were getting jobs merely by retrieving the mail. You know the way people get bank credit cards? You open your mailbox and there is a bank credit card for your use, right? That's how the top students at Wharton were getting jobs in 1969. For anyone who was in the top 1/5 of the class, all you had to do was open your mailbox and there was a job offer. You didn't even have to go for a job interview. I had forty-nine job interviews, no offer.

My interviewers were very impressed. They would say, 'Wow, this is amazing what you have done, and we think what would be great for you to do is work for that other company over there. We see that you are very good for learning and they have an environment that would be much better for you. Why don't you just go over there, sonny.'

On the fiftieth interview I found a company called Cooke & Bieler, where I am still working as a partner and director. This was 22 years ago. At my interview, Cooke & Bieler said to me, 'Well, it looks like you can think, and this is a business in which thinking is important. You can speak, and that's important. It doesn't look like you have to be able to read. We'll hire somebody to read to you and take it out of your pay.' (They understood ROI too, they were all Harvard guys.)

I told them that I would have to think about their offer. They were surprised: 'You have to think about it?' 'Yes', I said, 'because I have already applied to the PhD programs at a few universities including Stanford and they have given me a very generous fellowship.' See, they learned their lesson.

As you know, I went to work at Cooke & Bieler. Just after I arrived, they hired two other young fellows. This was 1969. There were seven people in the company then. We discovered that this was too many mouths to feed, that this tiny company that managed about \$300 million couldn't feed all of us. We had two choices, either we needed to have fewer employees or increase the size of assets under management. We decided to try the latter. We built the company up and up and up. Now Cooke & Bieler has about \$4 billion of assets under management and we have increased the number of partners from seven to seven. We understood our ROI too.

I came to the Civil Rights Commission by accident. I am an economist with a reputation for being unusually good at seeing the future, which is a great reputation to have if you can't see the present. I invented a story that if what you want to do is to see the future, you should hire Redenbaugh, or hire his company -- they're very bad at seeing the present but super good at seeing the future. Believe me, there is more money in seeing the future than in seeing the present.

Along those lines I also wanted to be on the Federal Reserve Board; they have the future all screwed up. (laughter) I thought you'd see that. Well I got close, but not close enough. However, in my efforts to be on the Federal Reserve Board, I met Senator Dole. When I failed to get on the Federal Reserve Board the Senator called me and said, 'I have something else in mind, it is the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.' I said, 'Really, I have never heard of it.'

He explained to me about ADA and his role in ADA, and that the CCR was expanding to include the civil rights of persons with disabilities. I hadn't been walking around thinking I was going to do that, but after thinking about it, I came to realize that it was probably a more important opportunity, and a more important chance to contribute than being on the Federal Reserve Board. So here I am. I was accepted, I have been serving now about fifteen months. That is why I am here.

One of the notions that I have come up with is that the way to solve the problems of civil rights is to have a growing and expanding economy, one that produces job opportunities for everybody, and to have certain legislation to encourage people to open those opportunities where they otherwise might not do that.

As I look back across the 27 years of my life that I have been blind, a couple facts stand out. One is that there is a set of events that represent my biography, or my story, what happened to me -- Stanford declined, Wharton accepted, couldn't get a job, then I did. All of these

constitute what I call my history. There is also what I am going to call historicity. History is what happens to you, and historicity is the story you make up about it.

Historicity is the interpretation you make about what happened. It is the story that lets you decide to go forward or fall back, it is the story from which you generate the possibilities of the future. It is the story that allows you to do something different than someone else that has the same history.

Now, it is not always easy to generate this historicity in a country that is always telling you that because you are blind you can't -- can't ride in a taxi, can't sit here. But in order to keep moving forward and being effective in life you need to generate a historicity that is different than the history.

Let me talk a little bit about the advice I give to blind or disabled people. I was talking with someone the other day she was asking for advice, and like a lot of people who ask for advice this person wanted to hear what I had to say only if it agreed with what he already thought. Any of you ever have this? Any of you have children? They all fall in this category. Gee Dad, I wanted your advice but I am not interested in it any more because it doesn't agree with what I thought.

I was giving advice to this young man who was graduating from college and having difficulty finding a job. He is blind. He reported that he was interviewing and telling people that he was just as competent and could do anything that a sighted person could do. I recommended that he not say that. He said, 'No it's true, I can do anything that a sighted person can do.' I said again, 'I don't recommend that you say that.'

It took me about three times of saying this before he said, 'Oh, why?' I said, 'I don't recommend you start a job relationship by lying. You cannot do anything that a sighted person can do. What you must do is show the employer that there are some areas in which you cannot and will not be participating. And, in other areas, other domains of action, there are things that you can do much better, and if he wants those actions done, he should hire you.'

I realized then that we don't have a very good understanding about what is disability. We confuse a lot of things. Disability is a limitation in the physical body, I am including mental disabilities here as well. Disability is a limitation in the physical body that produces an inability to produce action in some particular area or category of action. For me it is seeing the present. I am not very good at that at all, this is a limitation.

We think, however, that because we have a limitation in one domain, or a physical limitation in some part of the body, that it affects our capacity for action, for effectiveness, for thinking, for generation, for being in the world in all the other domains. This is not true. It doesn't do that. In fact, it may result in other domains in being far more competent than people who are not assessed to be disabled.

Let me give an example. What if you discovered that in your company you had a problem with listening? Any of you have this in your company, that people give workshops on how to listen, and how to communicate? Listening is thought to be an important virtue? Well, who do you think would be a better teacher about listening, someone who is sighted or someone who is blind? I would argue somebody who is blind. If there were two people offering to teach you about listening, both equally competent but one was blind, who would you hire? I'd go with the guy who was blind. He must be good at listening or he would have been run over by now. (laughter) All the blind people who aren't good for listening are flat. True. (laughter)

So, I told this young man that he needed to start generating a historicity that acknowledges that there are a lot of actions that he can't do, that he is not going to do, and that he doesn't want a job that includes these anyway. However, if this employer wants a very important task done in a certain area that contributes to the company, they should hire him because in this other area he is much more competent. I told him to build his competence in that area and stop pretending that he can do everything a sighted person can do, because he can't. Now the guy had a whole new problem.

That is the advice that I give to people who are disabled. I also give it to all of you. What are the domains of action on this job? What do we really need? Where are the limitations a problem? Where are they not? And, what are the unusual competences that a person might have that has some limitations in the physical domain? Answers to these questions better prepare you to get down to the business of business.

Let me say, very briefly, one or two things about ADA. Any of you here concerned about ADA, does it look threatening? I have something here to show you. The Justice Department sent this to me, I'll bet you get one too. It is a little 6-page brochure about ADA, very simple, straight-forward, and unless you have already 400 other things about it I recommend this.

The way I interpret ADA is as an encouragement to do what is right. By "do what is right" I mean consider hiring qualified but disabled people. I say advocate hiring people who are disabled unless they are qualified, but if they are qualified, then why not? Only hire people who are disabled if it makes good business sense. Don't do favors to anybody. Don't run a charity business, that is not your responsibility. Hire when it makes sense to hire.

The real value of ADA is that it provides a little bit of conscience for people; it encourages us to look behind our automatic negative prejudices about people who are disabled. It encourages us to say, 'Wait a minute, in the area of employment, transportation, accommodation, telecommunications, and public services, it makes it illegal to discriminate against qualified people,' and that is the important part.

ADA is an encouragement to go beyond our automatic prejudice, the prejudice that has somebody like Stanford say 'It can't work here', or the taxi drivers that I run into that says 'No, you can't get that dog in my cab', or the restaurant, like one I was in a few weeks ago in the San Francisco airport, where they said 'You can't eat here because of the dog.' It is automatic.

For people who don't know they have these automatic prejudices, the ADA is an encouragement to look and see what is possible. Then, if the person is not qualified, don't hire them. No one is helped and no one gains dignity from a job that is a handout. Dignity is one of the important things missing from people who have disabilities, don't make it worse.

I am going to close now by saying that I wish for all of you here what I wish for myself. I think you are all doing this, and that is what was so exciting about the mood and tone of this meeting today, is that you are already all doing this, then I wish more of what you are already doing.

I wish for us all that we go through life not as a collection of petty complaints and ailments, but with the aim to be used in life for a purpose considered by ourselves to be a mighty one. In that, in being used for a purpose considered by ourselves to be a mighty one, we live in gratitude. We walk in the appreciation of what it is to be alive, and the problems of life fall in place behind. Life works itself out when we live for service. That is my wish for all of us. Thank you.

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