Inspiracy Theories: Change, Challenge and Choice

Good Morning

I am the son of Calvin and LaVerne, the grandson of Edward, Almeta, Ivory and Beryl. My heritage runs from Africa to Europe, from slave-owner to slave, from Texas Rangers to the native tribes they fought. I am pleased to be here to represent the accumulated experiences of those ancestors. Before I was, they were and I honor them. I would like to thank all of you for being here this morning, especially since that means my preparation is done. I am delighted to see Annabelle Underwood who has graced us with her presence for over thirty years. I am also blessed to have family members who could make the trip, especially my sister who has never heard me deliver a speech.

In early March I prepared for a meeting Teresa Huether to talk about Brown Bags and One Book stuff. We had had several conversations about a workshop on estate planning that Marsha Stiles was giving and I had some information on estate software. I arrived with several packets that I had prepared for the meeting to find that the accomplice, I mean Teresa, would be delayed. As Pat Williams and I sat waiting for Teresa to return we talked about a few things including One Book when she pulled out a book that the committee was considering – complete with ISBN that I might have caught had I been wearing my glasses. On opening the book I arrived at the title page: **You have been officially booked for the David L. Underwood Memorial Lecture Award.** Gotcha! I was a bit stunned, maybe a bit speechless which would be unusual for me, overwhelmed and excited. It’s like receiving a gold medal when you didn’t know you were in the finals, except you can’t show or tell anyone. You also have to think about how you would normally react to conversations about the award when you now know who received it. After the excitement, after the announcement and the congratulations, which I appreciate, after it goes back to business as usual for everyone else – the punishment begins. It didn’t hit me right away – I’ve given many speeches. When its before your peers – it’s a different game. When you know the people who have gone before – it’s a different game. When – thanks to Ann – you have to title your presentation before you have content – it’s a different game! My topic is **Inspiracy Theories: Change, Challenge and Choice** – I will do my best to keep you engaged and hopefully provoke some thought along the way.
I never met David Underwood but I have come to know something of the man through the people who knew him – that’s how teachers extend their reach. Dr. Myron A. Marty, the first Underwood Award winner, described him as “some kind of man, some kind of dean: unimposing, candid, a practitioner of common sense.” Ron Eldringhoff shared that “he was always able to give me a sense of revitalization, this gentle, but reasonable man. . . He dealt with problems in a straightforward manner, but always with humanity.” Ron goes on to say “What is significant then about this annual event is not that it glorifies Dave Underwood, the man, but that it serves as a rededication of this college community to the spirit of the man.” In 1984 Ken Smith offered this observation “Recipients of the award for the past nine years have all known Dave Underwood . . . In the not too distant future though, the Underwood Lecture recipient will not have known Dave Underwood. When that time comes, neither the significance of the award nor the impact on the recipient will be diminished. But rather, a tradition will truly have been established that will carry forward for the life of this College.” With that observation, in 1985, Carol Edwards became the first Underwood lecturer who did not know the humanistic dean for which the award is named. The spirit of the award should be the ‘life’ of the college.

Twenty-six years ago I faced a choice. I was going through one of those depressing introspective periods filled with uncertainty about my past decisions and future choices. I was considering a career change after working for several years as a chemical engineer with mechanical engineering degrees. Something was missing and I couldn’t quite identify it but a change was in order. In the midst of interviewing for a new position I read an ad in the Post-Dispatch advertising for a mechanical engineering instructor at Florissant Valley. I had never been on the campus. I didn’t know anything about community colleges and other than roller skating, swimming, Sunday school, and occasional tutoring, I had no teaching experience. So with that, I decided to apply. I interviewed with Ken Smith, Carl Dietz, Herb McMahon, Tom Bingham and Gloria Adeyemi. They were nice enough and I suppose the interview went well but I had no expectation of being chosen and shortly after the interview McDonnell-Douglas made the proverbial offer you can’t refuse. I didn’t. On the Friday before the week I was
scheduled to report to work – Florissant Valley called and offered me a position at 2/3 of the McDonnell-Douglas salary offer. Why would I turn down good money in a challenging and exciting position for a pay cut in an uncertain new direction? Clearly this was a decision worth considering. For a weekend I consulted friends and family; I prayed and reflected on the ethics of changing my mind; and Monday as I drove to McDonnell-Douglass to report to work I was still filled with doubt. There was a burning and nagging question. This community college thing didn’t make sense but something about it felt right. That Monday morning as they met me to take the picture for my badge, I *re-decided* to decline the McDonnell-Douglas offer and accept Flo’s. The nervousness started at that point. Unknown to the ‘powers’ at Florissant Valley I had never taken Statics, Dynamics or Thermodynamics. In fact, Florissant Valley represented the first time that I had read or owned those texts. At Rensselaer I had somewhat naively agreed to an advanced sequence that skipped those courses with the expectation that I would acquire the foundation by moving directly to upper level courses. I did well, graduating with honors, but I wasn’t sure if my foundation was strong enough for the detail of teaching. I had clearly stepped out on faith. I decided to use transparencies in my classes (uncertain about my board work) and at that time those could only be made in the IR building. Each thermal transparency took about 30 seconds to make and in my first academic year I made more transparencies than the rest of the campus combined. For 26 years I have had no regrets about “The Road Not Taken.” It is a constant reminder, however, that life is that metaphorical ‘game of inches.’ Perhaps I am romanticizing my choice but *Frostian irony* aside; I believe it has made all the difference. A lot has changed since that freshman year and much had changed even before my arrival. [Slide Show]

Life is about change and much has changed since the first Underwood Lecture in 1976. Thirty-three years ago there were no cell phones, or CDs, no cordless phones or caller ID. Some of us were still watching black and white TVs. Punch cards and Fortran – the programmers choice and at Flo on the phone if you heard a voice, it was live. And we couldn’t survive without ditto machines – Selectrics and white-out were tools and the means to reports. If we had to sort, it was done by hand and carbon paper was still in
Inspiracy Theories: Change, Challenge and Choice

demand. Pac Man was not yet a game and Atari had not yet achieved the fame that it would. Technology was good. Eight tracks were still being played and VCRs were now being made overseas – imported for TVs that were still made in the states. We hadn’t yet heard of Microsoft or Bill Gates or the IBM PC. And big cities had no cable TV. Pagers were not yet carried by teens – there were no multiplex theatres with 18 screens. Oil wasn’t changed at Jiffy Lube and no one had heard of a Rubik’s Cube, a Jarvik heart or an MRI, Indie Jones or that Skywalker guy. Microwave cooking was not yet the rage and research demanded our eyes on a page – Not the Net. Not yet! The mouse and the hard drive had not yet appeared and Kodak film was still revered for our photographs – and just for laughs we watched Happy Days not Different Strokes. We listened to Cosby’s stories and jokes while The Sony Walkman was just a thought and the first pair of Nike’s had not yet been bought.

Change! We are living in a time of accelerating change and complexity where changes in technology, communities, families, work, education, environment, demographics and global interaction challenge us by outpacing our ability to adjust.

So what does this have to do with Inspiracy Theories. The distinguishing characteristics of those who will thrive in this twenty-first century will be the intellectual and emotional traits and abilities that entail excellence in evaluating and responding to conditions of change. I like to play with words and it occurred to me after watching the 1997 Mel Gibson and Julia Roberts movie, Conspiracy Theory, to play with the word conspiracy. Conspire means to agree together, secretly, to do something wrong, evil, or illegal; and a conspiracy is defined as a secret agreement between two or more people to perform that act. Inspire on the other hand is to fill with an animating, quickening, or exalting influence; so I decided an inspiracy would be a combination of persons who openly participate in the act of encouraging and inspiring others for a positive rewarding purpose or outcome. The focus of Inspiracy Theories was an examination of those factors that deter or support building an inspiracy: change, diversity, negativity, leadership, stress, creativity, and humor. Leadership in an organization is not only about producing results; it is also about maintaining the capacity to produce – protecting and honoring the relationships. Effective leaders would clearly be inspirators.
Inspiracy Theories: Change, Challenge and Choice

For better or worse this campus in many ways has been my home. It is filled with mentors and memories and to whatever extent I have grown up much of that growth has taken place in this family – sometimes fractured, sometimes dysfunctional – but there was always energy and inspiration. There have always been connections that are filled with open encouragement and support. The existence of some dysfunction (as in almost any real family) does not negate the fact. I discovered at this campus that I was always becoming. I came to this campus following a tiny flicker of undetermined passion and it grew to a flame. Reading and viewing the lectures of those who preceded me to this stage was a reminder of the gift this campus has been to my life – a reminder of the importance of what we in turn give to our students – an inspiracy. Had I made a different choice I may have been a better engineer, but I would not have been a better person. We live in a space where we get to touch lives every day. I am not speaking just to faculty. Every day we are in an environment where encouragement – human connection – can change lives. Teachers, counselors, librarians, housekeepers, physical plant, secretaries, groundskeepers, administrators, professional staff, classified staff and students – We get to touch lives! There is nothing more honorable, or more powerful. It’s that special. The climate can and should be an inspiracy where we continually prepare our students to make good choices in an uncertain world. But making good decisions requires a yardstick to measure the quality of our choices.

Good decisions . . . [SLIDE]

- **Expand the mind**

  We want to expand the minds of our students – to help them become better thinkers. Part of this is making the case for broad education beyond specific disciplines – establishing the importance of history, humanities, natural, physical and social sciences. We want them to read and access information from a variety of sources and perspectives; with the understanding that the Internet does not turn words into facts. We want them to be more than ideological thinkers – easily persuaded by slogans without substance. In the twenty-first century especially, expanding the mind also means expanding awareness and competence in mathematics, science and technology (technology being much more than computers). I believe that beyond the application-oriented value in STEM there are fascinating stories about the interactions of great
thinkers. I’ll try to give you an abbreviated version of a 17th century soap opera. What would have happened if the next to lowest ranking student at Grantham’s Free Grammar School had given up – a student often filled with self-loathing who lost his father before he was born and felt abandoned by his mother? We would have lost Isaac Newton, an intellectual giant by the age of 36, and a member of the elite Royal Society. Still when Robert Hooke denounced his thesis that white light was not pure, as Hooke had suggested, Newton withdrew from the Royal Society and had to be persuaded by Edmund Halley to complete his book *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy in 1687*. Newton and the German mathematician Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz independently developed Calculus although Leibniz published first. They were arch rivals and in the Leibniz camp were the Bernoulli brothers, Jakob and Johann, of Basel Switzerland. Jakob, who taught mathematics at the University of Basel, resented the quickness of his younger brother (Johann) and blocked him from teaching at the university. Christian Huygens offered Johann the Mathematics Chair at Groningen University in the Netherlands. As this drama had unfolded Johann had tutored a young French mathematician, Marquis Guillaume de l'Hospital, and later confided many of his discoveries to his protégé and *friend(?)*. Johann would later think that l'Hospital took credit for his work. Johann had a son, Daniel Bernoulli, who was also a prodigy who couldn’t get a professorship at the University of Basel. With considerable coaxing from his brother he accepted a position in St. Petersburg, Russia. After his brother’s death he sent for a young gifted student his father taught named Leonhard Euler. They became friends(?) but intrigue and envy again reared their heads. The elder Euler resented the joint award to father and son for winning the prestigious annual technology challenge sponsored by the French Academy of Sciences. [Maybe some of resentment stemmed from Daniel’s secret admiration for Newton over his father’s friend Leibniz]. Later the younger Daniel would accuse Leonhard Euler of conspiring against him to delay the publication of his book *Hydrodynamics* until the elder Euler, Johann, could steal parts of it and publish a book called *Hydraulics*. Though thoroughly disheartened Daniel Bernoulli went on to win a total of ten French Academy Awards, a record until Euler won twelve. As in most soap operas it’s difficult to follow. Among some of the greatest thinker’s in 17th and 18th century Europe, there was dysfunctional drama interspersed
with timely support and encouragement. It’s also true that we don’t always recognize talent or it doesn’t always show up during a test. Einstein was expelled from the Luitpold Gymnasium with the comment, “your presence in the class is disruptive and affects the other students.” The headmaster also told Albert’s father “He will never make a success of anything.” Einstein failed his first entrance exam to the Federal Institute of Technology. I think it’s important to share some of the background of these giants with our students so they understand that the names they see sprinkled throughout textbooks also struggled. It’s also a reminder to us to keep our focus on success and not on the obstacles or undercurrents that we believe or perceive to be present at the College. To expand the minds of our students we must continue to expand our own.

**Encourage our heart**

Our students come to us with a variety of narratives and negative tapes that loop continuously in their lives. [SLIDE] When we talk about heart we are talking on several levels. On one level we are talking about relationships and how we treat each other, respect each other and support each other. We want that heart to be evident in our classrooms and the corridors, in our administrative decisions and policies, in our extracurricular activities, our outreach to the surrounding community, and in our personal choices. To the extent that we encourage one another we create a more optimistic and hopeful climate while modeling positive behavior to our students. On a second level heart is about our passion – following the heart. I am here along with most of you because I had a passion for joining and remaining in an academic community surrounded by people who have a profound love of learning. Part of our responsibility is to help students discover their passion and chart a course for realizing their dreams. We want them to be passionate life-long learners as well as motivated performers. We often ask children or our students what they want to be in reference to a career. Our chief contributions in life may not occur in the discipline for which we have been educated and trained. Perhaps the career question may be better framed as how will you earn a living while you are becoming what and who you want to be. We want to encourage heart and passion with the reminder that passion and education is more than getting a
job. A third level of heart is often discussed in competitive athletics where heart refers to that ability to dig deep within ourselves to pursue a goal – to persevere. Success requires tenacity – holding on when others have let go. If we don’t challenge our students with high expectations they miss the growth spurt that comes from persistence. Good decisions encourage the Heart.

- **Elevate our character**

  We also measure the quality of our choices by how those choices elevate our character – a set of basic principles for effective living – principles that include honesty, respect, courage, integrity, maturity, fairness, compassion and responsibility. From the McGuffey Reader’s emphasis on honesty, courage, and hard work to ‘values clarification’ and Lawrence Kohlberg’s ‘just community” character education has been a topic of discussion. We can debate whether or not character can be taught in the academic setting, but we have experienced the cost of deficiencies in character at every level of government, in struggling communities, in our sometimes ‘not free’ market system and even within the academic community. Martin Luther King, Jr. said “The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically and that intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character--that is the goal of true education. The complete education gives one not only power of concentration, but worthy objectives upon which to concentrate.

  Chaim Ginott, teacher, principal, and psychologist wrote the following to his teachers:

  Dear Teacher:

  I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no man should witness:

  Gas chambers built by LEARNED engineers,

  children poisoned by EDUCATED physicians,

  infants killed by TRAINED nurses.

  Women and babies shot and buried by HIGH SCHOOL and COLLEGE graduates.

  So, I am suspicious of education. My request is: Help your students become human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmans. Reading, writing, and arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more humane.”
Character is doing the right thing – when it is difficult, when no one is watching, when there is no reward, when it is simply right. We have to seize those teachable moments to introduce or reinforce the importance of character. The essential elements of character challenge us to become more humane.

- **Energize our creativity**

Just as intelligence alone does not assure good thinking, information does not make a person creative. Creative thinking requires an attitude and an approach to manipulating knowledge and experience that facilitates the development of new ideas. We must challenge our students to augment critical thinking which is analytic and convergent with divergent lateral generative thought. Einstein and Picasso were contemporary four dimensional thinkers and according to Arthur I. Miller in his book *Einstein Picasso: Space, Time, and the Beauty That Causes Havoc*, “the similarities in their personal lives, working lives, and creativity are uncanny and documentable.” Einstein said, “Imagination is more important than knowledge.” Picasso observed, “Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up.” Carl Jung added, “The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct acting from inner necessity. The creative mind plays with the objects it loves.” As Edward de Bono, speaking on creativity asserts, “We need to put far more emphasis on creative and design thinking. Judgment and analysis are not enough. . . . Lateral thinking is concerned not with playing with the existing pieces but with seeking to change those very pieces.” We need to challenge our students to explore their creative energy. We need to encourage the play instinct and the joy of learning. Julia Cameron writing in The Artist’s Way notes, “The refusal to be creative is self-will and is counter to our true nature. In order to have a real relationship with our creativity, we must take the time and care to cultivate it.” We are in the business of transformation and the lines between mathematician, engineer, artist or the people I’ve just quoted are arbitrary. I call them all creativists. People who see the same things we see but in a different way. Although the media changes they are driven by a heart-felt need to make things. They are writers, mathematicians, composers, scientists, sculptors, engineers, and teachers. They are formally trained or undereducated but they find their own expression. They
Inspiracy Theories: Change, Challenge and Choice

can see around corners and their efforts have lasting influence. Was Leonardo Da Vinci an artist who dabbled in engineering or an engineer who dabbled in art? Peter Drucker was often called the “father of modern management.” By looking at people working and putting what he saw in historical context this newspaperman with a law degree created a new liberal art: management. Dr. W. Edwards Deming is sometimes known as the 'Father of modern Quality'. He had degrees in electrical engineering, mathematics and physics.

**David Salsburg wrote:**

"He was known for his kindness to and consideration for those he worked with, for his robust, if very subtle, humor, and for his interest in music. He sang in a choir, played drums and flute, and published several original pieces of sacred music."

I argue that engineers are creativists both inside and outside of their discipline. **Theo Jansen** (age 60) is a Dutch artist and kinetic sculptor who builds large works which resemble skeletons of animals and are able to walk using the wind on the beaches of the Netherlands. [Slide] **"The walls between art and engineering exist only in our minds."**

There are other famous people who were engineers or had engineering backgrounds:

- **Scott Adams** - cartoonist and creator of "Dilbert"
- **Alexander Calder** - a mechanical engineering turned sculptor. Many of his large sculptures are on permanent outdoor display at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- **Frank Capra** - film director - "It Happened One Night", "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington", "It's a Wonderful Life" - college degree in chemical engineering.
- **Roger Corman** -film director, industrial engineering degree from Stanford University. His probably unbeatable record for a professional 35mm feature film was two days and a night to shoot the original version of "The Little Shop of Horrors".
Inspiracy Theories: Change, Challenge and Choice

- **Leonardo Da Vinci** - Florentine artist, one of the great masters of the High Renaissance, celebrated as a painter, sculptor, architect, engineer, and scientist.

- **Thomas Edison** - Edison patented 1,093 inventions in his lifetime, earning him the nickname "The Wizard of Menlo Park."

- **Lillian Gilbreth** - and her husband used their industrial engineering skills to run their household, and those efforts are the subject of the book and family film "Cheaper by the Dozen."

- **Herbie Hancock** - jazz musician.

- **Alfred Hitchcock** - "Psycho", "The Birds", "Rear Window", and "North by Northwest."

- **Tom Landry** - former Dallas Cowboys coach.

- **Hedy Lamarr** - a famous 1940s actress credited with several sophisticated inventions, among them a unique anti-jamming device for use against Nazi radar.

- **Arthur Nielsen** - developer of Nielsen rating system.

- **Montel Williams** - a highly decorated Naval engineer, Intelligence Officer, author of inspirational books and host of a popular syndicated television talk show.

It is ultimately that ability to see around corners – to examine what others see and see more – to see connections and the influence of the immeasurable. Thomas Friedman has suggested that the world is flat. I respectfully disagree because flatness is only a temporary condition. The world is tectonic: converging, diverging and transforming. Along with common sense creativists have an uncommon sense for an uncommon world. That is what links the Einsteins and the Picassos, the Demings and DaVincis. That is what links the previous Underwood lecturers – they were and are creativists – unbound by shackles of academic discipline – free to build a people centered reality – an inspiracy and I am humbled and awed just to be invited to this playground.

- **Embrace our families and our communities – Edify our spirit**

  **Remember that we are all connected.** In our communities we will **stand on the mountain** that others have built or we will **languish in the hole** that others have dug. **We are connected!** As a community we cannot afford a prison industry populated with
African-American males who will become the poster children and justification for profiling, redlining, steering and exclusion. We are connected! The young men and young women who have strayed; the men women and children who are trapped in the glass cage of poverty, able to see out but not get out, they are still our brothers, sisters, sons, daughters and cousins and we should make every effort to help those men and those women who want to make a positive contribution – who want to be successful.

The village concept is real. While it takes a village to raise a child, it takes strong families to make a village, it takes strong adults to make strong families, and it takes well-raised and educated children to make strong adults. We are in the transformation business where families and communities will send us students and charge us with the responsibility of strengthening them as adults.

- **Edify us (and our neighbors) spiritually**

Sprit is the vital essence or animating force in living organisms. We should be about the business of edifying the spirit because we are connected. We need to reexamine what we mean by success so that we don’t mistake loving relationships, caring and kindness, triumph of the human spirit, and tenacity as failure because it didn’t produce enough money, degrees, or titles. Each of us has the potential for greatness. We will have the opportunity to make many good decisions. If we want to have our stories told we will have to tell them. If we want to live in communities that protect and respect our families and children, we will have to build them.

Our challenge is to embrace our diversity by breaking old stereotypes –blending our separate stories into a single narrative that is centered on love, mutual respect, support, and accomplishment. We can achieve success when we become men and women of concern, conviction, courage, and commitment.

Any time a decision is good for us, supports our family, helps our community and strengthens us spiritually then we should go with it - we're making a good choice! If we don't measure up in one of those areas, we probably need to rethink our decision.
We are here to prepare our students for the world in which they will live. The future of any culture or society ultimately rests on what it creates and builds; how it raises and teaches children; where it leads; and not solely on what it sells, services, sings or plays. Science and technology will be at the core of our competitive edge in the twenty-first century only if we are prepared to educate ourselves and our children. It does not matter if we are European-, African-, Hispanic-, Asian- or Native American; it does not matter if we are male or female; younger or older; abled or disabled; we can learn and contribute to the technological continuum! There are chapters of our history that are yet to be written and we are the authors. We are a part of future history and the challenge you face, the challenge we all face is what chapters will we write and who will be there to read them?

Ultimately, Success is not how much we have; it is how much we give. Success is not how much money we make; it is how we make that money work to build a better world. It is not the car we drive; it is the lift we give someone when he or she needs a ride. Success is not about our credentials, it’s about our credibility. Success - is not living large, it is leaving large footprints for future generations to follow on their way to success.
Prayer of Commitment

Lord Help me to question the world that I see,
To listen to questions and thoughts brought to me,
To criticize fairly with love and respect
Confessing my error when I'm incorrect.

Lord Help me give credit where credit is due,
Never forgetting the credit due You.
Guide me in thinking through all that I plan
And grant me the drive to do all that I can.

Lord touch me and teach me to truly be free
By helping me want what You want me to be.
As You lift me through challenge to each new plateau,
Lord help me to help those behind me to grow.

Terrence L. Freeman  ©1988