

Encouragement: Our Gift to the Next Generation
Grant McClung

I grew up in the western United States, a region of wide open spaces, massive ranches, and extensive farms. It was, at least in my childhood imagination (helped along in a large part by Hollywood images), a place captured in the idyllic words of a Cowboy tune, commonly regarded as the anthem of the American West:

Home, home on the range
Where the deer and the antelope play
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word
And the skies are not cloudy all day¹

Since those childhood days, life's realities have taught me that not all words are encouraging, not all days are cloudless, and most endeavors are met with obstacles and those "special" individuals who seem especially able to locate the negative in every situation!

In retrospect, we smile when we recount that:

- After Fred Astaire's first screen test, a 1933 memo from the MGM testing director said: "Can't act. Slightly bald. Can dance a little." Astaire kept that memo over the fireplace in his Beverly Hills mansion (we don't remember the name of the testing director!).
- An "expert" said of legendary football coach Vince Lombardi, "He possesses minimal football knowledge. Lacks motivation."
- Louisa May Alcott, the author of the famous Little Women, was advised by her family to forsake writing and find work as a servant or seamstress.
- Beethoven handled the violin awkwardly and preferred playing his own compositions instead of improving his technique. His teacher called him hopeless as a composer.
- The teacher of famous opera singer Enrico Caruso said Caruso had no voice at all and could not sing.
- Walt Disney was fired by a newspaper for "lacking ideas." He went bankrupt several times before building Disneyland.²

¹ From a poem, "My Western Home" by Brewster M. Higley

² Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen, Chicken Soup for The Soul (Health Communications, 1993).

Though there have been well-known individuals such as these, who persevered in the face of resistance, doubt, and insurmountable odds, there are multiplied millions who have accomplished much in life because they were encouraged by others. Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872 – 1904), considered the virtual father of black American poetry, captured it like this:

“Encouraged”

Because you love me I have much achieved,
Had you despised me then I must have failed;
But since I knew you trusted and believed,
I could not disappoint you and so prevailed.³

Encouragement is a natural part of human existence – certainly a central focus of parenting. Every year it is estimated that there are some 200 million Mother’s Day cards sold in the United States – a recognition of the encouragement of mothers. The Apostle Paul used the imagery of a father when he told his friends in Thessalonica:

For you know that we dealt with each of you *as a father* deals with his own children, *encouraging*, comforting, and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory (1 Thessalonians 2.11-12).⁴

Most definitions of “encourage” and “encouragement” stress that to encourage is to inspire with courage, hope, or resolution. Some older versions use the definition “to hearten” which literally means “to put heart back into someone.” This is particularly relevant in light of soul-searching times, described by Jesus as times when “men’s courage will fail completely” (Luke 21.26 Phillips Translation).

In scripture, encouragement carries the emphasis of “urging forward, persuading, counseling with, and stimulating” others in the discharge of their duties and obligations as believers – especially in the face of harsh opposition, resistance, and violence. Scripture directs us to, “...*encourage* one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you will be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (Hebrews 3.13). Early Christians, facing stress, persecution, and obstacles were counseled, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us *encourage* one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10.25).

The Bible reveals our Heavenly Father as an encourager: “You hear, oh Lord, the desire of the afflicted; you *encourage* them, and you listen to their cry” (Psalm 10.17). God has designated encouragement as one of the spiritual gifts in the body of Christ. Alongside

³ Joanne M. Braxton, Editor. The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar (University of Virginia Press, 1993).

⁴ All scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from the New International Version - italics added by the author for emphasis.

the more (supposedly) “prominent” gifts such as prophesying, teaching, governing, there appears the spiritual gift of encouragement (Romans 12.8).

How then, do I extend encouragement to my peers, to those I influence, and especially to the next generation of leaders? I recommend at least five practical ways to encourage others by: *standing* with them; *speaking* a word to (or for) them; *showing* them a concrete act of encouragement; praying (*supplication*) for them; *seeing* the future with them.

1. *Stand* with them

Into the face of a hostile crowd, the Apostle Peter stood up to preach. When he did, there was the movement of eleven other men who stood up *with* him. I like how the Phillips translation of this Day of Pentecost event describes it, “Then Peter, *with* the Eleven standing *by* him” (Acts 2.14). One man may have done the verbal preaching but eleven others were standing in unity and solidarity with him. The eleven “encouragers” beside Peter were basically saying to the crowd, “we believe and affirm this man and what he is preaching. Take up stones to stone him and you will have to stone us all!” By standing with others we express our commonality in calling, commitment, and collaboration.

2. *Speak* a word to them/for them

As children we sometimes repeated the schoolyard chant, “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.” Words, however, *do* hurt. Thank God, however, that *encouraging* words also heal, help, and give heart. That is why the scripture admonishes us to speak to one another:

“Therefore *encourage* each other with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4.18).

“Preach the word, be prepared in season and out of season, correct, rebuke and *encourage* with great patience and careful instruction” (2 Timothy 4.2).

“He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can *encourage* others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” (Titus 1.9).

How often has my perspective been changed or my spirit lifted by someone taking even a brief moment to speak something significant into my life. Novelist Charles Dickens reminds us (through one of his literary characters) that, “No one is useless in this world who lightens the burden of it to anyone else.”⁵

⁵ Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (J.B. Lippencott & Co., 1885).

3. *Show* encouragement with a concrete sign or action

Recently my wife and I attended the dedication ceremony of the second child of one of our missionary couples. Typically, in visiting congregations we are there to *say* something, i.e. to speak. This time, however, our ministry was that of *presence*. Being there said to this young couple, “we value you and your friendship; your family is important to us.” St. Francis of Assisi gave his colleagues the now-famous instruction, “Preach the gospel at all times and when necessary use words.” We often encourage as much, or even more, by what we *show* than by what we *say*. Encouragement must often be *seen* before it is *heard*. A card, a special gift, our presence to help on a work project, sitting with someone through grief, a financial offering – the list goes on and on.

4. *Supplication*: Pray for them (and let them know it)

Most everyone has a file or a special place full of meaningful letters, mementos, and memorabilia. Mine has a handwritten note from a former professor, one of the evangelical world’s best known missiologists. Not long after leaving seminary to start my own missionary service, I received a note from him in the mail, written on behalf of the wider group of colleagues that had impacted my missiological journey. “Today,” he wrote, “in faculty meeting we remembered you in prayer.” Paul’s letters are full of reminders to his ministry partners how he remembers them and prays for them. Among my favorites is:

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, ... (Philippians 1.3-5)

5. *See* the future together

The completion of Paul’s reminder to his Philippian partners tells them that they have a future and he sees it together with them:

“... being confident of this, that he who *began* a good work in you *will carry it on to completion until* the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1.6).

Other leaders, especially younger colleagues, need to have someone get up on the mountaintop with them and look toward the horizon together, appreciating and affirming the vision that God is giving the next generation. They need to have someone show them how it looks to finish well and express confidence that it can be done again tomorrow as well as yesterday.

“Tomorrow” was on the minds of the “Hickory Huskers” as they filed anxiously into the Butler Field House in South Bend, Indiana. It was 1952. The true story of the Huskers (who in rags-to-riches style won the state basketball championship that year) is told in *Hoosiers*, one of my favorite family films. The Huskers were from a small country high school of 64 students in the rural heartland of Indiana. The film records victory after successive Husker victory in the crowded, cracker-box gymnasiums of small-town high schools. The scene etched in my memory is when they step off of their rattletrap school bus on practice day before the tournament and walk for the first time into Butler Field House, a massive arena with row upon intimidating row of thousands of seats.

“Tomorrow,” in this new and imposing environment they would face off with the “Mighty Bears” of South Bend Central High School, a modern urban high school which had 2,800 students. One by one, the camera captures the expressions of these farm boys – wide eyed with mouths open – who had never seen a place like this before (It was 1952...before the omnipresence of television). In their faces you can see fear, anxiety, intimidation. Their coach (played by Gene Hickman) was ready for this moment.

Pulling a tape measure from his overcoat, he said, “Charlie, come over here.” Handing Charlie one end of the line and holding the other under the basket, he told his player to walk to the foul line. He deliberately measured and called out the distance. Then, the coach called his shortest player to be hoisted up with the tape measure to the rim of the basket. They carefully measured from the rim to the floor. “Ten feet, Coach,” came the surprised response from his player.

To their relief and reassurance, the coach gathered his team around him, looked them in the eyes and said, “I think you’ll find it’s the exact same court as ours back in Hickory.” He was saying to them that regardless of the overwhelming size of the arena and the massive, sometimes hostile crowd, the dimensions of the court were exactly the same as the one at home. That day, and tomorrow, the court belonged to them.

Encouraging affirmation to the next generation of leaders lets them know that the arena and the crowds may have changed but the dimensions and directions for spiritual leadership remain the same. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13.8).⁶

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⁶ As told in Grant McClung, [Globalbeliever.com: Connecting To God’s Work in Your World](http://Globalbeliever.com) (Missions Resource Group 2010, p. 277).

