

Good Evening, too all of you, the members of the Urban League Board and members, students, parents and friends. It gives me great pleasure to come before you this evening. As most of you know, I spend most of my days with teenagers and have done so for the past 40 years, when I went straight from being a teenager to teaching teens. Because of that close association with teenagers, I sometimes forget that I'm not still a teen-ager. In all seriousness, however, I have the greatest job in the world, because I get the opportunity to not only interact with teenagers, but also I get an opportunity to mold their futures. It really pumps up my self-esteem when I hear from students from decades ago who say that something I said or did made positive impact on their lives. When Ms. Hunter asked me if I would be the keynote speaker this evening I gladly accepted because I know the great work that the Urban League of Middle Tennessee does not only for teenagers, but for adults alike.

When we are told to do the right thing, we usually think of doing the morally correct thing, such as not lying, not cheating, not stealing, not killing, not Doing a lot of things. Tonight I want to get away from telling you what NOT to do and share with you some life lessons I have learned about what TO DO. I have found that nature provides so many lessons for humans. The other day, I observed a beautiful butterfly that had lighted on my outside flowers. As I observed this beautiful butterfly, I thought back to the previous stage of a butter fly when it is an ugly caterpillar that somehow morphs into one of nature's most beautiful creatures. I considered budding plants that I had rooted and transferred to another site. At first they were straggly and about to die. With a little water, fertilizer and tender care, I now have some of the loveliest mums on my street. What I learned is that all of nature is capable of transforming itself from one state to another. It is the same with human beings. We were not meant to stay the same. We are or should be in a constant state of becoming. – Becoming better - not better than someone else, but better than we were the day before and certainly better than we were years before. Howard Thurman, the noted African American theologian and writer, says that each day we should strive to be better in our most ordinary day-to-day contacts. We should strive to be better with our friends, our family, and casual contacts. We should become better in our responsibilities. When I become a better me, then I will do the right thing, because the right thing is always tied to what is best for me. Therefore, I am adding a sub-title to this evening's message: It is "DO THE RIGHT THING: BE A BETTER ME.

What are those things in life that we can do for ourselves, by ourselves and to ourselves to make us successful, happy, and productive to society? I believe that we must begin by being better within ourselves.

There are 3 steps to becoming better:

- **Step 1 is to determine what special gifts we have been given to help us become better selves**
- **Step 2 is to believe in ourselves**
- **Step 3 is to pursue our dreams with all of the energy and passion we have.**

In his best-selling book, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, author Rick Warren writes that "***You are not an accident. Your birth was no mistake or mishap, and your life is no fluke of nature. Your parents may not have planned you, but God did. He was not at all surprised by your birth. In fact he expected it. He thought of you first. It is not fate,***

*nor chance, nor luck, nor coincidence that you are breathing at this very moment. God prescribed every single detail of your body. He deliberately chose your race, the color of your skin, your hair, and every other feature. He custom-made your body just the way he wanted it. He also determined the natural talents you would possess and the uniqueness of your personality.”*

This idea of a purpose driven life is not new to Rick Warren. He just found a new way to say what the Bible, the Koran and many other great books said thousands of years ago. **You are unique. You are special.** You were created for some purpose that you and only you can fulfill. With that in mind, it is fruitless to try to be like Mike” You must be yourself. If your friend can sing beautiful solos and you can’t, you will make a mistake trying to become like your friend. You may want to be the fastest runner on earth, but if that is not your gift, then all of the trying in the world will not make it happen for you. That’s why it is so important for you to tap into yourself early to determine those things which you do well. Often we get side-tracked because we don’t like our gifts. We want someone else’s gift. We will always be doomed to failure when that happens. In my own life, I never really wanted to be a teacher or have anything at all to do with education. You see, both of my parents were teachers and I wanted nothing to do with what they had done. I tried many times to become something else. I pursued law, but that did not work out. After teaching for a few years, I decided that I would pursue another career and I almost left teaching to be an accountant, but again something else came in my way. It was only after I accepted the fact that teaching was my gift and I was pretty good at it, did I begin to achieve some success and to enjoy going to work. So while teaching does not pay what I think I could have made as a lawyer or a business person, I am very rich in the rewards of great friends and thousands of students who appreciate me and I still have everything I need and most things that I want. So my first admonition is to seek out your own personal purpose in life and pursue it with gusto.

**Secondly, you must believe in yourself.** Just as God created you for a purpose, He also created you with a spark of divinity that is a piece of Himself. In other words, you have some of God in you. That does not mean that you can do everything that God does, but it does mean that he has equipped you to do grand things. Think about the technology that we now have. Who would have thought just 20 years ago that a small telephone like this could contain thousands of megabytes of memory that would enable you to call or e-mail persons around the world in a matter of seconds or that you could access your television in this one small device. The first computers less than 50 years ago were so large they had to be housed in large rooms. Now we can put this in our coat pockets. A little over 100 years ago, our forefathers spent the better part of a year going from the east coast to California, using horses and buggies. Today, we can jet from one coast to the other in less than 4 hours. All of the knowledge it took to create these advances rested in the minds of human beings. Each generation built upon the previous ones so that we are where we are today. Who knows what the future holds in terms of man’s capabilities. For you personally, it means that you are capable of doing and being far more than you are. Unless your brain has been damaged at birth or by some disease or accident, you were born with the same number of brain cells as the number 1 student at Harvard. Most of us do not tap into half of our capabilities. We are crippled by negative thoughts and negative people who tell us what we can’t do. It is amazing to watch how a belief in

yourself can transform you from ordinary to extraordinary. For the past 8 years, no more than 70% of Maplewood's students had passed the Algebra I Gateway examination. Last year in or our attempt to reach the State target of 83%, we put in extra time studying, but we also told our students that they were capable and that we expected 100% of them to pass the test. I recall one student in particular who did not want to go to the extra tutoring. When I found her, I told her that if she did not go to tutoring, she probably would fail the test. She told me that she would not fail "Your stupid test." When the scores came back, I discovered that she had not only passed, but she had passed with a score of ADVANCED. She even surprised herself, but not me. Now that she has this confidence, she has enrolled in Honors classes and is making A's in all of her classes, although last year, she barely passed and spent considerable time skipping class. Like many of us, we don't realize the potential that we have and therefore, we squander our talents and waste precious time. The most important step you can take towards being a better you is to believe that you can achieve your goals. Believing by itself will not make it happen, but with the determination and hard work, you will be successful.

**The final step in becoming a better you is to pursue your dreams with all of the gusto you can.** Almost everyone dreams. We dream of the man or woman we want to marry; we dream how our children will look; we dream about the jobs we will have; we dream about the houses and cars we will have; we dream about practically everything, but in order to make those dreams come true, we have to work at it. We have to set goals and prepare a pathway towards reaching those goals. We can't give up when the going gets rough. Several years ago, my family and I were traveling in Virginia. We had directions from MapQuest as well as the use of a car navigation system, but when we came to a fork in the road that seemed to point us towards our destination, we decided not to continue following the MapQuest directions. So instead of keeping straight, we veered to the right. After traveling for several miles, we decided to turn around and retrace ourselves. Instead of veering to the right at the crossroad, we decided to follow the directions on MapQuest. To our delight and surprise, our destination lay less than a mile from where we turned off. Life is much like that. We make a plan, but then someone or something comes up to steer us in another direction. Thinking that the new path will get us to our destination, we waste valuable time going down the wrong road, when if we had followed our directions, we would have reached our goal sooner. Some of you are high school seniors. At some point, you may say to yourself that you want to sit out for a semester or a year to get a little money. A semester turns into a year. One year turns in 2 and 2 into 3 and so forth. Before you know it, 10 years have passed and you still have not accomplished your goal. Upon looking back you will see that you could have had 2 degrees while procrastinating and making excuses. As our president says "STAY THE COURSE." DON'T GIVE UP." THERE'S A POEM THAT I LIKE BY AN ANONYMOUS AUTHOR, ENTITLED "Don't Quit"

**When things go wrong as they sometimes will;  
When the road you're trudging seems all uphill;  
When the funds are low and the debts are high;  
And you want to smile, but have to sigh;  
When care is pressing you down a bit**

**Rest if you must, but don't you quit.  
Success is failure turned inside out;  
The silver tint of the clouds of doubt;  
And you can never tell how close you are;  
It may be near when it seems afar.  
So, stick to the fight when you're hardest hit –  
It's when things go wrong that you mustn't quit.**