

The Denali Fellows

Social Entrepreneurs Class Graduation
The Kauffman Foundation
Kansas City, Missouri

30 September 2000
David Sawyer

Thank you honored guests, for granting me a few moments of your time. My formal role as Director of Training for the Fellows comes to an end tonight, and let me begin by thanking Bill Strickland, Greg Dees, Jim Heskitt, and Donnie Pomeroy for the opportunity to help design the Denali Initiative and work so closely with this first class of Fellows.

Every so often, as all of you do, I reflect on the state of our communities, our country, and our world. And I see many wonderful achievements, literacy and life expectancy increasing, amazing technological innovations, a deeper appreciation for diversity, gradual development along many fronts. I feel our glorious promise as a civilization and conclude that we are indeed making progress.

Think I think about AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa, about the widening gap between rich and poor, about the digital divide, about the extinction of species and global warming, about PCBs in mother's milk, about the violence in our schools, about the 1 in 4 American kids still growing up in poverty, about the shocking decline of civility. And then I despair, and fear we are on a collision course with a darker destiny of unimaginable proportions.

Around that time I try to recall the words of Wendell Berry, who once advised, "be joyous though you have considered all the facts".

If there is a cause for joy when you think about the complicated challenges we face as a nation and a world, it is because we have leaders like the ones we are honoring here tonight, and leaders like those of you in the audience. Some years back I concluded, as many of you have, that to create the kind of communities and the kind of world we all want to live in, we need—more than any other thing—thoughtful, committed leaders in all sectors of society. Servant-leaders. Leaders that will help all of us realize our ancient and greatest human dream. You know the dream. It is the dream of a world where the skies are clear, the rivers clean, the streets safe, the children happy, the elderly honored. The dream of justice and fairness, the dream of enough for all. The dream of peace among nations and peoples.

Robert Greenleaf, who introduced us to the concept of servant leadership, once asked this provocative question: "Who is the enemy?" Who is holding us back from our great dream? Is it the protesters, the politicians, the poor folks? Is it lawyers, corporations, Goths? Is it white people, or black, brown, yellow, or gay people? Is it democrats or republicans? Is it human greed and evil, apathy, or the "system"? Greenleaf's answer: The enemy is strong natural servants, people capable of making incredible contributions to our common welfare, people who could lead but do not. In short, we are the enemy, if we do not choose the high and hard road of servant-leadership.

I was stunned when I first read this years' ago, I knew that I could no longer allow myself to be the enemy. And I know I'm speaking tonight with individuals who have made the same choice. In particular, tonight we are honoring the first class of Denali Fellows, themselves incredible servant-leaders and social entrepreneurs.

I had the special privilege of being with the Fellows at their opening and closing retreats, and many times in between. They fought, they struggled, they wept together. I can tell you this: their learning curve was nearly vertical at times. Yes, they finally grasped "the numbers". But more importantly, they grasped what is behind the numbers. They stayed the course, and they

emerged stronger and smarter. But perhaps they did something even more important, these 20 nonprofit executive directors in the midst of a challenging effort to develop high level entrepreneurial skills in the service of better organizations and a better world, They built a community. A community where respect for diversity went far beyond the words. A community equal to both tragedy and triumph. A real community. Tonight, I want to sincerely thank you for allowing me to be part of that community for the past 18 months.

I will breathe a lot easier knowing that leaders of your caliber are afoot in our communities and in our country. When I think of you and your commitments, I feel like our ancient dream is not so far away. When I think of you I am joyous, though I have considered all the facts.