

Magnanimitas in the Twenty-First Century

Bill Curry

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Bill Curry played for ten seasons in the National Football League and was head football coach for four NCAA Division I schools.

As I looked at Juniata College's website and studied its motto, I noticed an exciting reference: "truth sets free." We will not deal with the Latin, since it has been a long time since I studied it. The idea of truth setting free is what America is based on, and that excites me. Then I saw your new brand signature: "Think about who you are." Now, listen carefully to the poem, "Exhortation of the Dawn" which is usually attributed to Kalidasa, one of the most important classical Sanskrit poets.

Listen to the Exhortation of the Dawn!
Look to this Day!
For it is Life, the very Life of Life.
In its brief course lie all the
Verities and Realities of your Existence.
The Bliss of Growth,
The Glory of Action,
The Splendor of Beauty;
For Yesterday is but a Dream,
And To-morrow is only a Vision;
But To-day well lived makes
Every Yesterday a Dream of Happiness,
And every Tomorrow a Vision of Hope.
Look well therefore to this Day!
Such is the Salutation of the Dawn!

These words were written roughly 1,500 years ago. Could the author have envisioned the world we live in today and how terribly important it is to have the capacity to think about who we are and to think about it in this moment? I want you to think about yourself; think about who you are. Adding a further dimension to your brand signature, I want you to think about whose you are. In the first part, think about who you are in the present. The capacity to think in the present is a diminishing skill because we are always worried about something that has been said in the past, on a Twitter page, or what a politician is tweeting or speaking about.

THINK ABOUT WHO YOU ARE

I care about your personal faith, but I will not try to influence your faith. I want to influence you to think about who you are. Think. Sit quietly. I'm not sure I ever did that until I had grandchildren.

A long time ago, back when I was in the sixth grade, there was the most beautiful girl in College Park, Georgia. Her name was Carolyn Newton. I went home and told my dad I was going to marry Carolyn. This was the sixth grade. My dad told me it was the best plan I ever had and asked if Carolyn was aware of my plan. I said no, she was not. In fact, she would not speak to me yet. At five feet two inches, she was taller than me. I was shorter, chubby, and always in trouble in the principal's office. She was a great student.

But I was persistent. She would not talk to me for six years. I would call her several times a year and ask for a date, and she would say, "No, thank you." Finally, when we were seniors in high school, we began to go out together and in December, 2016, we celebrated our fifty-fourth wedding anniversary. Carolyn and I have two wonderful children, who have grown into two wonderful, responsible adults. One is the head of the English Department at Westminster High School in Atlanta, and the other works for Boston Scientific. Our son, Bill, Jr., and his wife, Kelly, have five redheaded boys, and our daughter, Kristin, has two beautiful daughters. Those grandchildren have taught me to think in the present! When the grandkids were young, we would take walks, and I relearned how to change a diaper. I got to relearn everything, since I was with ESPN and I was not working the whole time. I could communicate with these girls, especially Evelyn, with whom I had more time. We would rock in the chair, and I would confide in her and tell her things. I learned that if you do not want the truth, do not talk to your grandchildren. We continued to rock, and I told her I loved her, and she said she loved me, too. She then said to me, "Bo, there's a lot I'd like to tell you," so I told her she could talk to me. She said to me, "Bo, your breath is terrible." For the rest of my life, I will go around carrying gum so that I never have to hear that comment again.

I have an eight-year-old grandson named Brett. He has two teenaged brothers, and of course they influence him. I walk into their house, and they see me as a large toy. One time, as soon as I walked through the door, Brett said, "Bo, get your ass upstairs. Let's play videogames." I was shocked. I told him to never speak to me that way again because I did not like that language and I expected him to be more polite. I asked him to try again, and he said, "Get your ass upstairs, please."

Are we communicating with our youth? I do not think so. My granddaughter Claire was over one morning when she was around nine years old. She has always been an old soul, so she was quiet as we fixed her breakfast. I asked her what was running through her head. She said, "You know, one day you're a newborn and the next thing you know, you're nine years old." Wow. I was not expecting that.

Here is what I am trying to say: you learn to listen, learn to be in the present, and learn to honestly evaluate who you are. A lot of us do not know that we are not defined by somebody else's opinion or by some desire for us to run fast with a football or dunk a basketball. This is not what defines you. What defines you is in your heart and in your soul.

As we tried to rebuild the Georgia Tech football tradition, we developed rivalries in our league, the Atlantic Coast Conference. One of those rivalries is with the University of Virginia, and one year when we went to play them, there was a sophomore student there by the name of Kristin Curry. Naturally the school had to interview her at halftime. They said, “Kristin, what’s the deal with your dad? Why does he wear those sunglasses and those black clothes on the sidelines? And why does he wear them when it’s not even sunny out?”

Here was her answer: “I’m not sure, but I think he thinks they make him look cool.” She was right. I did think I looked cool. I do not think that anymore, but it has taken me seventy-four years to understand that everybody has something beautiful and wonderful inside of them. If we fingerprinted all seven billion people on the planet, each one would be unique. There has never been a human being quite like you, and there never will be. We need for each of us to locate our special gift, develop it, and share it.

MAGNANIMITAS

I worked two wonderful years at Baylor in Chattanooga, Tennessee. As you leave the school, there is a stone with twelve letters, five syllables, one word: *magnanimitas*. This twelve-letter word intimidates us, but it should not. I went up to the president of Baylor and asked him what that Latin word meant. He said it was “greatness of spirit.” Dr. Baylor, the founder of the school, in his last communication to his students had this message: if he were to share one word with his students to be the beacon for the rest of their lives, it would be the Latin word *magnanimitas*, or greatness of spirit. This greatness of spirit resides in our souls. You may become a great success in your life. You may become a great theologian. You may become a successful businessperson, teacher, mentor, or parent. But you will never be the human being that God made you to be until you locate the greatness of spirit inside yourself, develop it, and give it to a cause greater than yourself.

I asked formal permission to borrow that word, and I have it in writing that I am allowed to go around the country and share that word so that I can tell people how precious and how special they truly are. You are unique.

If football has a place in our culture, it is because inside the football huddle everybody matters. It does not matter if you are black, white, or brown. It does not matter what religion you are. You cannot step into the huddle and be a racist. The guys on the team will expose you to the world. Football is the only sport that I am aware of in which every player needs every teammate on every play, just to survive.

That is the way the United States is structured as well, and we have forgotten that lesson. We need each other to survive in this society. Our individual uniqueness is essential to our culture. We need to learn how to understand our differences. It does not matter what they are; it matters what our commonality is.

Think about who you are. Think about it, and think about why you are who you are. Then resolve that you are going to eliminate the bad stuff—because you can, but only if you are willing to focus on it.

SHORT, FAT, AND LAZY

I did not need to play football. I had two goals in life. One, I told you already, was to marry Carolyn Newton. The other was to pitch for the New York Yankees. There was nothing else in the world that mattered to me. Only one thing kept me out of Major League Baseball: talent. So now you know that I was fifty percent successful with my life goals.

I had never even watched a football game. I thought, “Why would I want to play a sport where you run into each other, if I can play a sport where I stand sixty feet, six inches from you and throw something at you? Why would I run into someone and risk injuring my little, puffy, lazy body?” I did not want to do that, but I showed up for day camp at College Park, Georgia, which is what all the little white boys did in the racist culture in which we lived. Racism was big-time where I lived. But I would learn that racism was not just in the South and, unfortunately, is still in the fabric of our society today. I will always resent the fact that I was told to hate a group of other people for no reason at all. We are still dealing with it today, and it is the reason we have diversity and inclusion programs like the “Beyond Tolerance” series here at Juniata. This school is giving you the opportunity to focus on that which is most important in the world today—the capacity to get along with and understand people who are different from us. It matters how we treat each other and that we need to help others.

There I was getting ready for camp with the most intimidating presence in the history of the world: high school football coach Bill Badgett. He looked at me and said, “Oh, Bill, you’re going to be in eighth grade this year. You’re coming out for football.” It was not a question coming from him. I just nodded dumbly, and the next thing I knew, I was in a nasty locker room, in ninety-eight degree weather, with no air conditioning. The Centers for Disease Control could have come in there and taken a few cultures to study for the next thousand or so years. I hated it. You had to put these ridiculous pads on your body and funny looking plastic things on our heads. We would go out of the locker room, and coach would immediately start yelling and screaming at us. We would smash into each other and get knocked all goofy and silly. We would be staggering with a concussion, but it was a joke back then. “Oh, Curry’s got the blind staggers. Hit him again!” After Coach had finished swearing at us, he blew the whistle and we came into the huddle to say the Lord’s Prayer. What was up with that?

I hated everything about football, so I decided I was going to do what all little lazy kids do; I was going to quit. I was going to turn in the equipment, but I had a problem because my father lived at my house. He did not make me go out there, but he said that if I was going to go out there, that I was not

quitting because that would be letting my teammates down. This seemed like the worst thing that could happen to short, fat, lazy Bill Curry.

Thinking about who you are or whose you are, I did not want to be there at all. I wanted to be up on the pitcher's mound. The cruelest thing was that I could see the baseball field from where we had football practice. That was where I thought I belonged, all right. Things got worse before they got better. They started assigning positions, but there were only eleven new players. So coach Jesse Shaddix, the assistant coach, called us over one day and started putting players in positions according to athletic ability. Of course, Tommy got to be the quarterback because he had a good arm. Richard got to be the fullback because he was big and fast. Finally, ten positions were filled, all of them the good ones. There was one position remaining that nobody wanted. One short, fat, future New York Yankees player stood on the sideline picking his nose. I did not care what he did with me. Coach said to me, "Well, Bill, you're going to be the center." I thought, "No kidding, Shaddix, there's only one position left." I trudged over to the center position, and he said a brilliant thing to me, "Well, Bill, I guess you're going to have to learn to hike the ball." I thought, "No kidding, Shaddix, somebody's got to hike this ball."

Think about this. It is thirteen pounds per square inch of a really hard oblate spheroid, and they are telling me they want me to get into a squat and pull it up. We are right there, and Tommy Fields is going to put his hands where I do not want him to put his hands! I did not want his hands anywhere near there. Are you kidding me, coach? This was a very complex transaction we were contemplating. We should have discussed this. I did not want to hike a ball to anybody, but I had no choice. It was the only position they were going to let me play, and my buddies were watching, so I learned to hike the ball. This was the worst thing that could have happened to short, fat, lazy Bill Curry, right?

Wrong. Four years later at Georgia Tech I learned to hike that ball to Billy Lothridge, who was a Heisman Trophy runner-up to Roger Staubach. At the end of my college career in the Senior Bowl, I learned to hike that ball to Joe Willie Namath, and a few months later, in another game, I learned to hike the ball to Roger Staubach, John Huarte, Bob Timberlake, and Craig Morton. The week after that, I learned to hike that ball to Bart Starr of the Green Bay Packers. In the three years after that, I learned to hike the ball to Johnny Unitas, who came from down the road and has been called the greatest quarterback that ever lived. In other games and other situations, I hiked the ball to Dan Pastorini, Bob Griese, Daryle Lamonica, James Harris, and Len Dawson. I had the privilege of being in the huddle with the greats—not just the greatest players, but the greatest leaders in the history of our sport. I had the privilege and responsibility of conveying the football to each of those guys and then protecting them with my life. That is the position of offensive center. You see, there is no other position in any other sport in the world that would have allowed Bill Curry, with my meager physical abilities, to play and to have a career.

What is the best thing that could happen if you are stuck in a spot you think is unfair? If they have you sweeping floors, and you do not think you ought to be sweeping floors? If you're playing a position or swimming an event, and you think the coaches are treating you unfairly? Try doing it so well that nobody can beat you. It is amazing what just might happen. You will be promoted, or as in my case, you will get opportunities that you never could have dreamed of otherwise.

GEORGIA TECH

I would love to tell you that I was a deeply disciplined and powerfully willful person. I was not. I was a coward. I would have gone home in a heartbeat if my father had not been there. He promised me a construction job if I came home. That discipline, which had been imposed and enforced upon me, became incorporated in my actions and became such a part of me that I was given a mission in life.

I was given the opportunity at a college education. My dad was a Georgia guy; according to everybody who knew anything about anything, I was supposed to go to Athens. I was being recruited by Georgia Tech, Georgia, and a couple of other schools, but I got a map out and I found out that Athens, Georgia, is not the closest campus to Agnes Scott College. Guess who happened to be going to Agnes Scott College? That's right, Carolyn Newton. I was not going to go very far from her, and I still have not to this day. So for all of the wrong reasons, I was thinking about Georgia Tech. My high school counselor, Ruby Crowe, called me in. She said she understood that I was considering Georgia Tech, but that I should not. I asked her why, and she said, "Bill, they take calculus and physics. They have National Merit Scholars. You would not survive two years there. You are not a stupid boy, Bill, but you have frolicked all the way through high school." I thanked her, and then went down to the library to look up the word *frolicked*. She was right; I had frolicked through high school. But I was determined to go to Georgia Tech.

I showed up at Georgia Tech, and there was a man there who was the epitome of the Southern gentleman: Robert Lee Dodd. Coach Bobby Dodd has since died, but he was famous for a lot of things. He was a great coach, but before that he was a great player—a three-time All-American player at Tennessee. He was also a non-graduate. He gave us a little lecture. He said he was a third-quarter sophomore at Tennessee and that he would always be a third quarter sophomore. He said that was not going to happen to us. He said football was going to be good to us and that he would not run us off. A lot of schools in the Southeastern Conference were signing sixty players every year and running off thirty. It was really just a pro tryout. He said they would not do that; they would sign thirty guys, and all thirty were going to stay on the team as long as we went to class. He was very serious about going to class.

I thought he was kidding; I thought that he could not be serious. There were a hundred guys in the chemistry class, and I had no idea what the teacher was saying. It met at eight o'clock in the morning, so

one day, in all my seventeen-year-old wisdom, I decided the best use of my time was for me to rest rather than waste time listening to the professor. He talked all the time, and the rest of the brilliant students that were sitting in class could catch me up. The next day my name was on the bulletin board: “Bill Curry report to Grant Field at 5:30 a.m. on Wednesday.” I showed up just as the sun was coming up. A really happy assistant coach met me there, and he ran me up and down the west stands at Grant Field until I was gagging, sobbing, and dying. I decided about the fiftieth time I hit those stadium steps that chemistry at eight o’clock in the morning was a wonderful thing.

That is a cute little story that parents love, but here is what matters. My football coach loved me too much to allow me to self-destruct when I could not see my own potential. Somebody needs to do that for us because I never cut another class. I could not let him down, and I could not face those stadium steps again. I had no intention of running them again. I graduated from one of the hardest schools in the country when I did not belong there because I learned from our football staff to sit in the front row, take notes, pay attention, and actually read my notes before the quiz. Turns out, it works! I had never tried that, and for any of you students that are messing around in school, don’t. It’s stupid. You are short-changing yourself. If you are an athlete, you are not only short-changing yourself, but also your teammates and your family. Do the very best you can all of the time. If you have not been the best you can, it is never too late to start. It is never too late to start doing the right thing, and most of the time we know what the right thing is.

THE GREEN BAY PACKERS

Leaving Georgia Tech, I was shocked—and so was everyone else—when the Green Bay Packers drafted me. In those days, they had twenty rounds, but no one knew the names after the seventh. That is why we have seven rounds today. After nineteen rounds, Vince Lombardi turned to his personnel man, Pat Pepler, and said, “We’ve drafted nineteen players. I’m exhausted and going to bed. Do something humorous with the twentieth selection.” So he did, and there I was. Being the last draft choice was not my biggest problem. I was used to having a Southern gentleman for a football coach, but Vince Lombardi was not Southern. Your religion and your family and the Green Bay Packers was all you were allowed to think about under Lombardi.

He was an Italian from Brooklyn, and we are generally skeptical of immigrants in the United States. But he would not allow prejudice on his team because he had experienced prejudice. Yet I came from the most prejudiced part of the United States. A favorite thing of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant men is to judge everybody while we quote the Bible and say that we do not judge anybody. God bless us; we are the worst sinners on the face of the Earth for that reason. I certainly judged Lombardi, and I did not like him.

We were only allowed to think of our religion, our family, and the Green Bay Packers—in that order. But when we got onto the practice field, Lombardi got confused about this order. I went to Bart Starr, one of the great guys on the team who would talk to rookies, and said, “Coach goes to Mass every day, but there is no way he is a Catholic with all of the profanity that comes out of his mouth.” He said that I would realize once I had been working for Lombardi for a few weeks that this man needed to go to church every day.

But Lombardi was not my biggest problem. We had a middle linebacker, Ray Nitschke, who was a future Hall of Famer. He was known to have the baddest forearm in the league. He broke my facemask, broke my nose, and knocked me out. That was the first day of practice. I am not exaggerating. I had to make a decision. Do I want to hit this guy again? If I didn’t, I would be going home on the next bus, and I could not bear the thought of calling my girl and telling her that they were sending me home. I could not bear the thought of that. So I decided to hit him again, fair and square, and then I would hit him again, and again, and again. I decided I would hit Ray Nitschke fair and square until I could play football like the great Ray Nitschke. That did not happen, but the discipline that had become a part of me took charge. It took about five years of attempting to match the Hall of Famers I was playing against before I realized that I would never be as good as them. What I did instead was become the best football player that Bill Curry could be.

THE CAPACITY TO LEAD

Each person possesses a unique *magnanimitas* that will lift him or her up and out of the doldrums, but sometimes it takes somebody else. My biggest problem when I was playing for the Packers was that I had never before been in a huddle with an African American. As a Southerner, I was not supposed to like Yankees or people of color. It makes me sick that there are people who still think this way. I thought that I might say something racist in the huddle and get myself in trouble because Lombardi’s greatest attribute (and he does not get credit for this) was that he would not tolerate racism or even one racist word on his team. You would have been gone. In that state of mind, I was feeling alienated and uncomfortable around big, fast, brilliant African-American players.

As I walked out of a meeting one night, a voice from the darkness came from behind me. I thought God was talking to me, but of course it was not. It was Willie Davis, defensive captain of the Green Bay Packers. He said he wanted to speak with me, and I thought he was going to tell me to go home, to get lost. He said he had been watching me practice, that he liked my effort, that I had a chance to make the team—and that he was going to help me. He said that when Ray Nitschke was tearing my head off and when Lombardi was screaming in my face to the point where I did not think I could take it anymore, I was to find him and he would help me get through it. Sure enough, Nitschke tore my head off

and Lombardi screamed in my face, and I would run to number eighty-seven, and ask, “How you feel, old man?” His answer was always, “Feel Good! You can do it!” We called him “Dr. Feelgood.”

He did a great thing for a terrified white kid who did not deserve it. He did not just help me get a bunch of Super Bowl rings; he changed my life. My life was transformed by an unexpected, undeserved, unrewarded act of kindness from a great human being. Unexpected, underserved, unrewarded acts of kindness from dominating leaders change and transform lives. Their effects are undeniable. I had no choice but to respond. I have never looked at another human being in the same way since. There is somebody in your life right now who needs you to take his or her hand in the way that Willie took mine. You save lives when you love people unconditionally.

We all have the capacity to lead in some way. Some of you are probably thinking, “Don’t give me the leadership bit, Curry. I have never been a leader, and I never will be.” Oh, yes you will. When you walk into a room, you bring an energy with you, and the room either changes for the better because of the positive vibes that you bring, or you drain the energy with your negativity. Either way, you are a leader every day. You are a leader in your family, on your team, and in your classroom.

There are two pains in life: the pain of discipline and the pain of regret. With every detail of your life, you choose—and in so doing you alter your future. Every moment that you make a selection, you determine who you are going to be in the future. When you choose well, the honorable way, the hard way, you change your life and the lives of those around you. On the other hand, if you choose poorly and dishonorably—if you look down on someone with prejudice because of their race, religion, or ethnicity—you demean and diminish yourself and increase the likelihood that you are going to choose poorly next time you face a moment of truth.

I do not know when this moment will occur for you, but I can tell you some of mine. It was the fourth quarter, and we had a minute and fourteen seconds on the clock. We had one timeout and eighty yards to go, and we were four points down. We needed a touchdown. I was playing in my twenty-third football game. I had not missed a play all year. We were playing in 105 degree heat. I had lost twelve pounds from the dehydration. I had broken my knuckle again, turned my ankle, and saw blood everywhere. Running through my mind, I thought, “I do not want another Super Bowl ring. I do not want to win the game. I do not want the big contract. I do not want to protect Johnny Unitas or Bart Starr. I want the same thing I wanted when I was a twelve-year-old baby; I want to quit.” I was dying out there. I could not take another step. So I made up my mind in that moment. This is my confession to you. In my line of business as a center, you do not have to leave the field to quit. All I would have had to do is turn my shoulders ever so slightly and let Mean Joe Greene or Merlin Olsen get past me and do what he did best. The game would have been over.

After I decided to quit, a small little voice, that *magnanimitas*, the little flame that never flickers, told me that I didn't dare quit. I had not quit anything in my life, and I was not going to start then. I bent my knees and kept my pads square. I did not care how bad it hurt. I was not going to let us lose the game. I had found my motivation. I refused to let my teammates down, to be the one that let us lose the game. The great teams have players that refuse to let each other down. At the end of the day, we could look each other in the eye and know that we did the best that we could for each other.

I mentioned that you need to think about who you are and to think about whose you are. I was afraid I was getting addicted to pain killers at one point. I have had five shoulder replacements, and I can tell you they are no picnic. I felt that I was getting too happy with the pills that I was taking. I called and asked a friend of mine who works in addiction whether or not I had a problem. He asked me who was in control. I realized that I was not in control because I had let the substance take control of me. It is the same way with people. If you are under the influence of another person, even if it is a good person, if you are not making the decisions that matter in your life, then you are not in control.

God gave you a greatness of spirit. He or She—however you see the Creator—endowed you with something that nobody else has, and we need your input. We need you to think about who you are and whose you are. If you are the possession of a National Football League team, you are not in possession of yourself. It means that Vince Lombardi is in charge of your life, and God knows he loves that.

You always have to think about who you are and whose you are. It took me years to understand why I was irritating my wonderful Carolyn so much because I thought she belonged to me. We had been married for about twenty years then, and I thought she was mine. Wrong. She is never going to be anybody's possession. Instead, I belong to her because I freely give myself to her. It took me too long to learn that. I am ashamed of that. If you have a relationship with somebody you dearly love, understand it is not about them belonging to you; it is about you belonging to them and being willing to do anything to make their life better. It is the same thing with a sick child or parent who cannot take care of themselves. You are helping them along, and that is priceless. It changes everything.

When we reach across our differences, as we do on our teams, that is when great things happen. I want to end by pointing out a scientific fact to you. It is one you already know intellectually, but I want you to incorporate it into your life and affect the way that you think and act. When you join hands with someone, you are willing to transcend your differences and put away those petty things that separate us. Our capacity to do well and to do good does not increase arithmetically. It does not increase geometrically. It increases exponentially—and it happens in an instant. When you are willing to reach across your differences, you do not just change Juniata, you do not just change Pennsylvania, you change the world. God bless you!