

May 2009– Linfield College

Commencement Address

Speech by Jason Lett

My father, David Lett, was delighted when he found out last year that the faculty and trustees of Linfield had chosen to award this honorary doctorate to him. He passed away last fall, and I've been asked to address you all today, to accept this degree on his behalf.

I'm sure all you parents can relate to the pride I feel in accepting this degree for him. To the Faculty of the Linfield College and its trustees, on behalf of my father, myself, and our family, thank you.

For my father, who at 23 years of age applied to, and was rejected from, 12 medical schools: Well Dad, you finally did it... you're a doctor.

It would have given Dad great pleasure to stand here today and address you all. No doubt the things he would have had to say would have delighted those of you starting the next leg of your life's journey, and left those who helped get you this far – your parents, your teachers - feeling a little uneasy.

My father's success in life came from his ability to blend the three elements of being human in the world: The *heart*, the *head*, and the *hand*.

The Heart: Make space for the cosmic brick.

A friend of mine calls a moment of life-changing revelation "getting hit by the cosmic brick."

At 22 years old, to his parents' dismay, Dad's academic career got knocked abruptly off its course by a chance meeting with a barrel. He was hit with the cosmic brick.

A little background. My dad was the grandson of a doctor who had a successful practice in Chicago. When my father was born, the edict was passed from on high that Dad, too would be a doctor.

Dad tried to fulfill the role that had been proscribed for him. After high school he was a medic in the Coast Guard. He got a Bachelor of Science from the University of Utah, studying premed and philosophy.

Then he applied to medical schools. 12 of them. They all rejected him.

So what do you do with a degree in premed, philosophy, and rejection? The mandate proceeded to dental school. He was in San Francisco having an interview at a dental school in January of 1962. Donner Pass was closed because of snow and he couldn't get back to Utah. The cosmic brick interceded. For some reason he decided to drive up to the Napa Valley.

The wine scene in Napa Valley in 1962 was quite different than today. There were only three wineries which today would be called "super-premium" --Mayacamas, Stoney Hill and the old Souverain run by Lee Stewart. In fact there weren't very many wineries there at all, except some long-deserted and semi-derelict structures. The other wineries then in existence were producing jug wines – cheap, sweet, and usually pink. Growing up in Utah, these fine expressions of the grape, with names like Thunderbird and Wild Irish Rose were all he knew about wine.

My father happened to stop at Souverain. The cellar workers were out front, washing barrels. Within minutes Dad found himself rolling barrels by way of help. Within hours, he was asking the winemaker for a job. Within months, he had applied to join the University of California Davis School of Viticulture . He had "turned winewards."

That morning was the beginning of my father's vocation, a vocation he would never have found or followed if he had not made space for the cosmic brick.

So go forth. Take detours. Follow your goals, but keep your eyes open.

The Head: the value of education is not the knowledge, it's the tools.

Dad's training at UC Davis emphasized the paradigms of the time. The focus was on the methods of producing large amounts of cheap, sweet wine. The dominant philosophy was that California's bountiful, sunny climate was suited to grow anything better than anywhere else. This included cool climate grapes like Pinot noir... in California, Pinot ripened a month or two ahead of varieties like Cabernet or Merlot. So what? So you pick in August instead of October... what's the big deal?

The big deal was that California Pinot noir didn't taste very interesting. "The many California versions of this variety which I tasted at Davis," Dad wrote, "were a great disappointment." In one of his Davis classes he had the opportunity to taste Pinot noir from Burgundy, where Pinot noir originates. In Burgundy, a region in central France, Pinot production has been recorded since 1350 and certainly goes back farther than that, to perhaps at least the Roman era.

On tasting this wine, he was hit by his second cosmic brick: he was immediately captivated by its flavors.

"My first taste of a French Burgundy at Davis," Dad writes, "was a revelation--"This is what wine is all about!" "This is why I am here!" I began to focus my attention on this variety, tasting all I could get my tongue around. The differences between the French and the Californian Pinot noirs was incredible. The French had the decided edge in complexity, finesse and flavor--but why? I had been taught that California wines "were all things to all people" and that "all varieties do well in the warm California climate." Maybe so--but not Pinot noir in my book. This was reinforced by an enology professor at Davis who said during a lecture, "There are few, if any, climates in California cool enough for Pinot noir."

Dad took this off-the-cuff remark seriously. He began to study the climate of Burgundy and try to match it to other regions of the world. The possibilities narrowed to the South Island of New Zealand, and the Minho region of Northern Portugal, but he always found himself coming back on paper to Oregon's Willamette Valley.

At the same time as he was figuring out *what* grape to grow (Pinot noir), and *where* to grow it (someplace cool enough), he was also realizing *how* he wanted to grow grapes. At Davis his requirements included entomology classes that emphasized, as he put it, "Here's the bug, and here's how to kill it."

But he was also reading Rachael Carson's book "Silent Spring." Carson herself was threatened by lawsuits and was the subject of a public relations counterattack by Monsanto and American Cyanamid. The former Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson dismissed her as a "hysterical female." But for Dad, Carson's book showed him new priorities. He decided to look for ways to grow grapes without relying on the chemical paradigm that his education told him was necessary.

Perhaps the greatest contribution to my father's education in wine that his college experience gave him was contacts. After he graduated, Dad decided to travel to Europe for 9 months to see first hand the growing regions he had come to admire. His professors gave him letters of introduction.

"Upon graduation from Davis in January of '64 I sailed off for Europe armed with letters of introduction and a lot of questions. The secret I discovered was really no secret at all--it had evolved over the previous 10-15 centuries of grape growing in Europe. Grape growers are farmers and farmers don't normally go looking for more trouble than Nature always provides. This perverse bunch of European grape farmers, however, kept growing certain varieties in regions where grape maturity is in doubt almost every year. Why? The secret is that where grape maturity coincides with the very end of a cool growing season, the wines made from them are the best the variety can produce....

...When this match of ripening time of a particular variety corresponds with the end of the growing season FLAVOR is the result. Early maturing varieties grown in warmer climates tend to have the more subtle flavors literally boiled out of them before they ripen."

So there you have it. Dad's years at Davis were meant to teach him how to make pink, sweet wine in very large quantities. I have a file drawer full of his class notes from those years. Pound for pound, his notebooks are full of

information he would never use, about wine styles and varieties and growing techniques that he didn't respect. But here and there, he picked up little kernels of information: a professor's offhand remark. A taste of French Pinot. A book from the library that led him to think about agriculture differently. Access to maps and climate tables that showed him new possibilities. Contacts and introductions to growers in Europe, that put what he had learned into a new context and who helped guide his theories about grapegrowing in the New World.

I apologize to the people who've worked so hard to get you here today: your professors, your parents. But the only conclusion I can reach from examining my father's education is that you should not be afraid to throw out almost everything you've been taught. I know that's a daunting thought, given the tuition you've paid and the loans you've accumulated. But the education you and your family have sacrificed for has given you tools to think through and to build your own approach to things, and Dad would have encouraged you to employ those tools as often as you can.

The Hand: dedication trumps money.

Ultimately, we will all measure our success in the world by how well we can balance several elements:

One of them is care for your environment. Environment is a very encompassing word. I mean your spirit, your body, your community, and your planet. And not necessarily in that order. Luckily care for one can often help care for the others.

Another is love and time for your family and friends.

The last is professional success. How much you accomplished in making your way. When we say success, that's usually what we mean, though professional success is only part of a successful life.

We're all seeking our own balance of these elements of success, but we live in tippy times. Everyone of us, and you graduates especially, are going to be dealing with financial stress in the coming years. How, in trying times, do we muster the resources to follow our dreams?

When Dad came to Oregon, he came with very little. He wrote, "Upon my return from Europe, then 25 years old, I packed up this theory about grape variety and adaptation to climate and 3000 vine cuttings and headed north of Oregon. I settled in Silverton and found a small plot of ground to rent and planted the cuttings to let them root while I searched for the ideal vineyard site."

"In order to pay the rent and quell the rising specter of hunger, I took a job in a Salem berry nursery bundling blueberry rootings for 75 cents an hour. By Spring I was promoted to tractor driver at \$1.25/hour. While this was a great promotion I knew it wasn't going to pay for my long term goals."

"Then luck intervened again. A job selling college textbooks became available. The job was great--not great money--but an academic working year--namely summers free to work the vineyard. I kept this job for 8 years and it sustained our efforts of getting the family and the vineyard and the winery going."

"As our first vintage approached in 1970 I began to seek out lending institutions for money to build and equip a winery. No bank would loan me money. I had visions of leaving my precious first crop on the vines for the birds to eat. But fate once again intervened. I managed to rent a 20' x 40' room in an old ag processing plant in McMinnville--8 miles from our vineyard--for \$25/month. With 30 new French oak barrels and a lot of cobbled together equipment we produced our first 600 gallons of Pinot noir that year. In 1972 we bought the entire building... and have managed to make it both more attractive and more functional over the years."

"Our production has been a miniscule 5,000 - 6,000 cases per year for many years. While this amount wouldn't fill a transfer line at Gallo, we have deliberately limited our production in our vineyards and winery so that we can maintain an absolute control over the quality of our wines."

Dad's limited resources became a terrific asset. Circumstances required him to do the work himself, to be hands on,

and to participate in every step of the process from berry to bottle. Because he loved these aspects, and learned from them, his wines showed incredible harmony. The callouses on his hands reflected the knowledge he gained with every vintage.

Dad was dedicated to the hands-on details of his art. He realized early that in the search for quality, personal dedication trumps financial might. His hands-on ethos was a great example to we winegrowers who follow him, and it was one of his greatest legacies to us.

Winewriter Matt Kramer said of him: “[David] Lett pioneered both Pinot noir and its white wine cousin, Pinot gris, the two grapes that define Oregon wine today. But just as important, he established the very tone of Oregon winegrowing: artisanal, individualistic, even idiosyncratic... You can look at Oregon’s 300-plus wineries and 17,400 acres of vines and trace it to Lett. But he left more than that. He bequeathed a uniquely Oregon “wine genome,” one that others now seek to copy.”

In going back to the elements of success I mentioned before: Care for your environment, love for your family and friends, and your professional success... well, the first two, care and love, don’t require any money at all. And as Dad’s example proves, professional success can be accomplished with nothing more expensive than vision, dedication, and a willing hand.

The heart, the head, and the hand.

The Heart: Make space for the cosmic brick

The Head: The value of education is not the knowledge, it’s the tools

The Hand: Dedication trumps money

Before he set off for Europe, Dad scribbled a quote on the back of his travel agency receipt. It was from the favorite book of his youth, Henry David Thoreau’s Walden.

He wound up carrying this tattered piece of paper in his wallet most of his life. Eventually, he gave it to me. The paper itself is too brittle to carry, but the quote still has all of the strength and flexibility Dad found in it decades ago:

“I learned this at least by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of their dreams, and endeavors to live the life which they have imagined, they will meet with a success unexpected in common hours....

...If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.”

So, on Dad’s behalf, thank you for the funny hat. Oh, like you should laugh! I recall that those things you’re wearing are called “mortar boards.” When you’re building those foundations under your castles in the air, you’re going to need that mortar. That mortar is strong stuff. It comes from here, in your heart. And also from here, in your head. With your hand, build them well, and your foundations will be strong. My father would have sincerely enjoyed offering this toast to you, and I do it in his stead: Class of 2009, **CONGRATULATIONS, AND CHEERS!**