

Remarks prepared by W. Barry McRae

Altamont Class of 1977

As recipient of the 2011 Distinguished Alumnus Award

Tuesday, April 12, 2011

The Fine Arts Center, The Altamont School

Head of School Whiteside

Esteemed Faculty of The Altamont School

Beloved Family

Lesley

Keene, Malcolm and Charlotte

Mrs. McRae

Dr. McRae

Distinguished Alumna and Sister Katie Baker

Very Special Fellow Alumni

And all Altamont Knights: past, present, and future

I am thrilled to stand before you as the 2011 Distinguished Alumnus of The Altamont School. I have to admit that I have NEVER liked awards like this ...which single out 1 or 2 people above others. But, as I said the other day, I have felt that way mainly because I have never won anything like this. I can tell you TODAY , having been named, I am strongly in favor of awards like these. Still, truthfully, it is difficult to accept this award when I think of the many DISTINGUISHED Altamont alumni and faculty who founded, fostered, and fed the great institution that we call The Altamont School. It is in the name of those many alumni, friends

and faculty that I can accept this award at all. I cherish being their representative this year. Thank you.

Also, thank you for your kind introduction. I know of at least 3 people in this audience who enjoyed your words more than I did. Of course, my beautiful Lesley was touched, if a little amused, by your accolades. It is said that behind every man....there is a woman...who knows the truth. Lesley knows the truth...the good, the bad, and the ugly...and, in her usual GRACEFUL way, she chooses to be here anyway. I am very grateful to her.

And my parents-who chose to send me to Altamont - are here. I know my father was thrilled by your words. And I know that my mother actually BELIEVED...some of them.

Thank you.

As the good book says:

HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER, SO THAT YOUR DAYS MAY BE LENGTHENED AND SO THAT IT GO WELL WITH YOU.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity today to honor my parents today- thank you for making it go well with me- thank you for lengthening my days, for giving more time.

Today marks a milestone in the history of Altamont. For the first time, the Distinguished Alumna and the Distinguished Alumnus have both been Alumni of Altamont...rather than its predecessor schools: The Brooke Hill School and the Birmingham University School. For better or for worse: we are the products of Altamont.

Actually and perhaps unbelievably or providentially, I met this year's Distinguished Alumna for the very first time: in the very first minutes of the very first hour of the very first day that The Altamont School existed.

At a few minutes before 8 a.m. on a crisp morning in the Fall of 1975, as I approached Altamont's front door to begin my first Altamont class, I was greeted by a beautiful and beaming young woman. She stuck out her hand and said:

"Hi! I'm Katie Baker – I'm glad you're here!"

I responded: "Thanks. I'm Barry McRae and I think I'm glad to be here..."

And so began our Altamont experience...

Katie was 17, I was 16 and Altamont was 16 or 17 minutes old.

About a month later, the student government put on Altamont's first dance. It was in what we called the gym...in what is now the Fine Arts Center (we HAVE evolved!). Katie and I attended. We didn't attend together (as a date)...back then, Altamont students didn't date....we just went everywhere as a group or in what we called a clump. A few songs into the dance, it was obvious all of the students were too nervous or self-conscious- to dance.... and so Katie...in her usual shy and retiring way...bounded over to me and said: "Let's dance!" I said sure. The DJ then put on a popular song of the time called "Car Wash" to be sung by guys working at a car wash as they washed cars...OOOOO>>>>working at a car wash....at the Car wash....yeah....:clearly a song for those who dreamed BIG! Katie said : "Let's Bump" ...and we began to do THE BUMP...Now I know, given the way you dance today, THE BUMP might seem very tame (there was no grinding back then); but, after a few bumps, Mr. Hames had seen enough...and Mr. Hames sent Jimmy Barton, then an Altamont teacher, over to me to tell me: "Hames wants you to stop that lascivious foolishness immediately" ...this invective was, in and of itself, also an Altamont moment: you had to be a student at Altamont to even know that "lascivious foolishness" meant unnecessarily crude and lewd behavior.

In other words: He wanted us to stop our DIRTY DANCING. Believe me: We stopped our dirty dancing immediately.

And so began Katie's and my 36 year-old (and counting) involvement with a school we love...and a school that has served as a true alma mater to us and for us.

As a classicist, and in a weak attempt at impressing Mrs. Whiteside, I want to translate those 2 words very literally:

Alma mater:

Nourishing mother.

- Altamont has nourished our minds...Altamont has nourished us academically through its superior teachers and curriculum.
- Altamont has nourished our bodies through instruction and the discipline learned on the practice fields and courts.
- Altamont has nourished our spirits by allowing us to put into practice what we are taught through our various faiths.
- Altamont has nourished our senses by surrounding us with the arts.
- Altamont has nourished our souls by teaching us life lessons OUT of the classrooms and OFF the fields.

I remember well the first life lesson I learned here because I remember well the first essay I wrote at the- then- Birmingham University School (good ole' B.U.S.). It was written for an English class taught by Walter Ellis; but, my essay was so bad that Mr. Ellis brought it to the attention of Mr. Hames, then Associate Headmaster. I was summoned to Mr. Hames' office. For those faculty members who knew him and for those who have seen photographs of Mr. Hames...you know that he was literally larger than life. At that point in his life, Mr. Hames weighed at least 400 pounds and he liked to "throw his weight around".

As I entered his office, Mr. Hames picked up my handwritten essay (remember there were no computers then and I didn't know how to type). He thrust the essay into the air for dramatic emphasis (Hames was BIG on drama)...and

yelled..."you are no longer a BARBARIAN (his favorite word)...You are now an 8th Grade scholar at THE Birmingham University School. You clearly spent no time on this pitiful essay. I want you to learn something from this: I want you to learn that time and time only is the difference between a POSTURING FOP and a gentleman of the world's spirit"...He then said: "I will NOT let you be a posturing FOP".

I learned that day, that hour, that minute... that time, though a commodity, is a precious commodity, because Mr. Hames continued to tell me that he never wanted to hear me say that I didn't have enough time to do something. He said, perhaps quoting another writer: "Don't ever tell me you don't have enough time. You have exactly the same number of hours per day that were given to Helen Keller, Pasteur, Michelangelo, Mother Teresa, Leonardo da Vinci, Thomas Jefferson and Albert Einstein."

I learned that day, that my time should be used to incorporate into my mind, into my body, into my soul those "nourishing things", like those things Altamont provided me, that would strengthen me, fill me and give true meaning to my life.

Recently, I have learned another thing about time that I need to share it with you. I have learned that time, that precious commodity, will not always be here.

As some of you may know, 15 months ago, I was diagnosed with a particularly aggressive form of brain cancer. The cancer was removed and I have been going through a series of treatments that give me the hope of a full recovery. But the mere possibility that I may not have as much time as I thought has made me realize how important -the time I do have- is.

I have been inspired by a letter I recently read. It was written to America by a man named Lee Atwater. You may remember from your modern American history that Lee Atwater was called, in the late 1980's, the most powerful man in America. He was also called the meanest man in America because it was Lee Atwater, as Chief of Staff to Presidents Reagan and Bush, it was Lee Atwater who devised the modern era of dirty and mean politics. In the early 1990's, Lee Atwater himself was diagnosed with a brain tumor which eventually killed him.

Before he died, he wanted to write a letter of apology to America for the wrongs he had done to America.

The letter was published in LIFE magazine in 1991 and I want to share part of it with you now.

He wrote [and I quote]:

My illness helped me to see that what was missing in society is what was missing in me: a little heart, a lot of brotherhood. The '80s were about acquiring — acquiring wealth, power, prestige. I know. I acquired more wealth, power, and prestige than most. But you can acquire all you want and still feel empty. What power wouldn't I trade for a little more time with my family? What price wouldn't I pay for an evening with friends? It took a deadly illness to put me eye to eye with that truth, but it is a truth that the country, caught up in its ruthless ambitions and moral decay, can learn on my dime. We must be made to speak to this spiritual vacuum at the heart of American society, this tumor of the soul. [ENDQUOTE]

The nourishment that your minds, bodies, spirits and souls have received at Altamont and your God-given faith, can, has, and will continue to fill this spiritual vacuum and will make you whole.

Remember your time spent here at Altamont. Honor your time here at Altamont, so you will be filled -so that all will go well with you.

In closing, I want to tell you how ENCOURAGING you and this award are to me.

And perhaps in a weak attempt to impress Madame Classe, I want to look at the root of THAT word too: ENCOURAGEMENT- the root word here is the French word "Coeur": "the heart". To encourage someone literally means to make someone's heart grow larger.

You have TODAY made my heart grow larger and, thereby, you have increased my capacity to love-

To love my Maker

To love my Alma Mater

To love my family

To love MY TIME.

Thank you.