



## **Eyes on the Goal**

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It was the fall of 1966, the beginning of my junior year at Iowa Mennonite School. I had received my driver's license just eight months earlier. My driving record was largely unblemished although I had had a near disaster the first week I had my license. Two of my friends and I were heading out on a "triple date" and I lost control of the car on an icy road, made a few complete circles and backed the car into the ditch. We managed to get the car out and my parents never heard the story until years later. I'm sure we told our dates about it—we would have wanted them to hang on tightly.

Now it is September. And I was asked to drive the school bus for the next two years. It was a beautiful new, hot off the Bluebird assembly line, 60-passenger bus. The deal was pretty simple. As a private high school, there was no transportation system provided. My Dad and two others purchased the bus as private owners and then hired two of their sons to drive the bus to school and back every day.

I'm sure that most of you here this morning could care less that I drove a school bus as a 16-year old, and you certainly don't want to hear about my dating life. But, a few of you owe your very lives to my skill as a driver. Your parents were on that bus! If I hadn't been a good driver, you wouldn't be!

I learned a few lessons during those two years. And, I'm sure the kids and their parents learned something about faith. Any safe driver soon learns to keep your eyes moving, from looking into the distance, back to what is immediately in front of you, to the rear view mirror to see the traffic that is behind you. And, on a school bus, you also watch the mirror occasionally to see what is going on behind you inside the bus.

The text that was read for us a few minutes ago is from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians. "One thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

The goal in the distance, several hundred yards ahead of the bus we are on, is “to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God.” It is the vision of EMU that every graduate will not simply embrace those phrases as nice words, but will embody those concepts in their lives. They are not words intended to remain in the head, but a vision to live by.

We’ve all heard the typical admonitions to set goals and the consequences of not setting them. **Dag Hammarskjold, former general secretary of the United Nations**, “Never look down to test the ground before taking your next step; only he who keeps his eye fixed on the far horizon will find the right road.”

Eastern Mennonite University is a liberal arts institution in the Christian tradition, more specifically in the Anabaptist perspective. We intend to be clear about that identity. You should know something about the bus you are on and where we intend to go. Some of you have been on the bus for quite a few years and others just got on within the past few days and you’re still looking for a seat. In fact, some of you may be wondering if there actually is a seat for you. And, I can well imagine a few are looking at the driver and that alone is enough to ask to get off.

We want to provide a seat for everyone—no matter your background, no matter your past experiences, no matter your religious commitments. In order not to have total chaos on the bus it is important for us to have some shared commitments for the common good of the entire bus load. The purpose of the Community Lifestyle Commitment is not to set forth rules for daily living so much as it is to provide a framework within which we live in community. When you and I join the EMU community we, of necessity, give up some freedoms as individuals—but we become more than any of us could be alone.

The Apostle Paul suggests that our primary task is to look to the future. I learned very quickly, while driving the bus, that there were two points in the future that I had to constantly keep in my sights. An inexperienced driver will always look just a few feet ahead. It’s true that you have to watch for obstacles on the road. There are plenty of potholes to avoid. On the interstate roads like I-81 one has to watch for shredded truck tires; the truckers call them alligators. It’s not a good idea to tail gate.

In the academic world, each of us has to keep our eyes on the short-term goals. Students can choose not to do the assignments due later this week but only to your detriment. Faculty can wing it in the classroom for one or a few sessions, but consistent lack of preparation will ultimately backfire. The person in the business office preparing paychecks had better never forget the immediate goal!

What are some short-term goals that students might set for themselves?—those things just ahead to watch for? Attending classes on a regular basis, completing assignments as they are due, talking with your professors if you don’t understand what is being expected. Getting exercise, eating properly, getting adequate sleep, engaging in spiritual disciplines, participating in corporate worship.

Most students come to university studies with some longer-range goals in mind, even if they aren't yet fully solidified. To complete a degree, to prepare for graduate school or a vocation. But, short and mid-range goals alone are not sufficient.

Earlier this week I learned about a brochure that high school guidance counselors give to their students who are beginning the college search process. The first suggestion on a list of ten items was to determine what you want to major in and then start with colleges that offer that program. Not that the writer of the list would listen to me, but I would beg to differ.

Of course, your major or program of study is important. But, the realities are these. Most students will change their majors several times (ask those now in our graduate programs). Further, many of you as adults will be doing jobs very different from your undergraduate major. In fact, many of those jobs don't even exist in 2005.

Our hope and prayer is that every student who graduates EMU, undergrad, seminary, graduate, will share one long-term goal in common, regardless of your chosen profession, "to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God." We will prepare you well for a career, but that is not our ultimate goal nor is that the primary reason to get a college or graduate degree.

One could infer that the Apostle Paul may not have had a Ph.D. in history—at least most historians might wish they could suggest an alternative wording for the text. "Forgetting what is behind," is not a phrase you'll hear often in our history courses. More seriously, we should not read more into a particular text than is warranted. Paul is clearly underscoring his belief that one's plans for the future have more to do with the present than one's experiences of the past. The psychologist Gordon Allport put it this way, "One's intentions for the future have more to do with shaping the present than all the experiences of the past."

I've made a lot of mistakes in my 55 years of life. In recent years I've come to remind myself frequently that what is in the past cannot be changed. I cannot change what I said yesterday. I cannot go back and relive this morning. I cannot reverse time. There is nothing to be gained by obsessing about the past.

Your task and mine is to learn from the past so as to chart a better path for tomorrow. That requires some interpretation and reflection.

One morning on the way to school I realized that the bus was dog-trailing down the road. I had to keep the right front wheel of the bus nearly on the shoulder of the road to keep the left rear wheel from going over the center line. My first instinct, which turned out to be dangerously wrong, was that there was something wrong with the mirrors. In fact, the U-bolts holding the rear axle to the frame had broken and we were just minutes away from a complete disaster. One's view of the past, if not correctly interpreted, can lead to a very unhappy future.

Several years ago I learned about one approach to psychological healing which is based on a premise that makes some sense to me. The premise is that children are incredibly perceptive—they can quickly perceive when something isn't right. But, they are at the same time incapable of making correct judgments about those experiences. Therefore they frequently misinterpret the actions of others toward them. The classic example is the child who blames himself/herself for the divorce of parents. Or the one who was victimized by another but somehow feels it was their fault.

A mature adult may have the capacity to reframe (not deny) what occurred in the past and thereby experience a measure of healing.

I invite all of us, faculty, staff, students, to take these years to reflect on the past, and to set goals for ourselves, immediate, intermediate, and long-range. And in our long-range goals, I invite us to include, "to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God."

I close with the words of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "If you would hit the mark, you must aim a little above it; every arrow that flies feels the attraction of earth."

This morning I invite us to join in prayer for the millions of dislocated people in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and elsewhere. Their life goals have been dramatically changed—to immediate goals for survival. In the days ahead we will be communicating ways to contribute to the relief efforts and I would assume there will be service opportunities during our academic breaks in the year ahead.

As we face the challenges of a new academic year together, let us never forget that all difficulties are indeed relative. Let us pray.