

# An Attitude of Integrity and Courage

—by Sela Ward, Nu Beta/University of Alabama

Adapted from Sela's commencement address delivered at her alma mater in 2005



I wish I had some pearls of wisdom to offer the universe that would help solve world hunger or create world peace. I wish I had the answers to nuclear proliferation or terrorism, but I don't. I can, however, encourage and inspire you to dream a little.

From my vantage point, what do I think will be most useful advice as you journey through life? It's an exciting journey. It is not filled with wild beasts or impossible barriers. The obstacles and the potential for setbacks are there, but they are part of what will strengthen you. And, if you pay attention, you will learn and grow from them.

When I graduated from college, I was not ready for the real world. Where were the secrets of the universe I could call upon? When would mentors show up to show me the way?

Guess what? No secrets dropped from the heavens, no mentors came a'knockin'. And, my Mama, she wanted me to take a job with benefits that would stay with me my entire life and, of course, get married. If only she could have told me what years of hard knocks, successes, and failures taught me. But if she had, would my journey have been as fruitful? Would my achievement have been my very own? Did I wish for a short cut? Don't we all? But there are none.

So I'll tell you the things I wish my Mama had been able to tell me. Not shortcuts, but things I believe would have helped me to build my life and achieve success. It is your spirit and your trust in yourself that is the real guide and true companion. The heartbeat of what I want to share with you comes down to a lot of CPR : Courage, Perseverance, and Resilience with plenty of Humor and Serendipity thrown in.

**Let's take Courage.** What is courage to you? How does one prevail over fear and concentrate on good decisions that factor in risk, acknowledge one's important needs, and keep dreams alive?

Does courage mean letting go of a "sure thing" (in my case a close-to-home job with benefits) in favor of heading off to Memphis for a job with Pepsi? I'd like to say it was courage in my case, but it wasn't only that. I chose Memphis because it was the best job I could get that was close, but still far enough from home. Even this small step opened the way to travels that ultimately led me to this crazy business I'm in—with hurdles along the way, such as disastrous auditions, people who said I didn't have what it takes to make it, and so on.

Fear is the enemy of courage, and yet we all experience fear. Fear of the unknown, fear of change, fear of failure based on previous perceived failures, and disapproval. Remember, fear is but a sly trickster. Fear is your adversary. Overcoming Fear, aka "Courage," comes in small and large bites... and so I count courage as a cornerstone trait for success.

**Perseverance** or "persistent determination," which includes tenacity and focus on one's goal, means that you will not permit yourself to be distracted,

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discouraged, or talked out of your path. Every occupation brings with it speed bumps and roadblocks along the way. How you react, how you bounce back, how you draw lessons out of failure will determine how persistent you can be and, ultimately, how successful you will be.

For me, after being devastated by the first handful of failures, I learned that in every loss there is an opportunity to learn something – either about myself or about the world around me. That one of the best things I could develop is the ability to get right back up after being knocked down. That if I crashed and burned on a film, in an audition, or in a relationship—that which didn’t kill me made me stronger. Being stronger made me able to know that there is always another opportunity around the corner.

“Welcome to Hollywood, the land of sharks and  
undermining and envy and always great possibility.”

When I speak of Perseverance, I am thinking of holding on to your own sense of trust in yourself and your goal. Remind yourself that pursuing the avenues of possibility takes time and energy. Often, those in power will not spend their time and energy on you. It is easier for them to say NO and be done with it. In the movie *Million Dollar Baby*, Morgan Freeman’s character comments, “If there is magic in boxing, it’s the magic of fighting battles beyond endurance. It’s the magic of risking everything for a dream that nobody sees but you.” You may be disappointed, but you will call on your perseverance and await your next chance—for there will be a next chance.

Early on I repeatedly fell prey to this “NO” tactic. Starting at 15 years old and winning a local department-store contest to be in a *Seventeen Magazine* ad for a national teen-clothing company, I and three other young girls from around the country were flown to St. Louis to shoot the magazine ad. Exciting to say the least, it was every young girl’s fantasy. But during the trip, the top ad executive for the company proclaimed that none of us had what it takes to be a model. POOF! My bubble burst. There went my secret dream, for he certainly must know what he was talking about!

Five years later, through a series of serendipitous connect-the-dots, I was signed by Wilhelmina models in New York City. I didn’t have the “look du jour” or the height to be one of the top models of that time, but I had what it takes to make a decent living in Manhattan. It was good enough for me.

**Resilience.** What is resilience? It’s my daughter’s ability to recover when her hair isn’t looking just the way she she’d like as she heads off to first grade in the morning; it’s my son’s ability to deal with his beloved LA Lakers basketball team not making the playoffs. But in adults, it is the ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change. It has buoyancy, which is particularly important and differs from perseverance. For while getting back on the horse shows perseverance, it is the attitude you bring to recovering yourself that holds the key to how you will experience the universe. With buoyancy, one is

very much like a submerged object, refusing to be held under water, choosing instead to POP back up to the surface.

In my first months in Los Angeles to pursue my acting career, I went on an audition for a television show called *Emerald Point NAS*. My agent gave me two scenes to prepare. When I arrived at the audition, I was handed 12 pages I had never seen, but I had enough naivety and just the right amount of hubris to think that I could wing it. I bravely started the dialogue and immediately got flustered and asked to start over. The casting director rolled her eyes and looked to her assistant as if to say, how could you embarrass me with *this* one? And with great disdain she again prompted me to begin.

I was horrified, terrified, and now a shell of my former self. I left the audition and called a dear friend hysterically crying and exclaiming that I’d be on the next plane back to New York! Well, I didn’t go back to New York. I decided instead to recognize what I didn’t know, which in this case was how to cold read, and got myself into an acting class on the technique.

Another actress was cast in the role, the pilot was shot, it was decided she wasn’t right, and a new casting director was hired. Once again, I was asked to audition for the same role in the same show, and this time I was prepared. I auditioned and got the part!

I could easily have hopped on that plane back to New York, back to playing it safe and not challenging myself too much. I have many similar stories of my 20-plus years in entertainment. I have bombed many auditions and heard comments like “She’ll be ready in about four more years.” One acting coach said to me: “I’m not quite sure how you got this part (opposite Tom Hanks in *Nothing In Common*) . . . my daughter would have been better.”

Welcome to Hollywood, the land of sharks and undermining and envy and always great possibility. Courage, Perseverance, Resilience.

**Tenacity** is an aspect of perseverance that requires the patience and humility to take life one day at a time in the pursuit of the high goals we set for ourselves, whether personally, professionally, or spiritually. There are many folk tales that praise tenacity. There is the story of the king who has a daughter of marrying age. He announces: “I will give my daughter’s hand in marriage to the man in this kingdom who can jump to the top of this big staircase that leads to her chamber.” Of course, all the guys are thinking, “Okay, here’s my chance, I’m going to do this.” And all the big athletes train and they all take a shot at it. They go to the stairs, trying different approaches. Some stand there and leap; others take a running start. But in every case they land on the staircase and fall down to the bottom.

And then there is one little guy, a nerdy type who says “I’ll take a crack at it.” Everyone laughs as he goes to the bottom of the stairs, looks up to the top, takes a deep breath, and he jumps . . . one step up. More laughter. And then he jumps to the second step, then to the third, to the fourth, to the fifth,

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until eventually he has jumped all the way to the top, and he gets the princess. Point being . . . that seemingly unachievable goals are made up of smaller achievable goals that can be accomplished by persistence and tenacity.

**Humor.** If you think about it, much of what happens to us and others, much of what we react to in relationships, in accidental happenings, and even in tragedy has a humorous side.

Humor is always present, and it is for us to find it and include it in our attitude toward life and its vicissitudes. If you can laugh at yourself, you are less likely to sink into discouragement, blame others, or feel despair. Life, if you really look at it, is like the “theater of the absurd.” We’re all a part of this play. Take the time to look around and notice the absurd and comical side of life. It will tickle your mind and energize you. Humor is a great assistant. It leads you to discover joy and hope. It helps to understand things like Serendipity.

**Serendipity** may be hard to trust. It involves much that seems out of our control. The dictionary defines it as “the faculty of making fortunate discoveries by accident.” The real question is how do we make *fortunate* discoveries by *accident*? Can we actually plan for and initiate these fortunate accidents? Maybe the answer lies partially in practicing perseverance, resilience, and tenacity. But it takes more than that. It takes incorporating other life skills into the fabric of your life, such as knowing what you know and knowing what you don’t know.

You aren’t expected to know everything, and while *nobody* holds the keys of wisdom that will unlock the box for you, there is a wealth of knowledge and experience lying low on the tree for picking from friends, relatives, associates, and people who cross your path. Beyond that, a lot of the knack for creating serendipity in your life lies in your ability to develop your peripheral vision.

Some of us have a plan and some of us take it day to day. Some of us wake up looking straight ahead and some of us look left and right. While your eyes are focused steadfastly on the road you are traveling, there is a road or roads not taken. And, while the laws of physics dictate that we can only be in one place at one time, through peripheral vision we can see a broad spectrum and thus the opportunity for avoidance of mistakes *and* the opportunity for fortunate accidents that were not a part of the original plan.

Ask successful people if they stayed on the path they set out on or if they derailed themselves from the path du jour to venture down a road not taken. Fact is, God drops gifts in your lap all the time. You just have to be ready and willing to recognize them as such.

Sometimes, serendipity comes down to being in the right place at the right time. George Clooney, who played my husband on the TV show *Sisters*, was riding a motorcycle from Lake Como through the hills of Italy on his way to Milan. In the middle of nowhere, George’s bike breaks down. He walks to the nearest house, knocks on the door, and it is opened by a young 17-year-old

Italian girl. She takes one look at him, starts *hysterically* screaming, “Oh my God, it’s George Clooney. . . . I watched your movie last night and prayed to God, “please send me George Clooney, please God, send me George Clooney! And here you are!” Now, what are the chances of that happening in the middle of nowhere in rural Italy? Just another fortunate accident?

There are serendipitous moments at almost every turn in our lives. When my job with Pepsi was over, I had my sights on New York. En route I was sitting on a plane next to a man who told me he ran an audio-visual production company based in New York and Atlanta. I jumped all over that!

The next thing I knew, I was in New York working at his production company. It wasn’t the perfect job and it wasn’t enough money to live in Manhattan the way I would choose, but it got me there! Had I not been open to talking to the man, had I not seized the opportunity for an interview . . . had I not recognized the opportunity . . .

Perhaps you are thinking: Sela is so lucky, yes, she had a few knocks but . . . the world is her oyster. I want to remind you that luck and opportunity are like gold nuggets in a river: They are available to everyone. You have to look for them, you have to believe in their presence and notice them. Make sure you are not walking around with your eyes wide shut, blaming others.

Do you remember Sisyphus, who was punished by the Greek gods for his “trickery.” Could it be the gods were offended that he was thinking creatively rather than being submissive? As punishment he was compelled to roll a heavy stone up a slope, the stone always escaping him near the top and rolling down again. Often this myth is seen as a metaphor for human life: an endless and frustrating labor over which man has no control.

Why has this myth survived? The same story could have had Sisyphus realizing his errant ways and begging the gods for forgiveness. But no!

French writer Albert Camus believed that Sisyphus stands for all of us, if we think of him in another way. Sisyphus persisted in his task with integrity and strength of spirit. He did not accept the punishment—he defied it by converting the gods’ decree into a task he was determined to execute with his own control and self-respect. He did not fall into depression and self-pity. He did not plead with the gods or blame them! He created a challenge and contributed to humanity by prevailing!

I hope there was humor there, as well. **E**



For her work in the hit television series *Sisters* and *Once and Again*, Sela Ward earned two Emmys, a Golden Globe, and the respect of the Hollywood community in which she works. She is the honorary chair of Chi Omega’s 1895 Society, authored an autobiography, *Homeward Bound*, and personally fosters a children’s home in Meridian, Mississippi.