Colonel Arthur J. Athens

Leadership: What's Love Got to Do With It?

1/C Capstone Seminar

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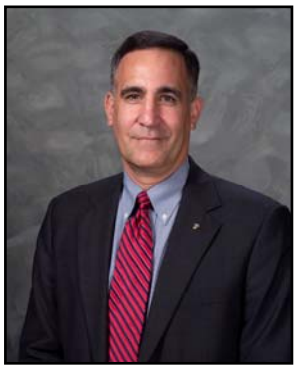

Colonel Arthur J. Athens, USMCR

Colonel Athens is the Naval Academy's first Distinguished Military Professor of Leadership. He has a diverse background, spanning the military, higher education, and the non-profit sector.

Colonel Athens has also served as the Commandant of the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy; the Executive Director of OCF, a worldwide non-profit organization helping military personnel integrate their faith and profession; a White House Fellow under President Ronald Reagan; the Special Assistant to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) Administrator following the Space Shuttle Challenger accident; and a U.S. Marine Corps Officer with more than 29 years of combined active duty and reserve service in significant command, staff, and instructional positions. In his current Marine Corps Reserve assignment as the Special Assistant to the President, Marine Corps University, Colonel Athens led the effort to establish the Marine Corps' General John A. Lejeune Leadership Institute.

In 2005, while fulfilling his other professional responsibilities, Colonel Athens volunteered to coach the Northern High School boy's lacrosse team and led the team to their first regional championship and a third place finish in the Maryland state championships. The *Washington Post* selected him as their Coach of the Year.

Colonel Athens holds a bachelor's degree in operations research from the Naval Academy where he lettered in lacrosse, served as the Brigade Commander (the senior ranking midshipman at the Academy), and received the Alumni Award for overall academic, athletic, and leadership achievement. He also earned masters' degrees from the Naval Postgraduate School, where he stood first in his graduating class, and the Army's School of Advanced Military Studies.

Colonel Athens currently serves as the Director of the Admiral James B. Stockdale Center for Ethical Leadership at the U.S. Naval Academy.

He is married to the former Mistina Root of Williamsburg, Virginia, and they have ten children.

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Introduction
Lieutenant Nick Rogers, USN

Lecture
Colonel Arthur J. Athens

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This is an edited, abridged version of the original lecture transcript.

Introduction

Lieutenant Rogers

I have the distinct honor and privilege of introducing our guest speaker today.

Colonel Athens is the Naval Academy's first distinguished military professor of leadership. He has a diverse background that spans the military, higher education, and the nonprofit sector. Colonel Athens has served as the Commandant of the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy and as the Executive Director of OCF, which is a worldwide, nonprofit organization that helps military personnel integrate faith in their profession. He has also been a White House fellow. He has served the United States Marine Corps for more than 28 years of combined active duty and reserve service, in significant command staff and instructional positions.

His current Marine Corps Reserve billet is Special Assistant to the President, Marine Corps University. He also serves as the director of the Stockdale Center for Ethical Leadership here at the Naval Academy.

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Lecture

Colonel Athens

That doesn't worry you, does it, that I have 10 children? Are you wondering, "Man, what is wrong with this guy?" Just in case there are a couple of questions rolling through your mind, yes, they're all mine. They're all with the same wife, and yes, we know how it happens.

(Laughter)

We drive a 15-passenger van. Unfortunately, it's white, so it looks just like a GSA vehicle, one right out of the motor pool. My children continue to remind me, "Dad, if we have to have one of these huge cars, couldn't we at least get something that has color to it?" But the cheap ones are the big white ones that you can get used. As a matter of fact, when I was Commandant up at Kings Point, which is in a fairly wealthy area of New York, and one of our sons was a high school student, the school's parking was filled with BMWs, Jaguars, and Land Rovers. Every once in a while, Arthur would drive his 15-passenger van, and the thing that always amazed him was all the kids saying, "Look at that! Can we drive your 15-passenger van?" And he's thinking to himself, "How stupid. I want to drive your BMW—that's what I want to drive." He actually used the van at one of the proms there. They put up a disco ball inside and had it spinning. It was pretty cool.

That son of mine, Arthur, just got married on the 29th of December, so it was a pretty big, exciting holiday time for us. We just picked him up from Dulles Airport on Wednesday night from his honeymoon, and then he got on a plane at BWI to fly back to his duty station in Germany. He is actually an Army first lieutenant now, a combat engineer. Let me tell you something about him, because it ties with what we will focus on today. Arthur went to James Madison University over in Harrisonburg, Virginia. He actually went there to play football, and I think probably after his second season there, even though he had done pretty well, he thought to himself: "I'm probably not going to the NFL, so maybe I need to think about what's next in my life." He ended up getting an Army ROTC scholarship. He graduated from JMU in May 2006, and he had five days off before he went to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. It's a combat engineer school for the Army. Then he went to Airborne School down in Fort Benning and then right to Schweinfurt, Germany, where his duty station is, to join the 9th Engineer Battalion, but they were already deployed to Iraq. So he dropped his personal goods and found himself by December—six months after he had graduated—in Ramadi, Iraq, leading a platoon.

Before going to Germany, he anticipated what would happen, and he sat down with me. "Hey, Dad," he said, "We have talked a lot about leadership over the years, but could you give me a quick summary before I go do this for real?"

That's a tough thing to do, not just as someone who thinks a lot about leadership. How do you summarize it in just a quick discussion? It was also tough because he is my son, and I wanted to say the right thing for his benefit before he would lead soldiers in combat.

So I had a flashback to when I became a platoon commander out of the Naval Academy, and a mentor of mine, Lt. Col. Tom Hemingway, sat down with me after I graduated.

"I'd like to tell you a story about leadership," he said, "that I'd like you to remember as you go out and lead Marines." This is Tom Hemingway's story.

He was a Citadel grad, and he came into the Marine Corps in the late 1950s. He graduates from Citadel, goes to the basic school, and then from there, shows up at his first infantry platoon. He hears about his platoon sergeant, who is a gunnery sergeant. That gunnery sergeant had served in the Pacific Theater in World War II, landing in places like Guadalcanal and Iwo Jima—just some of those minor skirmishes that occurred in World War II. This particular individual had been promoted to an officer rank. They had lost a lot of officers on the beaches, and they were promoting folks, but after the war ended, he was reverted back to enlisted rank. Then Korea comes, and he fights in places like Incheon and Chosin Reservoir. He gets another battlefield commission, and then reverts back to enlisted rank. Now he is a gunnery sergeant, and my friend Tom is about to take command of this platoon.

So Tom was humble enough and smart enough to go in and see this gunnery sergeant, and they were both standing up. Tom says, "Gunny, look, you know my background, and I know yours. I don't understand how I'm supposed to lead you and some of these other Marines with all their experience, for us to be successful."

The gunny looked Tom Hemingway in the eye and said, "Lieutenant, sit down."

Of course, that was a polite way for a senior enlisted person to tell a lieutenant: "I have something to tell you, and you need to listen."

The gunnery sergeant said to Tom, "Lieutenant, there are only three questions that I'm going to be asking about you, and your Marines are going to be asking about you. First question they're going to ask is: do you know your job, or are you striving real hard to learn it? We know you don't know everything, but we're going to be watching to see if you're paying attention, whether you're asking the right questions, whether you're humble enough to find out how to do your job really, really well. Second question we're going to ask is: are you going to make the hard but right decision even if it costs you personally? And the last question we're going to ask is: do you care as much about me as you care about yourself?

Now, as Tom thought about those three questions, in his own mind he said, "The three C's: competence, courage, and compassion." That's the story Tom Hemingway told me when I was a brand-new second lieutenant in the Marine Corps. When my son got ready

to go to Iraq, that's the story I told him. When he sent back one of his early pictures from Ramadi, with his little hooch where he was hanging out, he had the three C's posted on his board. He might have just put those up and taken a picture to send to his dad, but no, he really had them up there, and it really did help direct his thinking about leadership while he was in Iraq. Competence, courage, compassion.

I have spent a lot of my life leading, developing leaders, thinking and studying about leadership, and our tendency is to focus quite a bit on competence and courage. I think a lot of what the Naval Academy is about has to do with developing your competence and addressing this area of character and courage. I am not so sure we stop and think enough about the third C: compassion. Do you care as much about them as you care about yourself? That's what I'd like to turn to.

If I could take you back to 1984, there was a billboard top hit that year. The person who sang the song actually won the Grammy award in 1984. The name of the song was "What's Love Got to Do With It?" Anybody know who the artist was for that one?

Participant
Tina Turner.

Colonel Athens
Tina Turner, right. That song took her to the top then, and I've thought about that title. I've thought that if we took the word "leadership" and the word "love" and brought them together, I wonder if we wouldn't ask the same question: "What's love got to do with it?"

Now I'd do my Tina Turner imitation for you this morning, but it's a little early, and I don't want to overdo it. If she were here singing, here's what the refrain of that song would sound like:

> What's love got to do, got to do with it? What's love but a secondhand emotion? What's love got to do, got to do with it? Who needs a heart when a heart can be broken?

She would challenge us to say what love has to do with this relational piece. If we actually stepped back and thought about it, we would say, "Yeah, well— what does love have to do with leadership?" And I'm going to tell you I think it has everything to do with it. I'm going to tell you that I don't think you can be an extraordinary leader unless you love your people sincerely. Let me repeat that. I don't think you can be an extraordinary leader unless you love your people sincerely.

Now history shows us that you can win battles, you can accomplish the mission, you can make money, you can build buildings, and you can win games without loving your people, because a lot of people have done it that way. But I am convinced that you and your organization, your unit, your group will never be extraordinary in the long run without that kind of genuine concern for your people.

So what is this connection between leadership and love? Is it real? Let me tell you just a couple of stories. Let me take you back now to 1918, even further back than Tina Turner. General John Lejeune— you might have heard his name. His statue is out there in front of Lejeune Hall. For Marines, he is the epitome of leadership. When we had to name a leadership institute in the Marine Corps, we named it the Lejeune Leadership Institute.

In his autobiography, Lejeune told a story about when he was the second division commander in World War I. He had both Army and Marine units under him, and they were fighting at the very end of the war, in November 1918. The war was drawing to a close, and if you remember your history, the armistice was actually signed in November of 1918. The battle ends in France on that November 1918, and the next day after the armistice is signed, Lejeune is visiting one of his division field hospitals. He's walking through the hospital and happens to see this one particular Marine who has an amputated leg, and he decides he is going to ask what happened.

So Lejeune walks up to that Marine and says, "Sergeant, tell me about it. Tell me what occurred."

"Yesterday," the sergeant said (yesterday being the day the war ended) "I was crossing a bridge on the Meuse River with a mission. There was heavy mortar fire. There was small-arms fire, and the shrapnel seriously injured my leg. They decided they needed to amputate it to save my life."

Lejeune said, "Sergeant, did you know that the war was about to end when you went across that bridge?"

"Sir," the sergeant said, "That was common knowledge amongst the troops. Everybody knew it was just about over."

Then Lejeune looked at the sergeant and said, "So what induced you to go across that bridge, knowing that it was almost just about over, that the fighting was going to be done?"

The sergeant said, "Sir, Our battalion commander Capt. Dunbeck gathered us on the friendly side of the Meuse River, and he said to us, 'I've received a mission, and I'm going across that bridge, and I expect you to come with me.'"

With slight tears in his eyes, the sergeant looked at Lejeune. "Sir, what could we have done? We certainly weren't going to let him go across that bridge by himself. We loved him too much for that."

Lejeune in his book then writes: "I have always felt that the incident I have just narrated gives one a better understanding of the meaning and practice of leadership than do all the books that have been written and all the speeches that have been made on the subject." When I read that in Lejeune's book, it really struck me. All the leadership books, all the speeches that have been made—and Lejeune believes that little snapshot of the love

between a Marine commander and his Marines represents leadership better than anything else?

On my Marine Corps Reserve side, I was involved with the establishment of the Lejeune Leadership Institute, so I read all the things that Lejeune wrote, not just his autobiography, but all his speeches and all his correspondence in the archives down at Quantico. The thing that struck me about Lejeune was how often he used the words "affection" and "love." I would have never expected it, but it was constantly in his communication while he was a Marine and after he retired from the Marine Corps.

Let me tell you another story. Between 1974 and 1983, there was a young man by the name of Jeffrey Marx. He was the ball boy for the Baltimore Colts. As you probably know, they left Baltimore and are now in Indianapolis. Jeffrey Marx eventually became a journalist, and he decided to write a book about the Baltimore Colts when he was the ball boy and find out what they did after they left professional football.

So Marx got the old roster, and he decided to call them one at a time, interview them, take notes, and write the book. The first guy he calls is Joe Ehrmann, who used to be a lineman, all pro, for the Baltimore Colts. He called Ehrmann and said, "Hey, do you remember me, Jeffrey Marx? I used to be the ball boy."

Oh, yeah," said Ehrmann. "We used to call you 'Brillo,' didn't we, because you had that curly black hair?"

"That's me."

"Okay. Hey, what do you need?"

"Well, I'm writing this book," said Marx, "and I want to find out what you did after you left professional football."

"I'd love to tell you about that," said Ehrmann. "I had kind of a strange transition out of pro football, because when I left, my brother died of cancer. It really affected me, and so I ended up going to seminary. I started a church in Baltimore, and I worked with primarily young men. But let me tell you what I really like doing. I'm the assistant football coach for Gilman High School outside of Baltimore. That's where my real passion is. As a matter of fact, Jeffrey, why don't you come to one of our practices and see what goes on there? It's pretty unique."

Marx was curious. He's a journalist. He showed up at Gilman High School for the practice. Joe Ehrmann has the team gathered around him before the practice starts. He asks the football team: "What's our job as coaches?"

All the players in unison reply, "To love us."

Then he asks, "What's your job as players?"

And all the players shout out in unison, “To love each other.”

Okay, I’ve been around athletics a long time. I’ve coached at a lot of different levels. I’ve assisted teams, collegiate level, even. I hate to admit it, but I even worked with the New York Jets, not as a player, but to assist them in some other areas. I’m not sure I did very well as I look at their record, but I’m going to tell you that’s not sort of the standard way that people start practices. I don’t care what your sport is.

Marx was fascinated by this. He changed the direction of his book. Rather than writing about all the Baltimore Colts, he decided to focus on Joe Ehrmann and this Gilman football team. Gilman has won seven out of the last nine Maryland Independent Athletic Association Division-A football titles. Often they’re ranked in the top 25 of *USA Today’s* top high school football teams. This is not a pushover team.

One of my sons, who is a junior, just transferred to St. Mary’s of Annapolis this year, and he’s the quarterback for St. Mary’s. They played Gilman, and I can tell you they’re not pushovers. This is a team that plays hard, works hard, but there is a bond of love there.

Jeffrey Marx came here about two years ago, and I had a chance to chat with him. I asked if he ever went back to see what happened afterward.

“I’ve been back there plenty of times,” he said. “It’s real. One time I watched when Gilman lost to McDonough, which is one of their chief rivals, and in the end zone at the end of the game, the coaches were there. All the players on the team were there except for two guys that were separate from the team, a captain and one of their star players. They had just lost probably the biggest game of the year, and those two guys were crying. So one of the coaches looked at the team and those two guys, and he said, ‘Look at those two players over there.’”

Now, most coaches would then say, “Look at those wimps. Hey, you two wimps, get over here with the rest of the team.” That’s not these coaches said.

They said to the team, “They are our family. They’re hurting. We need to go over there and encourage them, because we’re a team.”

Pretty incredible stuff. I watched this football team come out on the field. I watched how they worked with each other, how they cared for each other, and how they were winners.

Let me tell you another leadership love connection story. It’s about me when I coached this high school team. In 2005, two of my sons played on the Northern High School lacrosse team down in southern Maryland. Two weeks before the season starts, the head coach transfers. The assistant coach disappears, and another assistant coach gets pretty sick, so they have no coaching staff. The season is about to begin, so the principal and

the athletic director come to me, knowing my lacrosse background, and say, "Hey, how would you like to take the team this year?"

I said, "Well, you know, I have a couple things going on at the Naval Academy. I'm a Marine Corps Reserve guy. I have a big family. I can't really fit in being a voluntary head coach of a high school varsity team."

So I go home, and I tell my good old wife.

"Gosh," she says, "that sounds like a wonderful opportunity. Are you sure you don't want to do that? You would be with your sons, and we'll all pitch in."

As a matter of fact, the *Washington Post* did a feature story on us that year, because our oldest daughter is a physician assistant, so she was like the team doctor, and then our next son was Arthur, who was going to school at James Madison. He was a communications major, so he would come over to announce the games when he could break away from school. Our next two sons were playing. The next one warmed up the goalies all the time. The next one was the statistician. Then we had two water boys, a water girl, and a cheerleader, all in the family. We had the whole thing.

(Laughter)

But I couldn't picture that at first. My wife could though, so she said, "I think this is fantastic."

So I go back to the principal and say, "Okay, I guess I'm going to take this team."

Three days before the season begins, I become the head coach of this team on a voluntary basis. I had to rush down from the Naval Academy for practice and all this kind of stuff. It's about 50 minutes south of here.

The first thing I did was interview all the seniors and ask them about their future plans. What do you think your strengths and weaknesses are as a lacrosse player? How can I help you? Blah, blah, blah. So I'm going through each of the seniors one at a time, in about 15-minute interviews, and Houston shows up. Now, when Houston walks in, the easiest way to describe him is to say he is not exactly dressed like I am today or you either. Very, very different. Really, really baggy shorts. I mean, really baggy shorts, with a T-shirt that probably had, as I remember, some kind of derogatory comment about life on it. He had earrings all the way up his ears, across his eyebrows, and in his nose. Now is there any problem? No, I can get over that stuff. But my initial reaction was, "Wow, I have nothing in common with this guy." I'm not sure how we are going to get along.

It got worse, because Houston, before I said anything, asked, "Hey, Coach, do you remember me from last year?"

"Well, Houston," I said. "I didn't coach last year."

"Oh, no, I know," he said. "But you came to all the games. You were up in the stands one time when we had that big fight with Patuxent High School, and you actually came out of the stands, and I was like pummeling this guy, and you dragged me off."

"I guess I do remember you, Houston."

I'm thinking to myself about how I help people with how to prepare for interviews at different types of venues. That's normally not how I suggest you meet your new boss, but to Houston, that made no difference. At that moment in time, I realized that I needed to love that young man. He was part of the team. I was the leader, and it was not going to be natural for me. It wasn't going to be easy for me, but I needed to love him.

The next day, before the season actually begins, before our first practice, I ran into the principal of the high school, who said, "Oh, by the way, I forgot to mention there is one guy who is going to be on your team, his name is Houston, and the guy is a bum. I would kick him off the team right now."

"Well," I said, "I need to give him a chance."

He said, "No, no. The guy is terrible. He'll miss practice. You just watch."

Okay, so Houston is showing up for practice, not only showing up for practice, but is trying really hard. He's not a great lacrosse player, but I am investing myself in this guy, because I want him to know that I really do care about him.

Then one day, Houston doesn't show up for practice. It's interesting how human nature works. My first reaction was: maybe the principal is right. I left the practice field, and there was Houston standing by the locker room.

By the way, this is always a good lesson: rather than flaming on someone right away, it's always good to ask a question first.

So I didn't say, "Where the heck were you, Houston? You know my policies." No, I didn't say that. I said, "Houston, you doing all right?"

"Coach, could I talk to you for a minute privately?" he asked.

I said sure. So we go off to the side, and Houston said, "Coach, you've gotten to know me. I just want to swear to you that there were no drugs involved, no alcohol, but I was driving my car, and I was driving really fast, and I was driving so fast that when I touched my CD player to change the CD, I looked up, and I realized I was heading right through a red light, and I hit a car at an intersection."

While I was taking this in, Houston said, “Coach, I killed the driver in the other car. I don’t know what to do.”

So you’re the leader—what do you say? I’m convinced that, if you already love that person, you are in a much better position to figure out what to say. Basically, I told Houston, “I don’t know how this will turn out, but I can tell you this. I’m going to walk beside you as we do this, however it turns out.” This was a hurting young man.

As the season went on, and other legal things occurred as well, he then broke his collar bone in a game. He was absolutely dejected, because lacrosse was beginning to be the centerpiece of his life. It was a refuge for him. Old Houston would come to practice every day with his broken collarbone. He didn’t have to practice. He would do whatever he could, but every day, he would come to practice and say, “Coach, I bet I’m going to be good in about two days.”

I knew how long it would take to heal a collarbone. He wasn’t going to be ready in a couple days, and I kept telling him, “Houston, you have to be patient with this.”

Well, all of a sudden, unexpectedly, this team that had never won much of anything wins a regional championship. We go into the state playoffs, and Houston is just chomping at the bit to play. Now I have my daughter involved as the physician’s assistant, and I’m saying, “Christina, you have to let me know when I can pull the trigger with this guy, because I need to get him in if I can.” It’s the state semifinals, and I don’t need Houston in there. As a matter of fact, part of me is saying he may even be a detriment if he goes in, but I knew that young man had to get into that game. Christina said he was going to be okay.

Houston goes into the game. He doesn’t do much of anything, but I know to this day, because I have run into him a number of times, that it was probably the highlight of his life to play in a state playoff game as a high school player. I don’t think I would have figured out how to walk with Houston through his situation. I wouldn’t have put Houston in the state semifinal if I hadn’t learned to love him as his leader early on.

So what really is this connection between leadership and love? Why is it so important? What I have learned is, people want to feel special and valuable, every single person. Every single member of your platoon or division or section or whatever it is who’s standing in front of you, they want to feel special and valuable.

I celebrate birthdays when I am in a leadership position. When I am in class, I get the roster so I know when people’s birthdays are, and then I plot it into my calendar. When a birthday comes up, I buy the person just a little book, some cheap thing, and then we sing “Happy Birthday” in class, and I present the gift. It’s almost a little corny, but you know what, the person who is on the receiving end thinks it’s pretty darn special. Even the ones that say, “I don’t care if anybody knows my birthday or not”—I’m not so sure they don’t care. I find that people like to be recognized on their birthday, because it’s a special day to say someone is valuable. I make the effort to figure out when it is and

recognize the person in some way, even if it's just shaking his or her hand and saying happy birthday.

When I was at the Army-Navy game this past fall, I was trying to get to my seat, and Admiral Mullen, who is the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, also happened to be walking. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him stop and walk over to me with this huge entourage behind him. Admiral Mullen comes over and says, "Art, how are you doing? How is that new position and everything? How is Misti?"

Now, how does Admiral Mullen know any of that? Well, when Admiral Mullen was a lieutenant, he was the executive assistant to the Commandant when I was a midshipman. I happened to serve as the brigade commander, and so I would interact with Lt. Mullen every day, but I hadn't seen him in years. He knew Misti because I was dating her at the time. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff stops to come over and say hello to me? Does that change how someone looks to you? Absolutely. And that's how your people are looking to you to see if you are communicating in some way that you and you and you and you are special and valuable.

The second thing I've noticed is that people like to receive feedback in an atmosphere of genuine concern. All of you have experienced this. You know, I could bet my life—I'd bet my 15-passenger van on this one—that you have been given feedback by someone who you are convinced couldn't care less about you. Your reaction to that feedback is what? Okay, great. Yeah, right. Because we want to get feedback from people we think care about us, and one of the most important things leaders do is provide feedback to people, both good and bad. You have to give feedback to folks. They have to know how they're doing. If you give that feedback, and they're convinced you don't really care, then they're not going to listen to your feedback. They're most likely not going to take action on it either, which is what you're hoping to see happen.

Once, I had a Marine, who at the time was a major, and I was a lieutenant colonel. He was an AV-8 Harrier pilot, and he was a pretty good officer, but he was really, really arrogant. I knew that I needed to sit down with this guy and tell him, "You're a really good marine officer, but you're too full of yourself, and it's hurting you."

Now, try telling an arrogant person he's arrogant. You find out that's a really tough mission. I called Bob in. I said some good things about him, because they were all true, and then I said, "But Bob, let me confront you with something. I think you're kind of arrogant, and I think that arrogance is hurting you, not only just as a professional officer but as a person."

I gave him some ideas of about how he could change that. Man, he was angry. Now he was respectfully angry just because I was of a higher rank, but he was mad, and he was mad for about a year.

(Laughter)

But after a year, he came to me and said, “You know what, you were right about me. I know you have noticed I’ve made some changes.”

I said that I had.

“Let me tell you,” he said, “the only reason I made those changes is that I thought you really did care about me. It wasn’t about making the office better. It wasn’t about you becoming Commandant. You cared about me enough to tell me this thing that was a problem, and that’s why I took action on it.”

I think people want to feel special and valuable, and love enables us to make them feel that way. We want to receive feedback in an environment of genuine concern. I also think people want to know they have a leader they can come to when they’re hurting. You are going to have people who work for you with a lot going on below the surface. Some of it you will never find out. But some of it every once in a while percolates to the top.

When I was Commandant at Kings Point, a midshipman made an appointment and came in to see me. We were chatting, and then I say, “So how is everything going?”

He said, “Sir, to be honest, not very good. My father was murdered last night.”

Now I have had people come and say: my father has cancer, or my father died, but not this. His father had been murdered, in a gang-style type of murder, in New York City. We talked about it for a long time, and then he said as he left: “Sir, would you be willing to come to my dad’s memorial service in a couple of days?”

“Sure,” I said, “I’d be honored.”

A few days later, my wife and I went to the Merchant Marine Academy Chapel for a 1900 service. I’m looking around, and I don’t see anybody who looks officially religious. I knew all the chaplains. They weren’t there. It’s just starting to make me think.

About two minutes before the service was to start, this young midshipman came up to me and said, “Sir, whenever you’re ready to start.”

“What do you mean start?”

“Do the memorial service,” he said.
I didn’t want to say, “What are you talking about?” I just started a memorial service for a person I had never even met. Why did that young midshipman come and see me? Why did that young midshipman in his own mind trust that I was going to do his father’s memorial service in this chapel at the Merchant Marine Academy? He was convinced I cared.

A sergeant major worked for me one time, who was the poster Marine physically. I mean, he was unbelievable. Never saw an emotion out of the guy. It always reminds me of the movie *We Were Soldiers Once*, where the sergeant major has no emotion. An enlisted man always walks by the sergeant major, hoping the sergeant major will cheer up a little bit.

He always says, "Good morning, Sergeant Major."

"What's so good about it?" the sergeant major replies.

That was my sergeant major until one day when he asked to see me. He closed the door and just broke down, sobbing, because he had found out his mother had been diagnosed with cancer, and his mother was the center of his life. People need to know they have a leader they can approach, and they're only going to feel that if they sense that you love them.

Does that mean you bring the platoon around, all hold hands, and sing "Kumbaya"? Is that what I'm talking about? No, I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about real love, because if you ask the people that were on my lacrosse team, or the people that I led in the nonprofit organization, or my Marine Corps units, they are going to tell you we worked hard. We had a vision of where we were going.

I think about that movie *Miracle*, where the coach, after the exhibition game, says, "Again, again, again, until you get it right." You can ask my lacrosse team about the hills that are near our field. I knew one thing—our team was never going to be outrun by any other team. The only way you get there is by working really, really hard. It also doesn't mean you have an undisciplined mob. It also doesn't mean that you don't confront people. Sometimes, love also means saying, "You're gone. This isn't going to work out." But it all starts with an atmosphere of love.

So how do you do this? Okay, love, yeah, I think I know what that is. I'm not so sure we do sometimes in the leadership context, but I will tell you, it comes down to just one word more. When it comes down to leadership and love, that word is "sacrifice." If we are going to love our people, it's going to cost us. It's going to cost us to sacrifice for our people.

Lance Corporal Madsen was one of my Marines in my first platoon, and he was a terrible Marine. Looked terrible, didn't know his job. It was a disaster. I was at Marine Corps Station Yuma, Arizona at the time. Phoenix is about three hours away. Madsen called me up on a Sunday night at 2200, and Madsen always talked really fast. I think he was hoping that he could deny whatever someone said that he said, because it was hard to follow him, he talked so fast.

So he's on the phone, saying, "I'm at the bus terminal, and I don't have enough money to get back, so I know I can't be back for formation, and I know we have a deployment, so I just want to make sure you don't run me UA."

"Okay, wait a minute, Lance Corporal, man," I said. "Let me get this straight. You talked to your squad leader, couldn't get a hold of him. You tried the platoon sergeant, so you talked to me. Okay, that's good. Now where are you?"

"Well, sir, at the bus terminal up in Phoenix."

I'm not sure he really was at the time, but he got there eventually.

So I said, "You are not going to be back for our movement tomorrow, and you don't want me to run you UA? Well, you are going to be UA. It's not my fault you don't have the money to get back."

He went into this big, long story about why he didn't have money. He flew in from leave, and all this kind of stuff.

There was something that clicked inside of me that said, "This is a Marine I need to demonstrate my love for." So I said, "Hey, Madsen, you said you were at the bus terminal, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Okay, I'm going to drive there and pick you up and bring you back so that you are on time for your formation on Monday."

Now there was a big silence. That's why I thought he maybe really wasn't at the bus terminal. He might have been somewhere else, but in three hours, no matter where you are in Phoenix, you can probably find your way to the bus terminal.

So I get in my car, and I drive the three hours, pick Madsen up, and drive the three hours back. I get to know Madsen pretty well in the three hours in the car. By the way, I didn't go pick up Marines all the time. There were just certain times where I realized I had to sacrifice so they knew that I really did care about them. What I learned from driving with Lance Corporal Madsen was that he didn't have anybody in his life who would go ten minutes out of the way to pick him up, let alone three hours. He had never had anybody care about him.

So what happened to Madsen after he got back? He became a model Marine. He would do anything, anything that needed to be done, because one person said, "You know what, I need to demonstrate love."

That love meant sacrifice. That drive took a lot out of me when we were getting ready to go on a deployment. So it takes sacrifice.

I love a story that Lou Holtz tells. Lou Holtz coached at Notre Dame, coached at South Carolina, coached at Windermere, but he is probably most famous for Notre Dame. By

the way, if any of you ever get a job, and you say, "I have a really hard job," think about the Notre Dame football coach and how much pressure that person is under.

Anyway, Holtz is in his first season, and he has four wins and five losses, and he is thinking to himself: "I have to win this last game. We have to win this last game, because if I come out 500 my first season, the alumni will probably be off my back."

They are playing USC and losing by four points. It's late in the fourth quarter. USC has their ball in their own territory pretty deep, and it's fourth down, and Holtz is thinking to himself: "This is great. They're going to punt. Even if it's a good punt, we are going to be in good field position. The momentum is in our direction. We can win this game. I can be five and five. I might even have a pretty decent summer. This will be all right."

The punting team comes out from Notre Dame. USC gets ready to punt. Lou Holtz had a son on that team. His name was Skip Holtz. Skip was on the punt return team, so as Lou Holtz describes the story, he says, "I'm down on my knees with my hands on my knees, and I'm looking at the punt, and it goes off, and I'm thinking, 'Wow, that's a terrible punt.' I mean, it's flopping all over the place, that's great." He looks out of the corner of his eye and sees a yellow penalty flag. He immediately looks over to where the punter was, and there is his son, Skip Holtz, sprawled out on top of the punter. The referee is signaling a roughing-the-punter call, which means USC will get a first down. It will be their ball, and they will continue on.

Lou Holtz continues with, "As my wife's son comes off the field—"

(Laughter)

"All I could think about was strangling him and picking him physically up and throwing him into the bench." Fortunately, he remembered what someone had once said to him: sometimes the people who need love the most deserve it the least. So as Skip Holtz came off the field, Lou Holtz gave him a quick hug and said, "It's going to be okay," and Skip went to the sideline.

Notre Dame came back and won that game, and Lou Holtz got his five and five season in a miraculous turnaround, but he says, "You know, the reason I think we won that game is that every player on Notre Dame was watching me to see how I would react to what just happened, and because I reacted the way that I did, I think they were convinced that my love for each of them was unconditional. They could play with that kind of freedom." Lou Holtz went on to have many, many successful seasons there at Notre Dame.

As a matter of fact, when I was a midshipman here, there was a guy named Josh McDowell who was speaking at different college institutions, and his theme was maximum sex. That was the title of his presentation, and when I was here as a plebe, which is when he came, it was still an all-male institution. You can imagine the big posters all around the Naval Academy, with big black letters, reading: "Maximum Sex." Very small letters explained that the presentation was about true love. You normally had

maybe 50 people or so in Mitchell Auditorium for events like these, but that night, it was packed.

(Laughter)

Just standing room along the walls and spill out into the open area beyond that. I'll always remember what Josh McDowell said that night. He said: "A lot of us base our love on 'love- if.' I'll love you if you do it my way. Sometimes we love 'because-of.' I love you because of the way you look or the things you do. Real love" he said, "is love 'in-spite-of,' in spite of your quirks, in spite of the thing you just did, I'm going to still love you."

That's what real love is. That's what real sacrifice is too. It's interesting that in the book *Gates of Fire*, which the movie *300* was based on, there is a little section that I think captures this idea of sacrifice and love very strongly. Now, my last name is Athens. My original name was Athenasiades. I come from the old country, not personally, but my family comes from Greece, so of course, I was thrilled to see this movie gain such notoriety for the Spartans. In *Gates of Fire*, a Spartan slave is captured by the Persians, and this slave is up there with the Persian ruler Xerxes. Xerxes keeps looking down at these Spartans and can't understand why they are following Leonides. He asks, "Why is this? How can this king have that kind of following?"

And the slave says: "I will tell his majesty what a king is." He then explains to Xerxes:

> A king does not abide within his tent while his men bleed and die upon the field. A king does not dine while his men go hungry nor sleep when they stand watch upon the wall. A king does not command his men's loyalty through fear nor purchase it with gold. He earns their love by the sweat of his own back and the pains he endures for their sake. That which comprises the harshest burden, a king lifts first and sets down last. A king does not require service of those he leads but provides it to them. He serves them, not they him.

Wow. That captures it.

Let me close with this final story. Corporal Jason Dunham, United States Marine Corps, grew up in Scio, which is in upstate New York. He graduates from high school and enlists in the Marine Corps in the summer of 2000. In 2004, Corporal Jason Dunham is a squad leader on the border of Iraq and Syria. As you probably know, squad leaders are typically sergeants, but in Dunham's case, he was a corporal, much loved by his people, much respected by all those above him. In 2004, Dunham is a squad leader at a checkpoint near the Iraq-Syrian border.

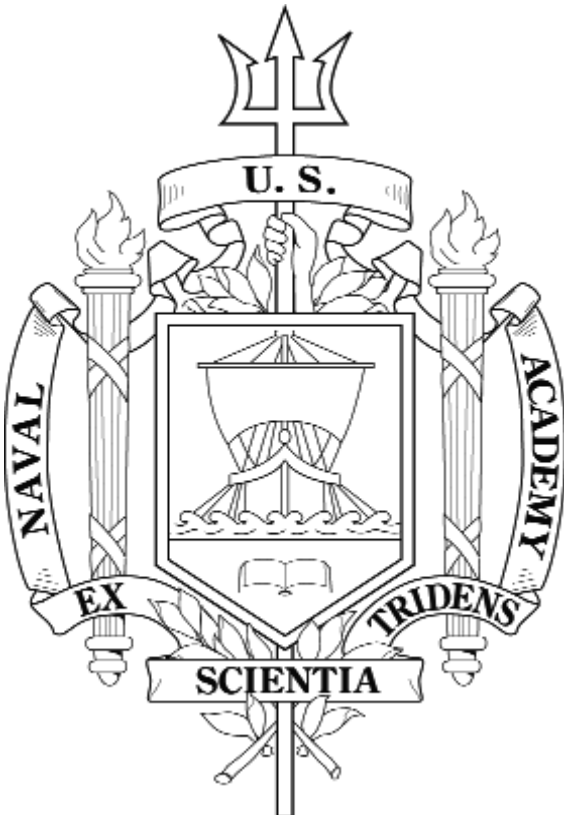
While he is at that checkpoint with his squad, he hears rocket-propelled grenade fire, small arms-fire, a distance up the road. A U.S. convoy had just gone through their checkpoint, so they were sure that this convoy had been ambushed. He mounts up his

squad. They move out in their Humvees to where the convoy was ambushed. He then turns his squad toward the village that's adjacent to this ambush location, and they move through the village. They finally come to this place where there are a couple of vans parked, and Dunham is convinced this is where the insurgents probably came from. Dunham carefully brings his squad up to these vans. In an instant, an insurgent jumps out of one of them. Dunham notices he has a grenade in his hand. The pin is already pulled, but he is holding the hand grip on it, and they begin to wrestle, Dunham and this insurgent. The insurgent breaks his arm free and throws the grenade towards the squad. Dunham is able to break loose from the insurgent, push him away, and tells his squad to hit the deck. Dunham takes his helmet off, puts it on top of the grenade, and the rest of his body and the grenade explodes. No squad members are injured. Dunham dies of his injuries seven days later.

In January of 2007, the President of the United States presented the Medal of Honor to Corporal Dunham's family for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his own life, above and beyond the call of duty. Corporal Jason Dunham sacrificed it all for the people he loved.

I have thought about this, and I think about you as a group, how many of you would be in that kind of situation in your lifetime, maybe none of you. Maybe a very small handful would be in that kind of situation where you need to throw yourself on a grenade, but here is what I am convinced of. I am convinced that all of us as leaders have to have the willingness to throw ourselves on grenades daily for the people we work with. We need to be ready to sacrifice for them, and our ability and our willingness to do this and our motivation to do it that's going to make us extraordinary is the motivation of love.

If you ask Jason Dunham what leadership and love have to do with each other, he would say they have everything to do with each other. If you ask General John Lejeune what leadership and love have to do with each other, I think General John Lejeune would say they have everything to do with it. I believe if you ask any extraordinary leader what does leadership and love have to do with it, they would tell you everything. My great hope is that all of you that are about to go out as leaders, some of you will take command of units much earlier than others, but all of you will be involved in leadership, that you will go out with a desire to be extraordinary, but if you want to be extraordinary, it's not just about competence, and it's not just about courage. That third C is part of the foundation, the C of compassion. Love your people, and you will see amazing things occur.



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