

59th NATIONAL PRAYER BREAKFAST KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Randall Wallace

February 3, 2011

Mr. President, members of Congress, honored international guests, and all of you here, I'm deeply honored to be with you today.

The introduction you've just heard covers me with Hollywood glory, and whenever I'm introduced that way I feel compelled to tell a story that reveals exactly how glamorous I am.

My first big break in Hollywood was when I was promoted to producer and sent to take over a television show that was in trouble. The ratings were low, the actors were unhappy, and unhappiest of all was a gorgeous young woman who had been Miss Universe. So before I went out to meet them I bought what I considered the essential piece of equipment for a producer: a strap to hold my sunglasses so they could dangle around my neck. My plan was to walk up, say, "Hi, I'm Randall Wallace," snap off my sunglasses, make my point, and then close with a dramatic flourish by putting them on again. I figured the actors would love it. So I walked up to Miss Universe, said, "Hi, I'm Randall Wallace," snapped off my sunglasses and said, "I know you're not happy. You haven't been given enough to do. But I'm in charge of this show now--the writing, directing, everything. So if you have any problems you come to me." And I snapped my sunglasses back on. But while I was talking I'd been fidgeting with my tie, and I did this.

There is no fall back from that position. A friend told me it may have been the first time in Hollywood history that an actress wondered whom she'd have to seduce to get out of a job.

Movies are arguably America's most lucrative and influential export--but guys like me don't seem the obvious choice to speak at a prayer breakfast. When I was directing *WE WERE SOLDIERS* at Ft. Benning, Georgia, I found time one weekend to drive over to visit President Carter's Sunday lesson at the Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains. I asked a friend who knew the Carters to save me a seat, and when I arrived I found the seat was right next to Rossalyn Carter. Apparently Mrs. Carter, gracious Southern lady that she is, had wanted to be sure I felt at home. I sat down and Mr. Carter asked the congregation to open their pew Bibles to a passage that was the subject of his lesson. Now I grew up in Baptist churches and I was familiar with the passage he was about to read, so I took the chance to open the hymn book to check on the lyrics of a hymn I was thinking of using in our film. And as I was thumbing through the hymn book, Mrs. Carter touched my arm and handed me her Bible, opened to the right passage. And I realized in that moment that Mrs. Carter had logically assumed that since I was a Hollywood director I didn't know the difference between a hymn book and a Bible. And I have to admit it did strike me that I had the perfect chance to steal Mrs. Carter's Bible. If anyone stopped me, I'd just say, "She gave it to me." It was worn with use, marked with joy and tears. Imagine what it would bring on eBay.

To prepare myself I've studied the speeches of those who have preceded me in this position in past years. The causes they've advocated from this podium are vital, and I have no way to compete with

their accomplishments or their eloquence, so this morning I'd like to do something that as nearly as I can tell is unprecedented for a keynote address at the National Prayer Breakfast. I'd like to speak about...prayer.

I'm not a philosopher. I'm not a preacher. I'm a storyteller. Like Jesus. As nearly as I can tell, that is my only similarity to Him. Actually there is one other: I too have cried out, "My God, why have you forsaken me."

I've lived a life of tremendous privilege. I grew up just down the road from here, in Lynchburg, Virginia. Virginians are a righteous and sober people, too proud to tell a lie. But I was born in Tennessee. My father was born in Lizzard Lick, Tennessee. The men in my father's family are Alton, Elton, Dalton, Lymon, Gleaman, Herman, Thurman, and Clyde. They called Clyde Pete. Nobody knew why.

When I was a child I suffered from attacks of asthma so severe that I couldn't breathe at all, and I had the real sense that if I panicked I would die. Grandmother would hold me in her lap all night long, and she would sing to me, and tell me stories from her childhood, and from the Bible, and she would look into my eyes and she would smile. And I don't look at blue eyes to this day without seeing hers.

And as I grew older I found her looking at me in a strange way--quietly, distantly, and so I asked her, "Grandmother, why are you looking at me that way?" And she answered, "You remind me so much of Rufe." Rufe was her husband, my Grandfather, who had died before I was born.

Of course I became hungry to learn about him, so I asked my father to tell me what he was like, and he told me this story.

During the Great Depression my Grandfather, who was a farmer, decided to open a country store to feed his family. There was no wood to be had and no money to buy any, but he found a wrecked riverboat on the shore of the Tennessee River, and he salvaged that wood to build a store.

But he needed cash to buy the stock to sell, and there was one place in town that paid cash for labor, and that was the plant where they froze huge blocks of ice and men would pick them up with tongs and sling them onto wagons so they could sell them to farmers whose homes had no electricity. My Grandfather was the only white man who did that job; all the rest were what they then called Colored men.

So his first day on the job, the Supervisor, another white man, approached my Grandfather and told him, "Listen, I just want you to know, all I got on this crew besides you is a bunch of...Colored men, and I cuss at 'em to make 'em work. So if I forget myself and I call you an S.O.B., don't pay me no mind, I don't mean nothin' by it, that's just the way I am."

And my Grandfather looked at the Supervisor and said, "I understand completely. And I just want you to know that if you do forget yourself and call me an S.O.B., and I hit you in the face with a claw hammer, don't pay me no mind, I don't mean nothin' by it, that's just the way I am."

And in that one story I understood exactly who my Grandfather was, and exactly who I wanted to be. And I understood the power of a story.

My father, and mother, worked extremely hard so that I could go to school. He was a salesman who loved his customers, and he rose in his company, with promotion after promotion...until one day the family-owned company he had worked for for twenty years was sold to a professional investment group, who knew nothing about the business itself but who believed it would prosper if they fired all the old guys and hired cheaper young guys. My father was one of the old guys. He was 38. I've always wondered if my father lived his life hungry for the father he'd never had; his own father had died before he was born--the Grandfather he'd told me about was my mother's father, not his. He had never been fired from anything. The strongest and best man I ever knew, and he had a complete breakdown.

While he was in the hospital my sister and I were farmed out to relatives. For awhile we lived in a house that had no indoor plumbing. When I told my father about that he said, "Well...rich people have a canopy over their beds--and we've got a can 'a pee under ours." That's when I knew my Daddy would be all right.

The last sale he had made for his old company was for ninety-thousand dollars--in 1961. The first sale he made when he started his next job was for ninety cents. Working one hundred hours a week, he clawed his way back to success. God bless America. And God bless my Daddy. He told me I could go to college anywhere I wanted--something he and my mother had never gotten a chance to do.

I chose the most expensive place possible--and he was so proud. But when I graduated, I didn't want to be a doctor or a lawyer, I wanted to be a writer. I wanted to tell the kind of stories that would let a young man know who his ancestors were, and who he might be. The kind of story that might keep a child alive through a long night.

My first job was in Nashville at a theme park, managing a live show that featured barnyard animals playing musical instruments. I'm not making this up. I had a piano playing pig named Pigarace. I had a duck that played the drum named Burt Bachquack.

You can imagine how proud my parents were.

I had my embarrassments and my setbacks, but I kept writing; I moved to Los Angeles, I got an opportunity in television. I married. We had two beautiful sons. I had purpose in my life, and I worked like I'd seen my father work, with pride and passion. I won a multi-year contract with a thriving company. I bought an old home and remodeled it; I was promoted to producer. Except for an occasional mishap with my tie, life was sweet.

Then the Writer's Guild went out on strike, which caused the company I worked for to void its contract with me. The strike went on forever, and when it was over the company was barely there anymore. I was out of work, my savings were gone. No one would return my phone calls--I'm sure that's never happened where you work.

I kept trying, of course, I was always good at trying. But one day I was sitting at home, at my desk, staring at nothing, my stomach in a knot, my hands trembling, and I realized I was breaking down, as my father had. I feared I had failed my father, and my mother, and my Grandmother. And my greatest fear was that I would fail my sons. I was afraid they would see me come apart, as I had seen my father come apart, and it would be something they could never forget.

I got down on my knees; I had nowhere else to go. And I prayed a simple prayer. I said, “Lord, all I care about right now are those two boys. And maybe they don’t need to grow up in a house with a tennis court and a swimming pool. Maybe they need a little house with one bathroom, or no bathrooms at all. Maybe they need to see what a man does when he gets knocked down, the way my father showed me. But I pray, if I go down, let me go down not on my knees, but with my flag flying.”

And I got up, and I began to write the words that led me to BRAVEHEART.

Was that moment of prayer the single determining factor in the arc of my whole life? Of course not. My teacher and mentor in college, the great Thomas Langford, of Duke University, once told us in class that no decision in our lives stands alone; the trajectory of all the other decisions we’ve ever made points our direction for the future.

Our lives are unfolding stories, they are moving pictures. If we took a freeze frame of Golgotha, on the day that Jesus was crucified, and showed that picture to anyone unfamiliar with the story and asked them to judge who the victor was in that scene, they’d be unlikely to say: “The one hanging on the cross in the middle.”

It was from that cross that Jesus cried, “My God! Why have you forsaken me?”

That cry does not amaze me. What does amaze me is that while one of the two thieves hanging on either side of Jesus mocked Him, the other acknowledged the justice of his fate and asked Jesus for help; and Jesus, in the agonies of the crucifixion, told him, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” That does more than amaze me. It makes me believe that any Power that could enable Jesus to say that, then, could do anything.

And it seems to me that Jesus’ response is the answer to every prayer that thief never prayed. If God is God, then God knows our prayers whether we pray them or not.

So why pray the prayers? To me it’s not because God needs to know my prayers, but because I do.

Prayer sifts us like sand. Take any moment of our lives; take this one. Here, in a room resonant with power. Did we come this morning to feel a closeness to power? Do we come before God because what we truly want is to use the ultimate power we imagine God has? Or do we fall to our knees to admit the truth of our weakness--and stand again, in the strength of that truth?

Jesus said the truth will set us free, and He said that the truth is: God is love.

It seems to me that the prayer that comes from Love is the prayer that goes to God.

My father once told me the story of a man drowning in the ocean. He cried out, "Oh God! If you save me, I will spend the rest of my life in serving You!" A few moments later a boat appeared and pulled him from the water, and on the way back to shore the man lifted his eyes to heaven and said, "Of course You do understand that I meant "in an advisory capacity." But life does not give us the option of Advisory Capacity.

Tolstoy wrote in *WAR AND PEACE* that in a battle, one man throwing down his weapon and running away can panic a whole army, and in a panic one man lifting up the flag and running back toward the enemy can rally a whole army, and no one but God knows which will happen, and when.

What if prayer is the way to glimpse God's true intentions--the divine purpose for each of us? I'm no theologian, I'm not looking for logic; I'm only trying to find an understanding for my experience that prayer matters. Does it change the mind of God? I don't know. I can only tell you that it changes me.

When I was a child we sang a hymn called "Footsteps Of Jesus." Not everyone grew up as I did. I'm sometimes described as a rarity, a filmmaker who might speak freely about prayer. But really I'm not so unusual. All of us dreamers in Hollywood are keenly aware of the falseness of fame, the fleeting nature of beauty, the illusions of power. And when I pray with or for my friends, my first concern is not whether they follow the footsteps of Jesus, but whether I do.

If I've led you to believe my life is any example of righteousness, then maybe you aren't familiar with the Tennessee talent for stretching the truth. And even if I could've stolen Mrs. Carter's Bible, I couldn't have kept it. You might own the pages but you don't own the Bible until you've lived it.

Some of you here lead nations. Some of you here lead the world. All of us here have one heart inside us, and it is in that one heart where the whole battle is fought.

There are as many ways to approach the great questions of life as there are people on the earth. But every one of us must stand alone before all that made us, and all that we have been, and that we might be. And dying in your bed, many years from now, would you not trade all the days from that day to this, for one chance, just one chance, to open your heart before God Almighty, and to tell Him, "I will lose my life, and I will find it by loving in all the ways You lead my heart to love."

You have a prayer. Pray it. Amen.