

Good Evening!

I want to thank JJ for inviting me to this fabulous event, and congratulate all the athletes who trained hard to prepare for the games... for participating, setting goals, struggling through at times, overcoming, and joining us here tonight to celebrate your accomplishments. I am honored to be with you.

SENIOR is such a funny word, isn't it? How do we even define what that means?

If we were in high school again, it would mean we're near the end... almost done.

**That sounds just grand, doesn't it?**

Let's look at some statistics: According to the CDC, from the years 2000 to 2014, the population of centenarians (those who reach 100 years and beyond) grew by 43.6%. And... in 2014, the Social Security Administration said that, on average, if you live to be 60, as a male you can expect to live another 21.55 years (almost 82). As a female, you can expect to live for another 24.56 years (almost 85).

So, let's go back to high school and break this down. If we divide life evenly, and we know that many of us will live to be over 100, how do we possibly become a senior at 50 or 60? That's a lot of years to be considered an "older adult." A freshman would be 0-18, sophomore 19-37, junior 38-56... and then the next 25 to 50+ years are senior years... I don't like it. And I believe we need a different perspective.

Do any of you remember back when you were in high school and you had that one student who returned for a second senior year? You know the one... he was supposed to graduate with his class, but for one reason or another, he needed a little more time. When I was in school, we called it a 5<sup>th</sup> year senior, but my kids had a better term to describe this student... They would say, "He's doing a victory lap."

So I am here today to encourage you to think about your victory lap...

In America, sadly, we sometimes witness **quantity** of life, without clear evidence of **quality** of life. Doesn't living longer sound so much better when we are healthy, independent and fully-engaged?

We know that health is not simply the absence of disease.

Being WELL has many dimensions.

1. Physical Wellness: This is what we often think of when we think of health—functional status: mobility, strength, balance, flexibility, stamina. But the people I know who truly understand and study “fitness” tell me that 70-90% of fitness is about what you put into your body. Physical health is more complex than going to the gym—we cannot exercise away a bad diet. We also know more and more about chronic illnesses caused by inflammation. An anti-inflammatory diet and limiting our exposure to toxins are just a couple of ways to improve our physical wellness and prevent disease.
2. Intellectual Wellness: Are you committed to being a life-long learner? I read a while back that the people who are the most interesting throughout life are those who remain the most interested. We've all know that person who has all the answers and is willing to interject them into any conversation... and we all know that person who engages in meaningful conversation and asks all the right questions. What different experiences those are... Active listening and active learning are attractive at every age.
3. Occupational Wellness: Many of you are likely still working. Retirement at age 62 is no longer a reality for many Americans, but if we are healthy and active, work may still provide a great sense of purpose and satisfaction. (My mom is 74 and works circles around me!) It is said that about one-third of human life is spent at work... so finding work that provides fulfillment is important to living well.
4. Spiritual Wellness: Our spirituality is so personal, isn't it? For some, this means belonging to and participating in church. For others, it may be a sense of connectedness that includes meditation or time in nature. Whatever it is

for you—it is important to set aside time to practice spirituality in a way that brings meaning to your life.

5. Environmental Wellness: This is our connection to the natural world and it has so much impact on our perspective. In his article, “Our unrealistic views of death through a doctor’s eyes,” physician Craig Bowron, notes that at the beginning of the Civil War, 80% of Americans lived in rural areas, but by 2010, 80% were in urban areas, with only 20% of the American population living rurally. He goes on to say:

*For most of us living with sidewalks and street lamps, death has become a rarely witnessed, foreign event. The most up-close death my urban-raised children have experienced is the occasional walleye being reeled toward doom on a family fishing trip or a neighborhood squirrel sentenced to death-by-Firestone.*

*The chicken most people eat comes in plastic wrap, not at the end of a swinging cleaver. The farmers I take care of aren’t in any more of a hurry to die than my city-dwelling patients, but when death comes, they are familiar with it. They’ve seen it, smelled it, had it under their fingernails. A dying cow is not the same as a person nearing death, but living off the land strengthens one’s understanding that all living things eventually die.*

So, our understanding of a healthy ecosystem and connection to the natural world help us have a more realistic expectation when it comes to our own lives.

6. Emotional Wellness: Emotional wellness has to do with our ability to manage our emotions—how we cope, handle stress, how well we know ourselves. I am going to talk more about this one in a moment...

7. Social Wellness: The Alive.com website says, “A large body of research indicates that people who have more meaningful social relationships are healthier, happier, and even live longer. In other words, there seems to be a reason we feel the desire to care for our loved ones, belong to clubs and teams, and socialize with our friends.”

Without emotional wellness—that ability to cope, handle stress, and manage our emotions—we will struggle to have meaningful social connections... and then if

we get stressed from not feeling connected... You get what I mean. Those two are quite intertwined.

I have worked as a social worker and nursing home administrator before becoming the Executive Director of Legacy Lodge at Jackson Hole, an independent and assisted living community. A number of years ago, I was attending a conference with a colleague who sat through a presentation in which the presenter said that a group of “seniors” were asked about Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs... you know Maslow, right? In his 1943 paper, “A Theory of Human Motivation,” Psychologist Abraham Maslow used a pyramid to describe the stages of human psychological development.

On the bottom level is physiological needs – things like food, water and shelter

The next level is safety needs – physical safety, health, employment

On the third level is love and belonging – friendship, family, intimacy, sense of connection

Next is self-esteem – confidence, feelings of accomplishment and respect of others

And finally, at the very top is self-actualization – morality, creativity, achieving one’s full potential.

The pyramid illustrates that humans must have the basics in place to be able to move up the levels—each level must be reached from the bottom up in order to ultimately achieve self-actualization. In other words, you are not going to be focused on a sense of accomplishment if you are struggling for food, water and shelter. Those basic needs must be met first.

So this group of seniors was asked which level do you believe is the most important to reach or achieve for quality of life?

And what do you think they overwhelmingly answered....?

## LOVE AND BELONGING.

I decided to do my own unofficial survey on Facebook, with people of all ages. I asked the very same question: Which level do you believe is most important to reach or achieve for quality of life.

I had 40 responses, and 25 of them said LOVE AND BELONGING.

Here are a couple of comments that were made:

“I work in an adult mental health office. So many of the people I see just want to know someone cares and will listen to what they have to say.”

Another was: “You may feed me and give me drink and that would keep me alive, but love and belonging nourish the soul and help the spirit live.”

About five years ago, my sense of love and belonging was rocked. I went through a divorce after 22 years of marriage... It was a terribly painful time in life.

I am the biological mother of two grown children, the step-mother of three, and Mimi to five...with #6 on the way. I was a very busy young woman... a 24-year old mother of five and believe me, **mistakes were made**. Many mistakes were made.

One thing I discovered in the midst of the sadness of divorce was that I had a lot of work to do on myself... I had to learn to hear my own voice and to banish other voices that had taken residency in my head.

There were truths to tell myself and to speak out loud, and I had to learn that my truth was not anyone else's. We all have our own version of the truth because we each have our own vantage point... and none is more correct or more valuable than another. I had to humble myself and listen. And I had to have conversations that made me feel very vulnerable, but ultimately strengthened connection—that sense of love and belonging we all yearn for.

In many ways, I am just beginning. There will be more conversations and opportunities in the days, weeks, months and years ahead... and I welcome them, because I know with every one, healing happens and bonds grow stronger.

A core belief of mine is that each of us is born a perfect soul, but then life happens. Layers of sludge and debris build up and hide that perfection... but it is life's most meaningful work to peel back those layers and expose the beauty in each of us.

Parker Palmer, an author, educator and activist, I have come to admire calls it "THE DIVIDED LIFE." He says:

*For some kids it happens, sadly, in the family. For most of us it happens at school. We learn that it's not safe to be in the world as who we truly are: That if we express our true feelings, our true identity, we are going to get marginalized... we're going to be ignored... we're going to become invisible or we're going to be disliked or even hated.*

*...But there comes a point in life where that divided life—that gap—between who we really are and the face we put on for the larger world becomes painful. It doesn't happen for everybody. Some people adjust to it. Some people live their whole lives that way... but for a lot of people, the divided life becomes a source of pain and we have to find a way to try to close that gap—to build a bridge between our own identity and integrity as adults and the work that we do in the world.*

Through my work in long-term care, I have seen many individuals at the end of life. I have observed and worked with families who respond in a myriad of ways... and one thing I have learned is that those who have the greatest amount of unresolved pain have a tendency to make the most unrealistic and selfish choices. As author and Chairman of the Special Olympics, Timothy Shriver, says, "If you get grief wrong, you get a lot of things wrong... If you don't transform it, you will transmit it."

Emotional and Social Wellness.

Peeling back the layers.

Life's most important work.

Are there truths you need to tell yourself and speak out loud? Conversations to be had? Is your life filled with love and belonging, or is there more to be done?

Doing our personal work can be scary at times, but to quote the poet Hafiz, "Fear is the cheapest room in the house. I'd like to see you in better living conditions."

In her book Listening Below the Noise, Anne LeClaire shares her journey of practicing silence—one day a week, for years and years, even at times while surrounded by others—family, work associates, even strangers. The practice allowed her to listen to her soul... to learn who she really was.

And what a deep question that is. "Who am I?" Stop and think about that...

Who am I?

Who am I?

Who am I... separate from titles, roles, societal norms and expectations?

Who am I?

When we know ourselves completely, we can love more fully... share more openly... have honest conversations... and truly enjoy a complete sense of love and belonging.

The American Holistic Health Association says:

"Illness is viewed as a manifestation of a dysfunction of the whole person, not as an isolated event. Holistic physicians encourage patients to evoke the healing power of love, hope, humor and enthusiasm, and to release the toxic consequences of hostility, shame, greed, depression, and prolonged fear, anger, and grief. Optimal health is much more than the absence of sickness. It is the conscious

pursuit of the highest qualities of the physical, environmental, mental, emotional, spiritual, and social aspects of the human experience.”

I wish you many wonderful years of complete wellness... and a **VICTORY LAP** that is filled with a deep sense of love and belonging.

Thank you.