

“Fall Forward” – Denzel Washington’s Inspiring Message to Students

This lesson can be presented over 1-2 sessions. Instructors should feel free to use whichever discussion questions and activities you think best for your class or group. We advise giving students the sheet with the definitions of the virtues before each session.

Lesson Goals

Help students:

- realize that dreams are achieved by setting goals, and goals are achieved through discipline and consistency
- appreciate the value and inevitability of failure, and that success comes from perseverance and being resilient enough to keep trying despite our failures
- become aware that it often takes courage to strive for and achieve our goals
- be thankful for all that has been given to them and for the many gifts they can offer to others
- live with a sense of purpose in helping others

Primary Virtues / Character Traits

Determination – firmness of purpose; complete commitment to achieving a goal

Discipline: training expected to produce a specific benefit, moral, mental and / or physical improvement

Hope: confident expectation of achieving a goal or wish; hopes are realized in building a strategy to achieve the goal and then implementing the strategy

Perseverance: trying hard and continuously in spite of obstacles and difficulties

Resilience: the ability to recover from, or successfully adjust to change and difficulties

Secondary Virtues / Character Traits

Courage: the capacity to meet danger and difficult situations without giving way to fear; to have the courage of one’s convictions; to be willing to put one’s opinions into practice

Generosity: giving freely of our own possessions, time and/or talent

Gratitude: showing appreciation for the kindness of others, family, friends, education, all opportunities offered to us, health, life itself, and material gifts such as food, shelter and clothing

Leader Introduction

Denzel Washington is a famous actor who has been in many movies such as *Remember the Titans*, *Flight*, *Fences* and *Glory*. He has risen to the top of his profession in earning Golden Globe Awards, Academy Awards, and Tony Awards for his performances in both movies and plays. But just like all of us, he started off unknown and went through many trials and failures before he achieved success. We’re going to watch a video of two commencement speeches he has given. Does anyone know what commencement is? Commencement is the ceremony where students graduate and receive their diplomas. Although Washington gave these speeches to students graduating from college, the messages he conveys are relevant and inspiring for all of us.

I’m going to pass out copies of the speeches, and I want you to read along while we listen to his speeches. Be sure to highlight the lines that you like best as we will use these for our discussion.

Film Clip

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uM-MqsWjQd4>

Leader Summary

Washington's messages are powerful and inspiring, and he's right about the world needing the talents of young people like all of you. We mentioned earlier that commencement is the ceremony where diplomas are given to graduates, but commencement also means *the beginning, the starting point*. Washington's messages of achieving dreams through goals, of embracing failure and taking risks to achieve goodness, and of being thankful can inspire each of us to mark a new starting point in our life by committing to live these out.

Discussion Question Options (discussion prompts / answers are in parentheses or bullet points if needed)

Before beginning our discussion, let's read over the virtues and their definitions - included within the online lesson as a separate document.

1. Let's share some of the lines you highlighted that you think are especially inspiring? For each line let's discuss how that lines speaks to you and / or our community? Let's also name and I'll write on the board the virtues that each line reflects.

(Hopefully students offer and discuss enough lines to fill the time available for class discussion. Below are specific quotes that we think are especially inspiring and / or instructive and if students don't key these up, or you have extra time, please consider using some of these.)

2. "Dreams without goals are just dreams.Have goals. Life goals, yearly goals, monthly goals, daily goals. I try to give myself a goal everyday. . .Simple goals, but have goals and understand that to achieve these goals you must apply discipline and consistency. . .everyday. Not just Tuesday and miss a few days. You have to work at it."

Let's share some of examples of dreams that we have. Our dreams can relate to school, sports, family life, charity and even jobs we may hope to attain in the future. Let's name some of our dreams and then outline some of the specific goals you think you should set to achieve these dreams? (Please write these out on the board.)

Now, in looking over our goals to achieve our dreams what virtues will help us to accomplish these goals and work toward our dreams? (determination, discipline, perseverance, resilience, hope) (This can also be a journal writing option.)

3. "You've got to give it everything you got. Whether it's your time, your talent, your prayers, or your treasures. . .Some of you have patience. Some have kindness. Some have love. Some of you have the gift of long-suffering. . .whatever your gift is, what are you going to do with what you have?"
"Each one, teach one. Don't just aspire to make a living, aspire to make a difference."

What are some things that we have now and can be generous with to help others in our lives today?

(Time – spending time with others and being a good listener, offering thoughtful advice when people ask for it, cheering people up with a kind thought, song, or note; Talents and Time - volunteering for charitable organizations, helping out within our own families; Treasure – giving even a little to show our support and solidarity with others in need)

4. Denzel Washington talks about "falling forward", and that "You will fail at some point in your life. Accept it, you will lose. You will embarrass yourself. You will suck (can replace with "really stink" 😊) at something. There's no doubt about it. . . Embrace it, because it's inevitable. . .The point is, every graduate here today has the training and the talent to succeed...But do you have the guts to fail?"

What does it mean to fall forward?

(It means taking chances and going all in for something good. It means that even when we fail in striving for a dream we learn from the fall, and then when we get up again we are even stronger than before. It means not to be afraid of failure.)

What does it mean that to succeed we have to have the guts to fail?

(We need to live with courage in moving beyond our natural fear of failure so that we will strive for larger goals. In addition, we won't achieve all that we are capable of if we don't stretch to our limits, which means at times we will fail.)

What stories did Washington tell that prove the point of failure often leads to success?

(Reggie Jackson struck out 2,600 times in his career. Thomas Edison conducted a thousand failed experiments before he invented the light bulb. Washington himself was rejected in many auditions before he landed his first role.)

What virtues do we live by when we don't give up? Let's talk about them in our own words.

- **hope** – by having confidence in ourselves and in our abilities that we can achieve our goals we are better able to continue in the face of setbacks, and to do the hard work necessary to succeed
- **courage** - It can be scary to go into a situation that we might fail at, but fear should never stop us from trying.
- **resilience** – When we fail, we need to be able to brush off any hurt feelings, keep our “eyes on the prize” of our goals and continue trying. Failure can actually make us better by giving us “thick skin”, so that the next time we fail, we will get back up even faster.
- **determination** – living with a sense of absolute commitment to working toward and achieving our goals
- **perseverance** - despite any obstacles or failures, continuing to work hard. “Hard work works and successful people work really hard.”

Let's share some stories of when we didn't give up despite at first failing and then achieved something good for ourselves or for others.

(studying for good grades, practicing for a sport, reaching out to help another person, leader may want to share a story of their own)

Who wants to share something they are working on now where it's difficult to achieve your goal but your committed to achieving it?

5. “True desire in the heart for anything good is God's proof to you, sent beforehand, to indicate that it's yours already.” Let's read this in our transcript of the speech. What does this mean and do you believe it?

6. “Say thank you for grace, thank you for mercy, thank you for understanding, thank you for wisdom, thank you for parents, thank you for love, thank you for kindness, thank you for humility, thank you for peace, thank you for prosperity. Say thank you in advance for what's already yours.”

In hearing this did you think of something that you now realize you should be more grateful for, something or someone that we haven't thought of enough? Let's share some of these.

7. What was Washington's story about the ghosts on his deathbed? (“Imagine you're on your deathbed—and standing around your bed are the ghosts representing your unfilled potential. The ghosts of the ideas you never acted on. The ghosts of the talents you didn't use, and they're standing around your bed. Angry. Disappointed. Upset. . . So I ask you today: How many ghosts are going to be around your bed when your time comes?”)

How does this story speak to us?

Journal Writing Options

1. What line from the speech did you choose as your favorite? Why did you choose this line? What virtues does this line reflect or call us to live out, and how do you want to live them out in your life?
2. Several of the discussion questions above would be good for journal writing.

Extended Activities:

1. Organize students into teams to write their own commencement speech. Each team should come up with three main points for their speech. Encourage students to include humor in their speeches, whether through a story or funny joke they would like to highlight.

Each team can then present their speech to the group with each student performing a section of the speech. After each speech ask the group to identify the virtues reflected in each speech.

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