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Remarks of Michael Gartner

Thank you. It's nice to be here. As you can tell from that introduction, I have been unable to hold a job for very long.

I, of course, am the perfect speaker for you this morning. I know nothing about science. I know nothing about technology. I have never run a nonprofit organization – unless you count NBC News – and I am on the board of a museum that doesn't even know how to spell museum. It thinks it is N-E-W-S-E-U-M.

Furthermore, I am still in mourning. I am a Chicago Cubs fan. I own the Iowa Cubs, which is the triple-A farm team of the Chicago Cubs. I live and die – die, primarily – with the Cubs. And I thought – this year is the year. I mean. There we were, just one unthinking fan away from the World Series. But I should have known. My friend Bob Costas, whom I used to work with, had warned me.

A few years ago, I asked him to come to Des Moines in the middle of February to talk to 700 or so baseball fans, to get them ginned up for the coming season. The lunch was a sellout, but before Bob talked I asked Andy McPhail, the head of the Chicago Cubs, to say a few words. Andy got up, and he went on about how that was going to be the year, that some big trades had been made over the winter, that good guys were coming up from the farm system, that that year – I think it was 1999 – the Cubs might just take it all – the division, the league, the World Series. The crowd went wild, and he sat down.

Costas got up. He looked at the audience, he looked at Andy, and he looked back at the audience. “You know,” he said, “that was really great to hear. But let me tell you, folks, talking about the Cubs winning the World Series is a little like leaving the porch light on for Jimmy Hoffa. It’s a nice gesture, but nothing will come of it.”

Well, I thought this was the year Hoffa would show up.

But, as I said, I am, yet again, in mourning.

But I am here because my friend Mary Sellers asked me to come. Mary is a year away from opening a fantastic new science center in Des Moines, and she should be the one talking to you this morning about building a learning organization. Four years ago, she had a dream – and nothing more. No money. No site. No plans. No support. When she announced that the Science Center wanted to build a new facility, the town’s power structure tried to elbow her aside. But that didn’t work. But she outworked, outthought, outplanned, outsold and outmaneuvered everyone, and today she has \$50 million, a wonderful site in downtown Des Moines, and plans for a striking new center. Indeed, it’s already coming out of the ground, and those of us in Iowa can hardly wait till it opens next year.

She asked me to talk to you a little about building a learning organization, but, look, it’s Saturday morning, and we’re not supposed to have class on Saturday mornings. So let me, instead, just tell you seven little stories. When I’m done, I’ll tell you why I’m telling them to you. Maybe they’re relevant, maybe not. So bear with me.

The first story is just one-paragraph long. It has to do with Tom Brokaw. Tom Brokaw worked for me, in theory, at NBC, and once we were in my office, and we having a spirited discussion about the Nightly News. I thought something should be on

the show that night, and he thought it shouldn't. Or vice versa. I can't remember, and I can't remember the issue. But I remember the argument. "Damn it, Tom," I said, "if we don't put this on, we'll have egg on our face." "No, Michael," he responded, "if we do put it on we'll have egg on our face. And the thing for you to remember is this: It's your egg, but it's my face."

That's the end of that story.

The second story is a little longer. It's about Iowa, and it's probably my favorite story about the state where I was born and raised. It's about a man named Ralph. Ralph was a slave who lived in Missouri and was owned by a man named Montgomery. Montgomery and Ralph made a deal that let Ralph go to work in the lead mines of Dubuque. As soon as he earned enough money, he was to pay Montgomery \$550 to buy his freedom.

Ralph worked hard in the lead mines for many years, but he didn't make enough money to pay for his boarding and clothing, let alone to save \$550 to buy his freedom. Somehow, two men from Virginia who were in Iowa at the time – kidnappers or bounty hunters – heard of the deal and wrong Montgomery that they'd capture Ralph and deliver him back for \$100. Montgomery accepted the deal.

The kidnappers then went to the local magistrate to get an order for the sheriff to seize Ralph so they could deliver him to his master. The sheriff, having no choice, took Ralph in and handed him to the kidnappers. They put him in a wagon, hand-cuffed him, and took him to the town of Bellevue, hoping to catch the next steamer to Missouri.

But a nearby farmer heard of the deal and instantly called upon Thomas S. Wilson, an Iowa supreme court justice who was in Dubuque. Here's Judge Wilson's account:

“Alexander Butterworth, a noble-hearted Irishman, who was ploughing in an adjoining field, soon heard of the arrest and came immediately to my residence and demanded a writ of habeas corpus. An attorney drew up the application, and it was granted. The sheriff overtook the parties at Bellevue, and Ralph was returned to Dubuque. The case was heard, but at my suggestion it was transferred to the Supreme Court of the Territory, because of its importance, and there it was unanimously decided that Montgomery's contract with the slave, whereby he was permitted to become a citizen of a free territory, liberated him, and that slavery did not and could not exist in Iowa.” The court went on to say that in Iowa, the laws should “extend equal protection to men of all colors and conditions.” In other words, slavery was illegal in Iowa.

Now, what makes all this so wonderful is that it happened even before Iowa became a state – and 22 years before the Civil War. And this decision was the very first decision handed down by the Supreme Court of Iowa – it's in the records as 1 Iowa 1 – the first case of the first session of the court. The decision was handed down on July 4, 1838, and it started a brave and bold tradition of upholding freedom in Iowa.

It is, as I said, 1 Iowa I. As Casey Stengel would say, “you could look it up.”

That's the second story.

(The mention of Casey makes me think of Yogi. Joe Garagiola used to work with me, and one night we were having dinner. “Does Yogi really say those things he is quoted as saying?” I asked. “Yea,” said Joe. “The other day, he called me and said, ‘Joey,

I went to mass today.’ I said that that was nice, but that ‘you should go to mass every Sunday.’ ‘Joey,’ he said, ‘at Mass, the priest read a letter from St. Paul to the Corinthians. Joey, every time I go to mass, the priest reads a letter from St. Paul to the Corinthians, and I have a question.’ ‘What’s that,’ asked Garagiola. ‘Joey,’ he said, ‘didn’t them Corinthians ever write back?’”)

Here’s the third story.

It’s about a man named Jules Leotard. Jules Leotard was a vain French aerialist who was born in 1842 and died of smallpox in 1870, at the age of 28. Leotard was proud of his body and liked to show it off, so he regularly performed in very tight tights. (Now that I think of it, there’s probably no such thing as loose tights; if they’re loose, they’re not tights.) Anyway, Leotard became quite famous – he was the first person to perfect the aerial somersault (which makes you wonder what happened to the people before him who didn’t perfect it) – and eventually the revealing uniform he popularized became known as a leotard, or leotards. As I said, Leotard was vain, and while still a young man – indeed he was a young man when he died, just 28 -- while still a young man, he wrote his Memoirs. In them, he said:

“Do you want to be adored by the ladies? A trapeze is not required, but instead of draping yourself in unflattering clothes, invented by ladies, and which give us the air of ridiculous manikins, put on a more natural garb, which does not hide your best features.”

That was the third story.

(Did I mention that he died of smallpox? Did you know that back in those days, there was smallpox, and there was the great pox, which was another name for syphilis.

One time, in the 1700s, an English politician with a checkered career named John Wilkes was debating the Earl of Sandwich. The earl said: “Upon my honor, Wilkes, I don’t know whether you’ll die on the gallows or of the pox.” And Wilkes responded: “That must depend, my Lord, upon whether I first embrace your Lordship’s principles, or your Lordship’s mistress.”)

Anyway, here’s the fourth story. It’s about a man named Jack Welch, who many think is one of the greatest executives in the history of this country. NBC is owned by the General Electric Co. – indeed, you know those NBC chimes – duh, duh, duh – those are G E C on the scale, standing for General Electric Co., and that might be the only fact you remember from this morning’s talk. As I was saying, Jack Welch was president of GE when I was president of NBC News, so he was my ultimate boss. Jack Welch is a small man, bald, and not particularly handsome. He also stutters badly. Yet, somehow, he is so magnetic that after you talk to him you walk away thinking to yourself, I wish I was short and bald and not very good looking and stuttered. And, as you can see, I got three of my four wishes. Before I met him, I was 6-2 with a full head of blond hair and a movie-star face. At any rate, we were talking once, about a business venture I wanted NBC to start up. It was going to cost \$25 million upfront, and I had to go to him to get approval. I explained the plan, told him how we had investigated it and what we expected, and he quickly gave me the money. Then he said, “I hope it works, but it’s okay if it fails. It’s better to take a risk and fail than not to take a risk at all.”

Happily, I can report that it worked.

That was the fourth story.

Here’s the fifth.

There was, then, a wonderful woman who was bright and beautiful and nice and extraordinarily telegenic. She had all the makings of a zillion-dollar star.

All but one.

She didn't listen.

She didn't listen off-camera, and she didn't listen on-camera. If she was interviewing you, and you said you were there to talk about science centers, the interview might go something like this:

“Now I understand you're here to talk about the three greatest science centers in the world, and that you think the very best is the one in St. Paul.”

“Yes,” you might say, “but before we get into that, I should tell you that I just looked out the studio window here and I see masked terrorists have Tom Brokaw and Bryant Gumbel and Katie Couric lined up against the wall, and guns are drawn, and police have cordoned off the building, and I see 14 bodies on the sidewalk.”

“Yes,” she'd say, “and what is the second great science center?”

She didn't listen, and still today she's bright and beautiful and telegenic – but she's no longer on network television.

That was the fifth story.

Here's the sixth. It's also about England, about life there in the 1600s.

When life got dull in the 1600s in London, and visitors stopped by to see your ancestors, and there was no good football game to watch on the telly, your ancestors would take their visitors to the Tower of London to see the lions that were kept there.

This was a big deal, especially for the country cousins, and when those visitors went back home they often boasted about how they had seen the lions. Thus, in the 1600s, the term “to have seen the lions” came to mean “to have experienced life.”

The big-city folks later would explain how they had “lionized” their cousins – shown them the town, taken them to the Tower, gone to see the lions. In other words, the big-city relatives had made a fuss over the country cousins, and that’s why still today when you make a fuss over someone, when you treat that someone as a celebrity, you are said to lionize him. Or her.

Besides showing off the lions at the Tower, the big-city crowd would introduce their country kin to famous politicians or party givers or whatever, so those country folks saw not only the four-legged lions but also the famous people, or “lions” of politics and society. And that’s why still today anyone of note or celebrity is a lion – a social lion or a political lion or a literary lion or the like.

That’s the sixth story.

Here’s the last.

It’s, again, about some Iowans.

These Iowans were from Cedar Rapids, and they were in show business, but they weren’t exactly lions or lionesses. They were the Cherry Sisters – Effie, Adie, Jessie, Lizzie and Ellie. They couldn’t dance, and they couldn’t sing. In fact, they couldn’t do much of anything, at least not well. Their act exerted a ghastly fascination over its audiences.

And that was exactly what the great Oscar Hammerstein was looking for. The year was 1896, and he was going broke. He was in debt, and the acts he brought to

Broadway weren't doing well. He was desperate. "I've tried the best," he said, "now I'll try the worst." So he sent for the Cherry Sisters.

They opened at the New Olympia Theatre on Broadway on November 16, 1896. "Never before did New Yorkers see anything the least like the Cherry Sisters from Cedar Rapids, Iowa," the New York Times reported the next morning. "It is sincerely to be hoped that nothing like them will ever be seen again." The New York Herald was even harsher: "Did you ever hear the musical 'kerchunk' of the half-flooded milk pail as the brindle-cow kicked it over with her offhind foot?" wrote the reviewer. "Well, that is Lizzie's voice. Did you ever hear the frightened squeak of the rooster when your sister-in-law's first born jumped on him hard with his little copper-toed boots? If you didn't, you won't appreciate Jesse's song of 'Fair Columbia.'"

But the audiences loved them. Night after night, young men crowded the theater. Often, they brought vegetables; sidewalk vendors were said to do a brisk business every evening selling onions and melons and rutabagas. "There was scarcely a young blade in the late nineties," The Des Moines Register recalled in 1929, "but boasted he had heaved a cabbage or two at the Cherry Sisters." Hammerstein himself may have encouraged such activity by rigging a fishnet across the footlights to protect the ladies.

Eventually, they went on the road, and they made some stops back in Iowa. In 1901, the Des Moines Leader wrote:

"Billy Hamilton of the Odebolt Chronicle gives the Cherry Sisters the following graphic write-up on the late appearance in his town: 'Effie is an old jade of 50 summers, Jessie a frisky filly of 40, and Addie, the flower of the family, a capering monstrosity of 35. Their long, skinny arms, equipped with talons at the extremities, swung mechanically,

and anon waved frantically at the suffering audience. The mouths of their rancid features opened like caverns, and sounds like the wiling of damned souls issued therefrom. Effie is spavined, Addie is stringhalt, and Jessie, the only one who showed her stockings, has legs with calves as classic in their outlines as the curves of a broom handle.”

Well, the ladies sued, and the Iowa Supreme Court struck another blow for freedom. After watching the ladies perform – and after noting that the theater performance was so bad that the piano player left at intermission – the court rules that ridicule is often a writer’s best weapon. The case is considered a landmark of First Amendment law, for it upholds the notion that fair comment – even intemperate comment or comment representing minority opinion – is a valid defense of libel charges. It was 75 years before the Supreme Court of the United States came to the same conclusions.,

So those are my seven stories.

Why did I tell them to you this morning?

Because they are about leadership, about building organizations, about how to succeed.

You cannot build an organization, you cannot lead, you cannot succeed if you go it alone. As Tom Brokaw made clear, you must work together, build alliances, share resources. No one is so wonderful, so visionary, so rich that he or she can build an institution alone. And no institution is so wonderful, so visionary, so rich that it can go it alone. Everything requires cooperation, affiliation, relationships, teamwork. Otherwise, someone or some institution will end up with egg on his face. Sometimes, it will be your egg; sometimes, you face. Neither is good.

The second point is that you cannot lead, you cannot build, you cannot succeed unless you are brave and bold – brave and bold as the Iowa Supreme Court was 165 years ago when it freed a slave, when it said slavery could not exist in the Iowa territory. Brave and bold as that noble Irishman was when he called on the judge. Brave and bold as Ralph himself was when he bought his freedom. And in being brave and bold, you must stay true to your principles, true to your mission, true to your constituents. And that is true whether you are upholding the Constitution or running an institution. Consistency of mission, consistency of principle, consistency of strategy is everything.

The third point is that, like Jules Leotard, you must play to your strengths. The first thing any researcher, any consultant will tell you is this: capitalize on what you have before you reach out for what you don't have. Build the core so that it will sustain you – financially, philosophically – as you grow and broaden your organization. Do not abandon your base in search of something else. Build it, broaden it, define it and redefine it. But don't let go of it. As Jules Leotard said, “do not hide your best features.”

The fourth point is that you must take risks. As Jack Welch said, failing at a risk is better than not taking one at all. You must plan, you must budget, you must test and retest and define and redefine, but you must eventually take that risk. That's how you break out of the pack, how you not only survive, but thrive.

The fifth point is this. You must listen. You must listen so you can recognize new facts and situations that can change your mind, your institution, your course of action. A friend of mine divides the world into talkers and doers. The talkers, he said, are those who babble accomplish nothing. The doers, he said, are those who listen – and learn and get things done.

The sixth point is this. You must be a leader. You must be a “lion” of your community if you are to build a strong community organization and if you are to lead that organization to new growth, to new directions, to new prosperity. You must be a person the community appreciates and applauds, someone others point to with pride, It takes an outstanding person to build an outstanding organization.

The seventh, and last, point is this. You must be willing have a few cabbages thrown at you along the way. There are always folks who are against things, and those folks will be throwing slings and arrows, if not melons, at you. So what? If a plan isn't controversial, it probably isn't bold enough. If a person isn't controversial, she probably isn't assertive enough. If an organization isn't controversial, it probably isn't broad enough. Wear the cabbage as a medal of honor.

It's really as simple as that.

In other words, building a strong organization, one that's relevant and responsive, one that's attainable and sustainable, takes more than just leaving on the porch light and hoping.

Let me add one footnote:

After her wailing days were over, Effie Cherry ended up back in Cedar Rapids, running a bakery. In 1926, she ran for mayor on the Moral Uplift ticket.

“It's the high prices, high skirts, high life, one-piece bathing suits, high gas, light and water rates, and white-collared gasoline hounds I'm after,” she said. She added, “Public officials spent too much time playing golf. Women's skirts are ridiculous; they are too short – ankle-length skirts will be the style if I have my way.” She also advocated a 9 p.m. curfew.

In the four-way primary, Mayor J. F. Rall got 3,413 votes. W. G. Loftus received 2,809. Frederick Burill got 566. And 347 people voted for Effie.

So I guess there's a second moral to this story. It's this:

Sometimes, the high point of a career is when people are throwing rutabagas at you.

Thank you for inviting me here this morning, and thank you for not throwing anything.