

TOP TEN

By Gerald Blessey

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Our Coastal region has endured the trauma of Katrina and the current Recession, but our resilient spirit urges us to come back better than ever.

We're in a situation much like Winston Churchill when he met with the leaders of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. They met in one of those big, old English manor drawing rooms with high ceilings and bookshelves all the way up the wall. The head of the WCTU, a little old lady with a long umbrella, jumped up in a rage and said, "Winston, you drink too much. You're setting a horrible example!"

She stretched her umbrella up as high as she could and said, "If you poured all the liquor you've drunk in your life into this room it would reach up to here," pointing about half way up the wall.

Churchill gazed up and said, "So much accomplished ... so much more to do."

The Coast has come a long way, but we have so much more to do. There are still many people suffering from Katrina damage and loss of jobs. The tourism industry in Harrison has lost 3,500 jobs in the past 18 months. Tax revenues for local school districts and governments are in steep decline. Our population is still about 7% below pre-Katrina, and if we had grown at our normal pace of 1% we would have been 12% larger than today.

I've known every Governor since Hugh White and every one of them campaigned sincerely on the promise of better jobs and

better education. Yet, Mississippi, including the Coast, remains last in most economic and educational indices. We must ask ourselves, “Why are we still last in these critical measurements?”

Jane Jacobs, in her seminal books, “The Death and Life of Great American Cities,” and “Cities and the Wealth of Nations,” observed that cities and city-regions are much like ecosystems of the natural world. There are many interdependent elements, economic, environmental and social, that make the city-region a living, growing thing. They all depend on each other.

I challenge the outstanding leaders here today, especially those under 40, to lead us to excellence, to nurture and sustain this human ecosystem that we call the Gulf Coast.

The most critical need for our community ecosystem is to improve education ... dramatically. All else depends on it: jobs, health, affordable housing, environmental conservation, good government, art — everything. Education is the oxygen of a thriving, happy, sustainable community.

We must stop kidding ourselves. Our system of public education is failing most of its students and the taxpayers who fund it.

Many high schools point to the top 10% who get scholarships, while the vast majority of graduates are not competent for the jobs of the 21st Century.

We must have the courage to say that our public school system is an emperor that has no clothes!

At the beginning of the 20th Century, H.G. Wells prophesied that the future of mankind would be a race between education and catastrophe.

Many times during the 20th Century, catastrophe nearly won the race: Two world wars, the Great Depression, the Cold War, racial conflict, epidemics, natural disaster, and other catastrophes challenged the civilized world. They were overcome not just by the educated elite, but by a broadly educated and civilized middle class that some call, “the Greatest Generation.” I hope they were not the greatest. I hope we will be even greater; if not, our grandchildren are doomed.

For now, in the 21st Century, the race continues: from the largest nations to the smallest communities the common enemies are worldwide economic instability, terrorism, climate change, mass extinctions, poverty, disease, and ignorance beyond measure.

Recent studies show that the current, younger generation will likely be the first generation in centuries that is less educated than its parents — less competent in reading, math, science, history, and critical thinking. This is true right here in on the Coast as well as across this great nation.

We should, we must, we, you, me, all of us must, in the poet’s words,

“Think like people of action, and act like people of thought.”

Here is a short list of suggestions:

- Demand that our school systems achieve graduation rates of 95 percent. A 30-35 percent dropout rate is

unacceptable. If a football coach never won more than 65 percent, never had a championship, the system would not stand for it. Why not the same standard for administrators?

- At least one-half of the elementary and secondary student population should be in charter schools that require excellence in math, science and reading.
- Every school district on the Coast should have at least one charter school teaching skilled craftsmanship and technical skills in shipbuilding, health services and hospitality industry for graduates that are not collage bound. Excellence need not be limited to the top 10%.
- We must demand that administrators create school cultures where the average ACT score is at a level where all students are competent to enter the workforce and lead fulfilling lives.
- Every high school senior should have the opportunity to enroll in at least two college credit courses with Community Colleges, USM or private colleges.
- Establish an elementary school within walking distance of every home. Old buildings will do.
- Fire bad teachers, principals and superintendents. Reward good ones with special incentives.

We need more than excellence in education to sustain our ecosystem. Here are a few more challenges for you for the next decade:

To preserve and renew our authentic local culture:

- Provide public funds for venture capital for facilities along the miles and miles of waterfront not only along the beach but also in bays and bayous, for

recreational fishing, charter boats, ecotourism, sailing and public gatherings.

- The incredible diversity and length of waterfront on the Coast is our unique natural feature, and we must make it accessible to all, not just as tourist attractions but also as authentic parts of a great place to live.
- Put a park, a grocery store, a mass transit stop and a farmer and fisherman's market within walking distance of every home in populated areas.
- Every community should have entertainment districts with restaurants, coffee houses, dance clubs, comedy clubs and places for young adults to gather.
- Re-plant the grass beds of the Mississippi Sound.
- Put a fishing pier within walking or biking distance of every home.
- Revive competitive sailing in schools and clubs, with widespread public access to small boats.

For economic development, a few suggestions:

- Make Highway 90 a true Parkway. Purchase unused properties and turn them either into parks or mixed-use projects for jobs and housing using traditional architecture.
- Create business improvement districts all along highway 90 with incentives to build mixed use, storm-proof structures.
- Provide venture capital for organic farms to sell to Coast casinos and supermarkets and to New Orleans restaurants and markets. Like the truck farms of a century ago, food from local farms will create a local export economy that retains capital to create new businesses.

- Revive Tourism by investing public funds in a major hotel at the coliseum convention center and a smaller convention center in East Biloxi.
- Establish very high-speed wireless broadband in every community.
- Establish a research park for public and private labs and institutes in environmentally friendly polymer science, composite building materials, and health sciences.

Here are a few ideas for social sustainability:

- Make every public record available for public access on the web.
- Broadcast every public meeting of every government live on the Internet.
- Create a regional Racial Reconciliation Commission to review the fairness of courts, schools, police, prosecutors and other public institutions.
- Create a Housing Trust Fund to keep the supply of affordable housing in step with demand from low-income wage earners and elderly or disabled on fixed income.

We may be at the bottom in economics and education, but I believe we are at the top in community spirit. Katrina taught us that we are all in this together. We sink or swim together. “A rising tide lifts all boats.”

To achieve greatness, our thinking must be inspired. The devil may be in the details, but the angels are there too.

One of the greatest teachers of all time gave this advice about leadership to rise above any challenge. I commend to you, the

outstanding leaders of the Coast, for whom there is much left to do, this inspiration from St. Paul to the Philippians:

Whatever is true,
whatever is honorable,
whatever is just,
whatever is pure,
whatever is lovely,
whatever is gracious,
if there is any excellence,
if there is anything worthy of praise,
think about these things.

If you think about these things as you lead our region, I believe we will rise, and rise, and rise.