Top 10 Things I Learned Attending John Maxwell’s “Intentional Living” Lecture

To say that I’m not a big fan of motivational speakers is a massive understatement. Nevertheless, I’ve attended at least twenty leadership presentations, dating back to the 1990s—from Zig Ziglar and Dale Carnegie to Daniel Pink and Jeffrey Gitomer. Even though I’m often a reluctant participant, I always walk away with at least one nugget of new information or a helpful refresher of things I had already learned along the way. John Maxwell’s conversation in Charlotte last week offered plenty of both, and covered a broad range of subjects; from time management and personal growth to developing essential writing techniques.

As a nod to retiring Late Show host, David Letterman, in ascending order of impact, here are the top ten notions I appreciated about Maxwell’s “Intentional Living” lecture.

#10- “Elevator people.”” There are two kinds of people in our lives; those who lift us up and those who bring us down. While the sentiment may not be entirely original, truer words were never spoken and this particular phrase was brand new to me.

#9- “We don’t see things as they are, but as we are. If I trust myself, I will trust you because we attract what we are looking for.” This could be the very definition of effective working relationships or even developing friendships. I could not have said it better myself.

#8- “Intentional people fill their own calendar. They don’t allow others to fill their calendar.” This fundamental point is all about discipline. If we can effectively use our time doing important things, we don’t allow things like gossip or idle chatter to occupy our time or drain our energy.

#7- “Focus on the three R’s.” What is required? What offers the best return? People migrate toward things that reward. Knowing what is required of us sets the stage for significance. Doing what we do best nets us the highest return. And rewarding those who contribute to success, keeps the process moving ahead. If, as a team, we continue to work toward those three things, we’re on the right path.

#6- “There are two great days in a person’s life. The day they are born and the day they discover why.” This point is somewhat self-explanatory, but I’ve never heard it put more simply. We’ll never be truly happy until we have at least one purpose in life that absolutely drives us. It may be spending time with and providing what’s best for our family, mentoring others, working to fulfill the mission of our favorite non-profit organization, or writing the next great American novel. Whatever those driving forces are, once we’ve found them, we know.
#5- “Selfishness and significance are incompatible.” If we want to achieve significance, we must first help others. Years ago, I read a magazine article about “The Favor Economy.” Long before the phrase/act was in vogue, this article outlined the idea of “paying it forward” without any expectation of immediate return, and how such a pursuit can lead to a more meaningful life. In five words, John Maxwell just about summed up that entire magazine article.

#4- “Read, think, file, ask questions, and write.” Maxwell’s technique for writing a book is just that simple. Every day, he reads, thinks, files, asks questions, and writes. It may be as little as 15 minutes of each activity, but he does them all, every day…365/12/7.

Before I wrote my first book, I stumbled upon the notion that if I wrote just one page per day, I’d have a 365-page book in a year. Well, both of my books have fewer than 365 pages, yet each took longer than a year to write, so I wish I’d learned this tip about filing earlier, because my desks at home and at work tend to become disaster areas. Daily filing helps manage that mess and can increase productivity, so perhaps this tip should be even closer to #1.

#3- “Growth is not an automatic process. You don’t automatically get better.” As a lifelong learner, this is one I’ll be sure to share with protégés and my stepsons. I’ve served as a mentor to several interns and junior colleagues over the past few decades and continue in that role today, but only for those willing to work at becoming better. So many young folks I encounter today seem to think that all they need to do is go through the motions. I’ve even encountered several adults who believe that if they pretend to care about their own growth; it will be bestowed upon them if they just stick around long enough.

#2- “It’s not for me to accept my life. It’s for me to take charge of my life.” This may be an extension of #3, but to illustrate this point, Maxwell referred to Reese Witherspoon as she accepted an Oscar award in 2006 for her portrayal of June Carter-Cash. Evidently, when Witherspoon spoke with June Carter-Cash prior to filming Walk the Line, she asked about Carter-Cash about her life. The singer’s response, “I’m just trying to matter.”

John Maxwell contends that in order to matter we need to be intentional and that’s the difference between wanting to make a difference and actually making a difference. It’s hard to argue with that premise.

#1- “High morale is looking at each other and saying we are making a difference. Low morale is realizing you are not.” This one really hit home in two ways. Less than 24 hours prior to Maxwell’s presentation, I was energized by the North Carolina Outward Bound School (NCOBS) Charlotte Advisory Board’s first meeting of the fiscal
year. We welcomed several new members onto the board and discussed the funds raised, the status of programs we managed, the scholarships we provided, and the impact we had on local students, teachers and returning war veterans. Morale was as high or higher than I’ve seen in my six years on the board, because there is no doubt that we are making a positive difference in hundreds of lives.

The second way this quote hit home is our work at WTVI-PBS Charlotte. The station brought John Maxwell to Charlotte for his “Intentional Living” presentation and our facilities serve as a regular meeting place for local non-profit organizations, including the aforementioned NCOBS Charlotte Advisory Board meeting. The station intends to turn Maxwell’s leadership presentation into a national pledge program. It will be broadcast here in late August/early September and made available to PBS stations across the country. It’s been quite a while since Charlotte’s PBS affiliate mattered on a national level and this is just one more step on that journey.

Even more important is the work we are doing right here in our own community. WTVI PBS Charlotte has conducted local children’s literacy programs for decades. More recently, your hometown PBS affiliate initiated an annual Community Giveback Contest for small non-profit organizations; a STEM Awards Show for local students and teachers; and a free Family Fun Day. We’ve also introduced notable local shows, including Carolina Impact, Trail of History, and Off the Record, that focus on our community. So, not only is WTVI PBS Charlotte making a difference in our region, every week we are showing and telling the stories of countless local individuals and organizations that are doing the same. As WTVI PBS Charlotte prepares to celebrate its 50th year in August, this “service to success” model is the driving force behind everything we do and will enable us to continue serving this region for years to come.