

J.B. Nash Lecture: “Cross My Heart “

Presented By

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Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday. When I was an itty bitty child through my early teens, my favorite holidays were probably the gift-related ones, but not any more. Thanksgiving is my favorite now. But favorite or not, Thanksgiving is a time of testing resolve. I’m talking about diet resolve.

The holidays are always difficult on diets. The foods associated with Thanksgiving particularly are high in enjoyment but that also mean, that at least for my taste buds, high in calories, fat, etc. Instant and looming obesity is an integral part of the holidays for most of us. I imagine some of you are like I am:

I promise myself to watch what I eat.
I’ll have smaller portions: not so much for me.
I’ll just have a taste.
No, no. No second helpings, well, maybe just one more.
I’ll be better next week.
Ooh, why did I eat so much.
I promised myself to be good and now look!

In reality, I have promised myself to watch what I eat and I do. I watch everything, as I eat it.

My promise to myself was a promise with no substance. If I am honest, at least in retrospect, it was a promise with little chance of being carried through. Why is that? I don’t like the feeling of being stuffed, do you? Carried to an extreme and for a long time, broken dietary promises mean that we’ll probably not like the look on the doctor’s face when she tells us our cholesterol results. That feeling of being cramped by clothes that no longer fit is a continuous reminder of our failure to keep promises made to ourselves, and I’m sure the well-maybe-just-one-more wasn’t worth it when fear of an early demise to diabetes or heart attack enters our daily consciousnesses.

Not a talk about diet

No, this is not a talk about eating less nor is it a talk blaming Thanksgiving or the holiday or your preference for broken promises. It is though a talk *about* promises.

Seal a promise

When you were a child how did you seal a promise? Cross my heart? Curved little finger to little finger? Whatever method you used, did you keep those sealed important promises a child makes? Some were kept, but often the ones kept were kept only because they were convenient to



keep or because it never became difficult to keep them. When the going gets tough, most children's promises get going.

When You're 10

I was ten when Calico came into my life. I had been working on/nagging my parents for years before about having a dog. They knew instinctively, as do most parents, that a dog would end up being their responsibility to take care of, regardless of my promises to the contrary. So they said, in a kindly tone of voice, "No honey, no dog." Finally, I think to push it off to the future and to stop my nagging, they told me that when I turned ten, I could have a dog. Nothing much more was said after "age ten" was set. They had promised.

Today I Get a Dog !

Even before getting dressed on the morning of my tenth birthday, I reminded them of their promise of some years before. Today I get a dog! For an instant, their faces reflected an expression that might best be described as, "What have we done? Why did we promise a dog on her tenth birthday? We thought she would forget."

Kids don't forget promises made to them about getting dogs. Dog promises sharpen the memory to a razor's edge. A kid might forget to show a parent a report card, they might forget to bring home their lunchbox, but never, never is a promise about getting a dog forgotten.

My Calico Promises

Calico was a sweet, lively sheep dog puppy from the pound who spent her first night whimpering in the kitchen, surrounded by a fence made of chairs, on my tenth birthday. My parents had promised and they had kept their promise—even when they really, *really* didn't want to. I made promises about Calico, too. I promised to clean up after her, to walk her, to feed her, and to play with her. But when it got tough to keep those promises—when I had something else to do or when my promises were out of sight/out of mind—I did not keep my promises. When the going gets tough, most children's promises get going, and my Calico promises went.

Even now, my Calico broken promises bring a bit of regret. I disappointed my parents, even though they knew I would. I deprived Calico of a greater degree of human interaction and care she deserved—and which she might have had in a different situation. And I lost the opportunity to receive a full measure of the love and comfort a dog can provide to a child.

Adult Promises

We've made adult promises when we decided to become HPERD professionals: teachers, coaches, recreation specialists, and all the other myriad of varieties of professional niches we occupy. I think that as we committed ourselves to any HPERD variant for an answer to the question "What do you want to do when you grow up?" we made more promises than those heading toward other professions. Actually, what we signed on for as we selected a role in the HPERD profession was more than a promise. It is a covenant, a contract with self, *and* with those who trained us who had made the covenant a generation before. And with those lives we, by virtue of our role in HPERD, have the opportunity to affect for good or ill. The kind of



promise or contract or covenant I am talking about is more than a promise to push back the Thanksgiving dinner plate early. The kind of contract or covenant I'm talking about has two sides to it. In a contract, we promise to do something and the other person involved in the contract promises to do something.

Neither side is bound by the promise made if the other breaches their promise. The benefits of keeping a promise are not ours if we breach our side. Our Thanksgiving dietary promises are one-sided—we've promised ourselves to do something. If we don't honor the promise, we simply don't. There won't be benefits—although there may be consequences of our actions.

Breaching Promises

My Calico promises to care of her were different. They were two-sided. I promised to take care of Calico, and my parents promised to let me have her. They kept their promise even though I later breached my side of the deal. They didn't give her away. According to our bargain or contract, they could have taken her away. But they very generously allowed me the continuing opportunity to enjoy the benefits available to me if I might, in the future, start keeping my promise.

Our Promise is Bigger

But the promise, covenant, contract we made as we entered HPERD as professionals is a great deal more serious than either a Thanksgiving dietary promise to ourselves or a promise to parents about a dog. The covenants we make with those we serve become our credentials for admission into the community of True and Covenanted Professionals. To keep our covenants, to be a covenanted professional, to keep our side of the bargain, our contract with students, participants and peers is the challenge of our professional mortality. And it is worth the effort. The opportunity to progress and grow professionally through our career and, more importantly, to touch lives for good through our efforts is worth the effort. To know we can leave something of value in our footsteps is worth it.

What are our professional promises?

Okay, it's worth the effort but what exactly are the promises we've made? Sometimes they get fuzzy in our understanding. Sometimes we intentionally make them fuzzy so that we don't have to keep our promises so precisely. Maybe no one will notice, we tell ourselves. Maybe mom won't notice that I didn't walk Calico today. Maybe that extra helping won't have any impact on my weight. Maybe I didn't even know or think I made a any kind of a promise about my professional life. But let's assume we intend to keep our professional promises precisely. Let me propose a few professional promises that I think we've all made.

Stay Up to Date

I think we've made a promise to stay up to date. If we had not made that promise, why would we be here at Convention? It's expensive, unless your boss gives you a lot more professional development money than I ever received, and now that I bear the awkward terms "emerita" and "retired," for me there is no chance of financial help to keep promises made decades ago. To be truthful, there are additional reasons to attend the Convention but I look at these additional

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reasons, not as promises but as benefits received for keeping the promise of trying to stay up to date. Among the benefits: I get to see old professional friends. If I am presenting at a session, I add a bit to my feelings of self-worth. In preparing for a presentation, I make new connections between concepts and see things a bit more clearly, in my own mind, at least. The new connections and conceptual relationships, in addition to what I learn from colleagues at Convention, make me a better professional for my students and participants. That's the other side of the promise we've made to stay up to date. That's the *quo* for the *quid* in the contract/promise.

Joy in the Job

Another very valuable promise is the promise to find joy in the job. I would have taught for nothing. I enjoyed getting my paycheck every month, but most of the time I would have done my job for free. I was paid so fully with the currency of the *ripple effect*.

Sometimes I was able to help a student see a concept more clearly and they would, sometimes when it mattered, be able to use that new vision to benefit someone else. The *ripple effect*. Now and then I had a part in directing a student to a life that would have meaning for the student as well as for those they would serve. Again, the *ripple effect*.

Oh, if we are honest with ourselves, there are days, and sometimes years, when there is very little joy in the job. I'm not being a Pollyanna about the notion of the promise to have joy in the job. I used to keep a resignation letter, handwritten on yellow paper, in my top desk drawer. The letter began "I have found something better to do with the rest of my life . . ." and went downhill from there. When I wrote it, I was mad, tired, frustrated. I had been mistreated by the chair of the department. I felt cheated, taken advantage of, disrespected, and on and on. Seeing the corner of the yellow papers every day, poking out from under the other detritus that fills a top desk drawer, forced me to make a decision. Was I going to teach because I wanted to or because I was not brave enough to take the plunge of actually turning in my resignation letter. I had options other than teaching and I worked at making even more options.

Finally, though, I realized that I was a teacher because I wanted to teach, not because I didn't have a choice. I *was* a teacher. My soul loved to teach. My being gained nourishment through a teacher's life that was unavailable in any other profession. That doesn't mean that I didn't have bad days in the classroom or gym ahead of me: lessons that didn't go anywhere, students that were not engaged, and boring faculty meetings or nasty chairpersons. But it does mean that I consciously knew that there was great joy in the job. In the years that followed, I kept that old handwritten resignation—no longer as a threat but as a witness that I had learned something important about myself. I was a teacher and there was *great* joy in the job.

Be Fair

Equity is a notion that is central to all that we do in the HPERD allied professions. It is not winning that is central, it is equity. By definition, if winning was the central notion, half of us would be failures all the time. With equity as the central notion, we can all win.



Inequity is something most easily seen in hindsight. When I was in college, the women's teams traveled on an old repainted, cold and drafty school bus. We slept four or five in a room and paid the hotel bill out of our own pockets. If we ate, it was because we had packed a bag lunch. We bought our own shoes and uniforms. Our coaches were often our professors who coached for free because they had made promises from their generation to ours. The volunteer coaches had promised to be fair. When things beyond the coaches' control made it impossible to be fair, they gave more of themselves to move us closer to the line of equity. They had promised, perhaps not a promise made to us directly, but to either themselves or to the generation that trained them. Because they kept their promises, we have also made promises to be fair.

Vivian Acosta and I have just completed a national, longitudinal study on the status of women in intercollegiate sport that is now one-third of a century old. (So now you know that I am older than 33.) Doing something for that long, a major portion of the effort *after* any additions to our vita were moot, is certainly a professional promise of sorts. But more importantly, our professional promise to fairness and equity has grown through the decades of the study.

Early on, we promised to be aware of unfairness. Not just gender-based inequity but unfairness that exists anytime someone is treated differently just because of the group the person belongs to. Vivian and I have seen our own biases that we would have claimed did not exist and have, once aware of them, made a promise to remove them from our hearts. It has grown easier to see our remaining biases, to admit them to ourselves, and to work at removing them. There is no cost to our egos when we admit to having bias. The cost would come if we chose to let bias remain part of us once we found it. The promise of being fair is a promise that needs practice, patience, and persistence. It is a promise made to both the past and the future.

It has been but a little over half-century since federal troops were needed to allow black students seeking an education to enter the school house doors. Had those blocking the students' way made a professional promise to fairness? Perhaps they thought they had, but then either they lost their way or succumbed to peer pressure from those who had made no promises. Perhaps they put their personal preferences above professional promises.

Its almost 38 years since the enactment of Title IX. Many of us in HPERD have seen our gender-based bias and have tried to remove it. Despite Title IX's urgings, some of us wanted to linger a bit longer in our biases. Change is always threatening. We searched for reasons to justify our lingering, but we did so with great peril to those who could have grown through increased fairness. Almost always, right has a price.

Pushing the Thanksgiving plate back from my reach always had a price, as I wished to eat a few more bites. But it also carried a benefit. Giving up human nature's urge to linger in inequity also has benefit. More than 3 million high school girls now reap the objective and subjective benefits of a school-based athletic experience. Because of HPERD professionals who made a covenant to be fair, and chose not to linger in inequity, millions of our neighbors know more about risk evaluation, teamwork, the joy of hard work, how to rise when you fall, and all the other benefits from sport and recreation participation. That's a pretty big return for keeping a promise.

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Work Hard

You might have a colleague like the one I will describe to you. “Chris” had discovered that if you had all your classes scheduled for Tuesday and Thursday and put your office hours at 6:45 a.m., no one would notice that Chris was never there. Chris would never have to attend faculty meetings (held on Wednesday) nor be on campus for assignment to various committees.

In the theoretical world, Chris’s tenure would be revoked. In the real world, that seldom happens. Chris’s ability to get away with such behavior often makes those who want to fulfill the professional promise of working hard feel cheated. But Chris’s failure has no impact on our promise to work hard. Our commitments are not relieved because someone else has decided to breach their commitments. The benefits we gain from working hard also remain undiminished.

Working hard is a commitment that involves being prepared for our classes and programs. It also involves:

- Serving others through community and professional activities for which you are not paid.
- Serving on campus-wide committees.
- Being a mentor to your colleagues, students, and participants.
- Eating cold cereal for breakfast before the sun is up and cold cereal for dinner at 10 p.m. when you finally return home.
- Getting over-slights and perceived offenses from peers.
- Being prepared, fully prepared.
- Avoiding temptations to use the work of others for your benefit.
- Motivating yourself to conduct research, seek grants, and publish because you know you can contribute rather than because you have to do it in order to get promoted.

Help Each Other

As we keep our part of the professional covenants we help one another, too. When you are strong, you help me be strong. When you honor your promises, I see role models of how I need to remain committed. Commitment to professional covenants strengthens everyone. We are not solely individuals. Our actions have an impact on the people we work with and on those who would, in the future, follow in our professional footsteps.

Cross my heart, I am grateful for professional promises kept precisely. You make me better.