

President Cavanaugh delivered the keynote speech at Kaukauna's Veteran's Day Ceremony on Saturday, November 11, 2017. It was a cold, snowy, blustery day. Larry's address was well received. The entire speech is quoted below.

A very good morning to you all. What an honor and what a privilege it is to be here today. I have worn the uniform of the US Army; I have been to war; I have been to Vietnam—to fight for and defend my country. I have eaten many a C-ration, put on combat boots, shot at an enemy, and held a dying brother—and so my fellow veterans I have some idea what war is like, and I have some idea of what some of you have experienced: your fear, your bravery, your suffering, and your survival.

So here I am today, simply a grateful American, and I represent those grateful Americans who don't have the honor of speaking about their heroes on Veteran's Day. I represent those Americans who wish they could reach out and thank each one of you personally. Thank you! Two words, eight letters: we say it all the time. Sometimes we don't even think about it when we say it. "I like your shoes"; "thank you". "How are you?"; "well, thank you". Within seconds we have moved away from that moment and have forgotten what we said and to whom we said it. So where is the power, the emotion in "Thank You"? When do two words—eight letters—earn their stripes as words of gratitude, words of appreciation, words of thankfulness?

It happens when we put action behind the words. It happens when we look into someone's eyes, and when we speak from our heart. It happens when we remember what we said, and to whom we said it. It happens when we say it because we mean it, and not because it is an auto-response. It happens when we don't plan for it, and when we aren't prepared for it, but are stirred to say it. It happens when we let our heart speak.

Several years ago, I visited the Vietnam Wall in D.C. Not wanting to get too close, and standing at a distance, I observed a lady sobbing while a young girl clinched her hand. I watched several veterans leaning on the wall with both hands, sobbing. I watched a father scratching pencil across paper to capture his son's name from the wall. I saw a veteran in a wheelchair handing a tissue to a tearful older man. I saw an older couple desperately searching for the name they wished was not on that wall. There were countless teddy bears, crosses, flags, flowers, and candles covering the ground. I was overwhelmed—the tears were uncontrollable now. I turned away and looked across the reflecting pool. The sounds continued; the soft crying, sniffing, a deep breath, a child's voice, a tissue being pulled from a box, gravel crunching as people moved around in search. Then: "here it is; here he is; he's here, it's here; I found it!"

My eyes burned. I could feel my heart ache. My throat swelled, and my head filled with two simple words—eight letters—and they seemed inadequate. But I had nothing else. And so, I repeated these words as I walked the complete length of the wall—saying

“thank you, goodbye, and God bless you”, as I touched each panel of names. I had to let them out—those two words, eight letters—I had to pass them into the air, to swirl around the mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, friends, sons, and daughters who were standing at the wall grieving alone. I have never meant two words more than I did that day, at that time, in that place. And so, emotion is met with action; gratitude collides with thankfulness, and we move into a place of thanks-giving.

May they all rest in peace, and know that they left behind a grateful nation. May they know the sound of these two words, and feel the passion of the voice that spoke them. Since World War II, America’s military has fought in ten wars. We open our arms and hearts to welcome them home. They did not all come home alive; they did not all come home whole; many are not home yet. Since World War II there are still 80,000 GIs missing-in-action; 1600 of those from Vietnam. We continue to send our soldiers into harm’s way.

The enormity of their sacrifice is beyond compare. So how do we dare to believe that two words, eight letters, is enough? John F. Kennedy said: “as we express our gratitude, we must never forget, that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them.” So, it isn’t enough to say it—we need to be it, grateful-thankful-appreciative! The greatest prayer you can say is “thank you”—two words, eight letters, but weighted with love, gratitude, humility, and understanding.

Each day that passes, we move further away from these wars. Our heroes pass on, time pushes in new headlines, life gets in the way of the past, and we move through our own days, months, and years. Ceremonies are important, but our gratitude must be more than just once a year. We can honor these heroes—these men and women—by living our lives, as they would have lived theirs, and by giving back, so much that we have been given. That is a way for us to pay the rent for living on this earth.

Small town America is where these heroes are born and raised. We’re just simple, honest people, living simple, honest lives, in pursuit of simple, honest dreams. Heroes are ordinary people, doing ordinary things, and doing them well. They can rise to greatness in the blink of an eye, because it is the right thing to do, and they just did it. That is how it is done in places like these, this is what has always made America great, and always will. We say we love you, and we thank you! God bless you and God bless the United States of America.