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Western Michigan University

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Inauguration Remarks
John T. Bernhard
Western Michigan University
April 26, 1975

Chairman Caine and other distinguished members of
the Board of Trustees — past and present ^{honored} guests,
faculty, students, administrators, colleagues, and
friends of Western, I greatly appreciate your presence
here on this occasion. I feel your support, and I
certainly need it.

While I am deeply honored by my selection as your
President, and the implied confidence in my abilities,
I learned a long time ago the lesson of human frailty,
and the need for many willing souls to work together.
Western needs its faculty, its student body, its staff,
its Board, its Alumni Association, all of its friends —
now and in the future — if it is to thrive during my
presidency.

I realize and acknowledge that in my new position
I am the beneficiary of an outstanding heritage, a
legacy of excellent, dedicated leadership. And the
relatively brief opportunity I have had to work with
our current Board of Trustees, faculty, and staff has
confirmed my original impression that this university is
blessed with an abundance of talented, committed

individuals. It is clear to an outsider that you have enjoyed a high quality of leadership; I am grateful for and challenged by that standard.

This is, of course, a very special occasion for me, but no less so for the graduates assembled here today for their Commencement. So, I would like to say a few words to them. First, I congratulate you for having earned your various degrees, and I sincerely hope that this will be a satisfying, memorable day for every one of you.

It is traditional, and accurate, to note that Commencement is an occasion of dual meaning: it signifies a completion, an unusual achievement by each of you; but it also marks the beginning of a new life beyond the campus. In that regard, whatever expectations you may have from assessing your university experience, it does not in and of itself guarantee a happy life or an affluent career. Nor will a higher education automatically make you all-wise, all-just, and all-seeing — thereby assuring a kind reception from a grateful world. Though, in a modest degree, some of these things may result from your educational progress.

A university education aims, rather, at opening your mind to vistas which otherwise would be denied you, at providing the opportunity for you to see and understand as others do not or cannot. Education invites you to look beyond the pages of books in the library, beyond experiments in the laboratory, to perceive and examine the role that you might play as an individual human being, and how you might best relate to and serve your brothers and sisters all over the world. To the extent that you have been inspired and motivated to think in those terms, your investment in education, and your parents' investment in you, will not have been wasted.

These are perilous times. Many of you are still uncertain about your careers, and about your attractiveness in a discouraging labor market; but all the evidence indicates that your long-range future remains bright. You will have to be more versatile, more flexible, broader than your elders; but by training and experience you should be all of those. At root, however, as it has always been, the great determinant of your future will be your quality as a person -- your character, your values,

your standard of excellence. I hope that this University has helped you to develop these. If so, you need not fear difficult times, and we will have served you well.

Thank you for spending a part of your life with us on Western's campus. We are delighted to have had you as vital, contributing members of the University community; we will miss you. I pray you all Godspeed, and offer you our best wishes and good luck.

I noted earlier that today, as the occasion of my Inauguration, is also my Commencement; and thus an appropriate time for me to share with this community that I am joining my view of the university presidency. At the very least, I may satisfy a natural curiosity; and I might even clarify my own thinking on the subject, ~~and~~ not a bad way to start the new job!

Fundamentally, I see university administration as an essential catalyst to provide the most effective learning environment for the University community -- both on and off campus. It should never be self-aggrandizing. Administration was devised as an instrument of service; it should so function; and it should be judged by how well it performs as catalyst and manager of the educational effort.

Within that framework, the president's role, in my view, is that of institutional leader. In a public university, his/her legal authority, of course, is definite and is delegated by the State through an appropriate governing Board. I think all of us recognize the authority and the official responsibility of the president in law and in practice. Nevertheless, I am firmly convinced that the president should move unilaterally -- without appropriate consultation -- only when a very special situation exists or when a substantial burden of proof has been met. This is especially true in those areas which are of great concern to the entire university community. True, effective leadership, I believe, is best exercised when the president serves as primus inter pares -- first among peers -- rather than as tyrannos on the apex of a power pyramid.

(or the tyrant)
↑

In reflecting on the role of the president, I recall the fond dream I once had of a benign prexy sitting quietly in his study, reading Milton's "L'Allegro" or "Il Penseroso", or perhaps the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius -- in the original Latin. This mythical

father-figure was a veritable fountainhead of wisdom surrounded by a respectful constituency waiting to catch his every word. And, above all else, his repose was never to be disturbed by bumptious trustees, faculty hotheads, or student malcontents. He was simply to be admired ~~from~~ afar. Of course such a legendary figure never existed, though there have been a few presidents in the past who approximated this heavenly state. To speak of the president's role even as it was a few decades ago is to delineate a situation which today seems centuries old.

In an effort to modernize the image of the president, James Perkins, in 1966, expressed a frank challenge in these words:

"Someone must be concerned with the institution as a whole, the activities it supports, the public face it presents, and the private concerns with which it is occupied.... He must be able to involve himself directly in the central academic business of the university, to exert educational leadership, to be an agent for both stability and change. He must be capable of institutional justice and personal compassion. He must not fear power or be afraid to exercise it, because he must know that power cannot be the direct concern of either student or teacher. He must

always be sensitive to the difference between the process of management and the process of education, and he must understand that the former must always serve the latter."

(James A. Perkins, The University in Transition, Princeton University Press, 1966, p. 57).

As you may realize, these wise and well-measured words were uttered just before the roof fell in on Perkins and many others in higher education. However, Perkins' concept of "service" as central to the presidential role is still viable today. As Robert Greenleaf pointed out recently:

"If an institution is to achieve distinction as servant [to society], then only those who are natural servants should be empowered to lead. There is no magic in a serving institution, one that lifts everyone involved to nobler stature. At base, its form is shaped by the incremental actions of persons who are natural servants, those who, by nature, want to lift others so that others become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servants."

(Robert K. Greenleaf, Advices to Servants, Center for Applied Studies, Cambridge, Mass., 1975).

Admittedly, this noble ideal is difficult to achieve, difficult even to keep in perspective as a goal, when

confronted with the daily realities of a presidency. The demands of that experience were put somewhat more earthily and humorously by Herman B. Wells upon leaving his post at Indiana University. He observed that a president needed, "the physical stamina of a Greek athlete, the cunning of a Machiavelli, the wisdom of a Solomon, the courage of a lion, and the stomach of a goat." If those were the criteria posted in a job description for a new president, they might attract fewer "servants" than applicants resigned to servitude. But, then, every generation of college presidents has had enough problems and issues to enliven their tenure and to test their ideals.

Just a few years ago we were awash in a tidal wave of student protest, often neither mild nor rational. It seemed at times as if Bedlam had burst upon the campus, and Marat/Sade had conquered the world of reason. On a single day in 1969, for example, over 700 colleges were erupting with various forms of student militancy. Several of us still bear the scars of that turbulent period, that ^{so-called} "meaningful learning experience".

Today's college president is still besieged by a growing number of aggravating problems. While student turmoil has subsided, the nagging, painful chores of survival now gnaw at the president's spirit and strength. The decisions for which he/she is finally responsible bear directly on the academic life of the university, the programs for which it exists, and, in many cases, the careers and livelihoods of his ~~her~~ colleagues. Small wonder that in such circumstances the new element of collective bargaining, with its strong potential for dividing the institution, is now a key factor in those decisions. But the decisions and judgments, even when shaped as they will be in this adversarial framework, must continue to be based on how best to serve the crucial interests and obligations of each university.

While collective bargaining is the consuming, dramatic development of this era, the daily distractions from "higher" presidential purpose roll on unabated. Warren Bennis, after gloomily concluding that either he couldn't manage the University of Cincinnati, or it wasn't manageable at all, recorded a typical day in his office as follows:

"Here's a note from a professor, complaining that his classroom temperature is down to 65; I suppose he expects me to grab a wrench and fix it. A student complains we won't give him course credit for acting as assistant to a city councilman. Another was unable to get into the student health center. The teacher at my child's day school, is dissatisfied with her grades. A parent complains about four-letter words in a Philip Roth book being used in an English class. The track coach wants me to come over to see for myself how bad the track is. An alumnus couldn't get the football seat he wanted. Another wants a coach fired. A teacher just called to tell me the squash court was closed at 7 p.m., when he wanted to use it.... And so it goes."

(Warren Bennis, "The University Leader", Saturday Review, December 9, 1972, p. 43).

A painfully familiar description, which reminds me only too readily of the universal experience of university presidents that I have shared, and will continue to share at Western! It comes with the territory. And, as an administrative colleague of mine says when self-pity is seeping in, "I'm a volunteer".

While it is fascinating and challenging, the role of the university president is not easy. Nor does it fit -- if it ever did -- the idyllic image of the president

pondering "Il Penseroso" in his ~~hushed~~ hushed study. Instead, he/she is an individual beleaguered by fiscal problems, organizational snarls, and legislative constraints, not to mention ringing telephones and persistent petitioners. Yet, in the midst of all this hue and cry, the president must keep his ~~eye~~ eye firmly on the educational mission of the university, and what he ~~can~~ can do to help assure that it will be pursued. That is the real challenge.

Given all the pitfalls, uncertainties, and complex problems that loom inevitably in the future, why be a college president at all? That is not an easy question to answer, but I believe the core of my response must be that the president derives great and unique satisfaction from guiding his/her institution to serve society in ways and in circumstances that cannot be foreseen. I relish being part of the pioneering tradition, and serving on the cutting edge of a humane endeavor to which I am deeply committed.

Though I am naturally vulnerable to error, and will undoubtedly falter and grope at times, I shall always be willing to explore and discuss issues --

with logic as well as passion -- and to plan and work for academic and human progress at Western. As president I will search for honest, decent, effective answers to our University's problems, and will serve my colleagues in their efforts to do the same. Above all else, I pledge to persevere in the continuing struggle to advance the cause of higher education in the service of all.

In that spirit, I would like to conclude my comments with this remarkable fragment of the wisdom of Blaise Pascal, from which I have for many years drawn courage and inspiration:

"Man is but a reed, the most feeble thing in nature; but he is a thinking reed. The entire universe need not arm itself to crush him. A vapour, a drop of water suffices to kill him. . . All our dignity, then, consists in thought. By it we must elevate ourselves, and not by space and time which we cannot fill. Let us endeavor, then, to think well; this is the principle of morality. . . By space the universe encompasses and swallows me up like an atom; by thought I comprehend the world."

(Pensees, Nos. 347-348, Random House, New York, 1941, p. 116.)