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11-4-2010

Niagara Foundation/Rumi Club Dialog Dinner

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WMU ScholarWorks Citation

Dunn, John M., "Niagara Foundation/Rumi Club Dialog Dinner" (2010). *WMU President John Dunn*. 138.
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REMARKS Niagara Foundation/Rumi Club Dialog Dinner
John M. Dunn Remarks
Nov. 4, 2010

- Thank you for inviting me to be here. I was intrigued to learn about your organization and pleased that you have a small but active group here.
- As I prepared to be with you this evening, I asked my assistant to gather some background. Rumi Club President Yusuf Bilgic provided us with this succinct and heartening description of your purpose.
- "Our group's main purpose," he said, "is to forge and strengthen bonds of lasting friendship among people of different traditions by identifying what it is we have in common, by learning to appreciate and honor our differences and by collaborating on mutually beneficial projects."
- Yusuf, if I'm not mistaken, there's a group of Americans heading to Washington in January to form the 112th Congress of the United States. I think they would be well served to adopt your organization's purpose as a foundation for their work.
- You know, the poet W.H. Auden once said that "Civilizations should be measured by the degree of diversity attained and the degree of unity retained."
- That's a belief I've embraced for my entire adult life and career. It's a belief that came from my own experience at a public university.
- I grew up in a small southern Illinois town--Pinckneyville, population 3,300. We looked at diversity as a question of Protestants vs. Catholics. I accepted without question or real thought what I'll call the Pinckneyville Perspective--an embrace of

the idea of an America where one set of ideals applied to people who looked like me and another set of standards and behavior was expected of those who didn't. I didn't think about it too much, because frankly, there wasn't anyone in Pinckneyville who didn't look like me, and rare visitors who didn't look like me were immediately made aware they weren't welcome.

- I was fortunate enough to attend a public university in Illinois. For me that experience was like traveling to the other side of the world. It was my first opportunity to not only get to know, but to live and work beside people from diverse backgrounds--different parts of the U.S. and other nations. I truly experienced the art of living together.

- It was life changing. Not only did it set me on the road to professional achievement, it offered me the opportunity to build a personal set of ethics and an ability to work with people from all walks of life.

To this day, I tell parents that when they send their students to this university or any other, they are giving them the greatest gift they can give them--the opportunity to experience and understand the value of living and working in a diverse society.

- I'm now in the fourth year of my presidency at WMU. One of the things that attracted me to this great University was the incredible diversity that is represented here. You know that. When you walk across our campus, you meet people from every ethnic background and from 90 different nations.

- That diversity is something we can never take for granted. We have to nurture it and always work hard to make sure that in everything we do and say, we send the

message to every student that they are welcome and what they bring to our campus-- who they are--is a valued and treasured part of our campus learning environment.

- In fact, I've talked in the past about our diversity as a crucial component of having a healthy university. We work hard to commit ourselves daily to making sure we reach out to the broadest range of deserving students, and second, that we commit to the development of the full potential of each person we bring into our academic community.

- I see that goal as so important that our point person for that goal--Dr. Martha Warfield--has recently been elevated to the position of vice president for diversity and inclusion. Dr. Warfield and our entire campus community know that bringing diverse students here is just the first step.

- Diversity and inclusion demand that we build an environment in which our diverse student body is comfortable and empowered to engage in dialogs that explores their differences and similarities--dialogs like your event this evening.

- I congratulate you on your commitment to such dialog. I thank you for inviting me to be part of your discussion, and I encourage you to continue to talk about these issues--not just as students but as you move forward as graduates and citizens of the communities in which you build your lives.

- Please don't hesitate to contact me when you have concerns or observations about what we can do better to foster an environment of inclusion. My e-mail is john.dunn@wmich.edu. I read and answer my own e-mail and, while it may take me a little time to get back to you, I will respond.

- Let me close by quoting our Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

"What we have to do... is to find a way to celebrate our diversity and debate our differences without fracturing our communities."

- Events like this help us do just that. Thank you.