Centennial Afterthoughts

Recorded by David Isaacson, Professor, Central Reference

[During the centennial year celebration, Gatherings was happy to publish a few of the thoughts and ideas of WMU's first president, Dwight B. Waldo. Speaking through his supernumerary, Professor David Isaacson, Dr. Waldo shared valuable advice to a generation much removed from his own time. Here, for a final lecture (maybe) are some additional bits of centennial wisdom.]

Good evening (or morning, or afternoon).

I am Dwight Bryant Waldo, President of the Western Normal School. Yes, just as you do now, we made jokes about the name back in 1903, when the school was founded. Few people realize that this was the way that educators described a school with norms, or standards that we tried to achieve in teaching. In fact, my spokesperson David Isaacson might refer you to the Oxford English Dictionary or to the brainyencyclopedia.com, where it states that “the term originated in the early nineteenth century from the French école normale, because the first such schools were models.” Indeed, Western has always striving to both a model school and a model for other institutions as well.

But yes, since you’re still sniggering, there was an “abnormal” school just up the road a short distance. Then the Kalamazoo Mental Hospital, this institution now bears a more distinguished title, the Kalamazoo Psychiatric Hospital. Some of its original buildings stand tall, as do the original buildings of Western on the Great Republic: Abraham Lincoln. I’m glad the Rare Book department at Waldo still keeps my Lincoln books together. I tried to model myself after honest Abe. He believed in education too. I tried to be as strong a leader as Lincoln. I hired him all the professors and, if necessary, fired them during those first years. I had been a history professor myself at Beloit College and could boast about graduate work at Harvard after graduating from Michigan’s Albion College.

Even while serving as president, I tried to set a good teaching example, teaching my share of history classes. I was a good teacher. For one thing, people said I had a hypnotic voice. I was strict, even Victorian, which meant that I was firm, disciplined, standing for moral principles as well as intellectual ones. If a student got out of line, I got him back in line. One evening, back in the early days, a Kalamazoo citizen telephoned me to complain about some rowdy students having a party in a downtown rooming house (we had no dormitories back then). I called the young man, identifying myself as President Waldo. “Yeah, sure, and I’m the King of England, Pops” was the foolhardy reply. I presented myself ten minutes later at the door of the noisemakers. There was no more trouble at that rooming house for the rest of the evening. In the 21st century, I hope both the students and faculty at Western continue to respect one another.

Today, the government has made laws that prohibit smoking in public buildings, but I also didn’t allow smoking, not finding the need of that stimulant myself. We made a few exceptions. The gardener was permitted to smoke his pipe outside. One professor chewed tobacco in class. During the War (I understand you call it World War I) the officers training our students were allowed to smoke. As with later wars, a number of our professors as well as students not only served their country in Europe and elsewhere, but paid the supreme sacrifice. Our school, then and now, must always graduate students who contribute to our society in many different ways.

I had a lighter side too. Once - early on - we were having Senior Honors Day. This was a ceremony as auspicious as Graduation. It was held in the gymnasium of the first building built at Western, East Hall. (The gym is still there, but is now filled with archivists and researchers instead of instead of runners and players.) It was sweltering hot. There was no air-conditioning in those days. Everyone was bored, including President Waldo! So I decided to give the audience a respite from the drone of the speeches. I called Ike Miller up to the stage. The audience must have wondered what I was doing calling a junior up to the stage during Senior Honors Day. I said, “Ike has just won the state hog-calling contest. Ike, demonstrate how you won.” “Sueeeey... Sueeeey... Pig Pig Pig.”

Western welcomed students of all colors. Today, you use confusing words such as “diversity” and “multicultural,” but we, even a century ago, believed that everyone had a right to attend a school or college. One of our best all-round athletes, Sam Dunlap, was Negro. Culver Military Academy refused to play football against us if Sam were allowed to play. I told Sam it was his choice - if he wanted to play, that was fine with me. He chose to sit the game out. And we trounced Culver. Dunlap eventually returned here, and ended his career working as a custodian at his alma mater to which he was ever loyal.

Another important part of our “normal school” was bringing famous people to visit our campus. Will Rogers, seeing the famous set of buildings on the hill, called Western’s hill “the Acropolis.” Even in 2005, if you drive on Walnut Street toward the campus, the imposing East Hall looks down upon us mere mortals as if it were the home of the gods who spoke of higher matters. William Jennings Bryan spoke here

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under the auspices of Chautauqua. (This old word, easily defined by David Isaacson using those amazing dictionaries that he loves, meant "a meeting ... providing public lectures combined with entertainment such as concerts and plays.") But, back to my point. It was so hot the day Bryant spoke, he cooled his brow with a block of ice, and all of the students wished that they had some as well. Many years later, the Western campus is filled with air-conditioned buildings and wonderful aids to listening and learning.

One famous writer who did not visit our campus was George Bernard Shaw, who said about education, "He who can, does. He who can't, teaches." And then some wag added a codicil, targeted right at schools of education like Western: "Those who can, do, those who can't, teach, and those who can't teach, teach teachers." Both Shaw and the anonymous wag were very insulting to a school like ours, which to this day prides itself on the teachers it educates. Yes, yes, yes. There is something profoundly mind-numbing about "lesson plans," "learning objectives," and advice about how to arrange the chalk on the blackboard. But that's not what we did at Western Normal School, later Western State Teacher's College, then Western State College, and, in 1957, Western Michigan University.

We not only taught teachers how to teach. We gave them a higher and a liberal education. You may not have heard that classic definition of what a higher education is, or if you have, from where it came. Well, the story is that President James Garfield described education as what happens when Mark Hopkins sits on one end of a log with a student sitting on the other. Mark Hopkins was, in those days, a renowned scholar and teacher of Greek and Latin, and President of Williams College, in Massachusetts.

I emulated him. His were large shoes to fill. Hopkins was an old-fashioned scholar and gentleman. Think of what that log image suggests. Hopkins doesn't require a classroom, books, or a group of students in order to impart a good liberal education. He sits on a log with one student. This suggests the Oxford-Cambridge tutorial. But it's also very American and a lot like Lincoln's log cabin, or Thoreau's cabin out in the woods. Hopkins is talking with, rather than at the student. The student is listening, but not slavishly.

This is the very finest kind of conversation - and education - imaginable. One centennial afterthought - what a strange word "afterthought" - is how difficult it is to have such a conversation in a modern university, but the idea of one teacher conversing with one student is still part of Western Michigan University in the 21st century. As president Judith Bailey said, at her inauguration in 2003, Western Michigan University will continue to be loyal to its early tradition of being a student-centered school.

I couldn't agree more.