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Richard Herman, Interim Chancellor, The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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Greetings and Call to Leadership

Greetings from Colleagues at the University of Illinois
Richard Herman, Interim Chancellor, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Some men and women who would lead us enter a room with long, confident strides, with a swagger. Heads turn. Conversations stop, and voices go mute. Some men and women who would lead us suck the oxygen out of the space around them. They are the sun; we are the planets. They send the clear signal that they are the smartest man or woman in the room - and they want us to know it.

The man you have chosen to lead Illinois Wesleyan University, the man we are here to honor today - Richard Wilson - is, thankfully, not that kind of leader. As Provost of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and later as the school's interim Chancellor, I worked with Dick every day for years. I must let you in on a secret: Dick Wilson *is* usually the smartest person in the room. Yet his God-given gift - his natural genius - is that he doesn't seem to know it - nor does he care to make sure that we know it.

You at Illinois Wesleyan are to be graced with a leader of modesty and decency. A leader who will make difficult choices without ever losing touch with his humanity. A leader who knows that no idea is great if it fails to enhance the lives of people.

At the University of Illinois, Dick Wilson worked for me. Yet many times I sat around the table with him and others and quietly marveled at how much I was learning from him. He transcended his job as the maestro of dollars and cents and budgets by always listening - not listening because he wanted to seem as if he were interested in what others had to say, not listening to figure out how to maneuver others to his side of the argument. Dick listened because he really doesn't believe he is the smartest person in the room - or the wisest, or the most caring, or the most visionary. Dick listens because he has an abiding respect for each and every person around him, each and every one of you.

Listening - and hearing - is simply bred in his bones.

It is, for him, a kind of faith, a faith that most people are good, that most people want to be the best that they can be, want to be better every day and are glad to work hard at being better. This true-believer faith in people is powerful. Those around Dick trust him, respect him, are loyal to him - not because they fear for their jobs or fear the sting of his criticism. People give trust, respect and loyalty to Dick Wilson because he deserves it, because he gives it first to them. Your new president has for me always been a mirror into which I could look to be reminded of how the finest, most humane leaders among us neither demand power nor have it bestowed upon them.

True leadership is an honor granted by those who are led. A leader who assumes that each person, down deep, wants to contribute, wants to excel, wants to be their best - somehow, a leader who truly believes this allows others to find that belief in themselves.

The results are not metaphysical, they are tangible: *We all do better*.

How Dick Wilson came to know this mystery of the human heart, I do not know. Yet I know he knows it. I saw it at work again and again. And I try daily to remind myself of what I learned from Dick Wilson - and yes, to be better than I am, to listen more and talk less, to have faith that thinking the best of people finds the best in people.

Your President Wilson is a rare and wise man.

No one here will ever work *for* Dick Wilson. You will work with him.

I envy all of you.

Because I know - as you will soon discover - how fortunate you are to have him with you.