



Inauguration of Robert S. Eckley

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That We May Apply Our Hearts Unto Wisdom

Robert S. Eckley
Illinois Wesleyan University

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THAT WE MAY APPLY OUR HEARTS UNTO WISDOM

Inaugural Response by Dr. Robert S. Eckley on the occasion
of his inauguration as President of Illinois Wesleyan University
March 22, 1969

I accept the office of President of the University in the traditional symbolic sense, indicative of the continuity of this institution and representing the students, faculty, and trustees alike as each takes up his respective part in this great educational enterprise. Just as the church founded Illinois Wesleyan in the faith that men are ennobled by learning, each professor approaching the classroom and each student engaging in Socratic discussion does so in the conviction that he has something to give and to gain in the pursuit of understanding. As we participate today in this traditional ceremony, we do so with faith in the traditions of the University and with hope that our efforts toward its preservation and improvement may be commensurate with its needs. May our vision be adequate for our task.

My fourteen predecessors in this office exhibit considerable variety, despite the fact that twelve were Methodist ministers. Four saw military service of one form or another, two were born in England, and one became a bishop. A unifying theme among them is not hard to find, however, for they all had money problems. Never has this institution's pecuniary resources been equal to its ambition, and the difficulties of raising funds perplexed them all.

Liberal arts colleges, and particularly church-related colleges, including Illinois Wesleyan, are one of the unique aspects of American history, enriching and expanding educational opportunities. They illustrate the activism of American church life and are typical of the voluntarism that has characterized many of our efforts to improve society. These institutions have been no more immune to the forces of change than others, and their emphasis has shifted from the education of clergy in classical studies to the preparation of a broad segment of our population in one or two of roughly twenty-five specialized disciplines or fields of study.

True to the pragmatic Midwest, Bloomington's founders hedged its future with two colleges--one public, one private, two railroads, and even two towns. But the Illinois of Peter Cartwright and Lincoln became the Illinois of Adlai Stevenson and Everett Dirksen, and in the process focused on a different set of questions, external rather than internal. The colleges are vastly changed from their origins as a teachers' college and church school. One is evolving toward a major state university and the other, a distinguished liberal arts college with closely integrated fine arts and nursing schools.

Moreover, the part the Midwest now plays in world affairs is well illustrated here, where once an obscure Methodist college struggled in the outback of a nation overshadowed by the Victorian majesty of Britain. Now we provide seed grains for northern Italy and the Iberian peninsula, insurance for a multitude of risks, electrical controls for the world's switchboards, and earthmover tires for Pakistan or Zambia. Illinois is in the forefront of both agricultural and manufactured goods exports to other countries. But what is true for the Midwest economically is reflected in the political responsibilities of the nation. America has moved from a relatively unimportant political entity a century ago to the leading world power since World War II, a frustrated power, circumscribed as it is by the competing Soviet bloc, schismatic allies in Western Europe, and the increasingly insubordinate less developed countries.

The tasks imposed on American leadership are many, and the time available for their mastery, inadequate. In this year of renewed Soviet bellicosity in central Europe, we are all reminded of the nuclear sword of Damocles under which we live. Peace does not come easily when there are dozens of Korean, Vietnamese, and Middle Eastern antagonisms fused and waiting for a careless spark. On a longer fuse are burning the political, social, and economic aspirations of the developing world waiting impatiently for us to make good the promise of assistance contained in our words and in our Judaic-Christian philosophy. And at home, we have yet to demonstrate that opportunities can be equal despite inequalities in cultural and family backgrounds.

The needs that society places on the higher educational system are obvious. When we can thrust ourselves to the moon but do not have the political skill to remove the slums from the other side of the tracks, nor the social grace to include the Negro in our culture, we have some fundamental problems that transcend specialized science and engineering. What we require is not less science, but more adaptable social institutions, and more political ability. Men have always railed against the scientific achievements of reason, as if the renunciation of logic in one facet of human activity would create it in another. William Blake expressed it intensely in one of his Prophetic Books, "Jerusalem":

I turn my eyes to the schools and Universities of Europe
And there behold the Loom of Locke, whose Woof rages dire,
Wash'd by the Water-wheels of Newton: black the cloth
In heavy wreathes folds over every Nation: cruel Works
Of many Wheels I view, wheel without wheel, with cogs tyrannic
Moving by compulsion each other, not as those in Eden . . .

Blake appeals to our imagination and the emotional revolt within us, but our minds go marching on to new conquests of reason. Nevertheless, scientific specialization has achieved its triumphs at the cost of general education, leaving perhaps the most visible void in higher education. A hundred years ago in 1869 when Charles W. Eliot was installed as president of Harvard, he said, "The endless controversies whether language, philosophy, mathematics, or science supplies the best mental training, whether general education should be chiefly literary or chiefly scientific, have no practical lessons for us today. This university recognizes no real antagonism between literature and science, and consents to no such narrow alternatives as mathematics or classics, science or metaphysics. We should have them all, and at their best." Although he did not intend it that way, the elective system led to extreme specialization, and in our time C. P. Snow is still writing of the antagonisms of "The Two Cultures."

If we are to find acceptable goals and solutions to the divisiveness of the plural society, the competitive viewpoints of the different elements must find a better forum than they have in the past. Absence of personal contact or violent confrontation are not satisfactory alternatives. Higher education has a vital role to play in developing better communication--this is one positive result that may flow from the campus unrest of recent months, for the universities are the mirrors of society, however refracted the images they reveal.

American colleges and universities have been known for their diversity and are often criticized for their academic unevenness. But there is greater danger from a monolithic state of learning. Most federal and foundation funds for research have gone to

about fifty large universities, and until recently there has been subtle pressure to do the accepted academic thing. I believe, as Henry Clay remarked before the Senate, that "of all human powers operating on the affairs of mankind, none is greater than that of competition." Monopoly in the world of ideas is even more stifling than in business. In this age of emphasis on education, knowledge, and technology, we need competitive centers of learning if the best is to be sifted from the morass of conflicting ideologies.

However tenuous our hold on the reins of world leadership, I am convinced that perhaps the most significant American contributions to the rise of Western man are in the two realms of business and education. They are not unrelated. Education has been more widely diffused here than elsewhere providing an abundant flow of skills for the management of business. Both church-related colleges and state universities have had a part in this, as did the public school. Moreover, the reciprocal movement of resources from business fortunes has done much to strengthen private higher education, as the universities of Chicago, Northwestern, or Stanford demonstrate. If we have lacked the policy of an Eton and Oxbridge educational system, the sheer flow of numbers has proved superior. Wesleyan should be proud to have been a part of this joint American evolution of educational opportunity and business ingenuity.

What are Illinois Wesleyan's needs and objectives if it is to contribute its best in the future of American higher education? First, we need to understand what we are--a combination of distinctive undergraduate professional education in the fine arts and nursing with a balanced liberal arts college program, a unique small university in the Midwest. Nowhere is there a superior stimulative juxtaposition of such breadth in music, art, and drama along with the more practical interests in nursing, business, and finance, contained in an intimate liberal arts college setting. Like other colleges founded by churches, Wesleyan should ponder its Methodist heritage and continue to explore the meaningful relationship of religion and learning, at the same time it recognizes that its prime purpose is education for leadership in a secular age.

Like any developing institution, it has academic needs as well: to improve teaching with more contact with empirical problems of a type found to be so beneficial in sociology and the various internship programs; to inspire more research activity of the kind that enlivens learning, evidenced in Wesleyan's past from the explorations of Professor John Wesley Powell a century ago to the recent studies of parasitology; to make what contribution we can through teaching and public service to the policy problems of the day. John Wesley was probably the greatest popularizer of the eighteenth century, and achieved tremendous impact on public affairs through his more than 300 publications and lifelong itinerant preaching. We have a rich background, and the abilities and resources are within our reach to achieve these goals and more. I am fortunate to have a part in it.