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The President's Inaugural Address

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Inauguration Address
President Richard F. Wilson
April 9, 2005

I would like to begin by extending my deepest appreciation to everyone who has helped plan and execute the inaugural events. Literally months of time and effort have been devoted to this task by dozens of faculty, staff, students, alumni, and friends. I am especially indebted to Professor April Schultz and members of the Inauguration Committee for their devotion and creativity in developing the inauguration plan and for their fortitude and flexibility in transforming that plan into action. Finally, I would like to thank the Board of Trustees for its support and encouragement over the past year and its unwavering loyalty to Illinois Wesleyan. What I have found is that we are blessed to have Board members who care deeply about the University and give of their time and resources to sustain this educational experience for future generations.

In the center of campus of my undergraduate alma mater, Alderson-Broadus College, stands a beautiful white sculpture of two interconnected human forms, one standing on the shoulders of the other reaching an arm toward the heavens. This sculpture was created by Mark Warner, a classmate of mine, and is named Apollo in honor of the space program that captivated our attention in the 1960s. I have always found the statue meaningful for an educational institution because we clearly do stand on the shoulders of all those who have come before us. No one is more aware of that fact today than I. My life and career are filled with friends and colleagues whose shoulders have supported me, and I am honored that several of them are in this audience today.

I cannot thank them adequately without devoting this entire speech to the effort. However, I would like to acknowledge a few people who played key roles in my career and would ask that they stand as I mention their names: Michael Aiken, Larry Faulkner, Ned Goldwasser, Richard Herman, Bill Nugent, and Morton Weir. These people not only served as valued colleagues; they also are my friends. In the early months of my presidency at Illinois Wesleyan, I have called upon the storehouse of ideas and insights provided by each one of them. In fact, I invited them to this ceremony today but asked that they leave some of their stories about Dick Wilson at the edge of town.

On April 18, 1952, Alderson Broadus College inaugurated Dr. Richard E. Shearer as its President, a position he held for thirty-two years. In the 16th year of his presidency, I married his daughter. The close personal relationship with Dr. Shearer provided much inspiration for my academic career and countless hours of conversation about issues in higher education. In fact, it continued almost to the moment I walked on the stage today.

I recently secured a copy of his inaugural address and was struck by the continuing relevance of some of the issues he chose to emphasize. In a section devoted to tolerance, objectivity, broad-mindedness, and sectarianism, Dr. Shearer made the following statement: "The citizen who takes no stand on political issues, and fails to use his franchise is a detriment to a working democracy." The significance of this comment is that fifty-three years later, almost to the day, we find ourselves endeavoring to find new ways to instill a sense of civic leadership and responsibility

among our students. I would like for Dr. Shearer, his wife, Marilyn, and other members of the Shearer family to stand and be recognized.

I have been blessed to have had parents who devoted their lives to the education and well-being of their children and am honored to have my father, Adam Wilson, here with us today. The inspiration and encouragement provided by my parents came naturally. One of my favorite stories involves the challenge that my grandparents faced when their children were ready to go to college at West Virginia University. The only way to make this work financially was for them to close their home for the academic year, rent a large house in Morgantown, West Virginia, and take in boarders to help cover costs. They made this sacrifice because of the importance they attached to a college education for their daughter and two sons. My father recently gave me a recitation book that we believe my grandmother used in school in the 1890s. In honor of my grandparents, I would like to recite a brief passage from a poem entitled "The Brook" by Alfred Tennyson that appears in this collection:

I come from haunts of coot and hern
I make a sudden sally,
And sparkle out among the fern,
To bicker down a valley

By thirty hills I hurry down,
Or slip between the ridges,
By twenty thorps, a little town,
And half a hundred bridges.

Till last by Philips' farm I flow
To join the brimming river,
For men may come and men may go,
But I go on forever.

I like this passage because of its relevance to all of us who work in higher education. We are stewards for a relatively short period of time of institutions established for the generations and whose work goes on forever.

There are two women who are not here with us today who would have enjoyed this occasion more than anyone present: my mother-in-law, Ruth M. Shearer, and my mother, Nelma M. Wilson. My mother-in-law was one of the most dedicated educators I have ever known. She inspired my early interest in teaching and encouraged everyone in the family to seek out new opportunities in life. Whatever was done, she insisted that it be done well.

My mother led by example and exhortation. I cannot remember an activity in my life as a child in which my mother was not involved in some leadership role. I never considered my mother a feminist and am not sure she did either. However, about ten years ago, I was going through some old pictures and found one of my mother in knee stockings and bloomers, holding a basketball. With surprise clearly in my eyes, I asked her if she played basketball in high school. She replied:

“Only when my father didn't know about it.” After a brief pause, she went on to say: “I was born fifty years too soon.”

Both of these women enjoyed pageantry and celebration, especially when family members were involved. I share this moment with them.

I have saved my family for last. My two children are here today: Adam and his fiancé, Quyen Nguyen, and Rachel with her husband, Corey. These are the bright lights of my life and the ones who have endured my penchant for storytelling, my not so subtle interference in their lives, but my unconditional love.

Finally, I would like to pay special tribute to my wife, Pat. She has supported me at every stage of my career and, in fact, likes to tell the story that she worked to support the family when I went to graduate school and worked to help support the family when she went to graduate school. Our relationship is such that we cannot wait to talk to each other at the end of the day. I have come to expect that she will know when it is time to express support and concern and when she needs to stir my resolve. There are many blessings associated with the Presidency at Illinois Wesleyan, but the most important one is that we get to do this together.

The last twelve months have been the most exciting and challenging time of my life. I was attracted to Illinois Wesleyan because of its mission, its standing as a national liberal arts university, its pursuit of excellence, its commitment to social justice and cultural diversity, and its relationship to Bloomington-Normal and the surrounding region. These early impressions have been reinforced with regularity over the past year in formal meetings and through informal conversations with students, parents, alumni, faculty, staff and friends.

My education as President is far from complete, but today I would like to share my thoughts about Illinois Wesleyan's role in “Inspiring Knowledge and Wisdom,” a phrase chosen as the theme for this inauguration and that drives the work of the institution.

For the past six months, I have had the privilege of working with a small committee of faculty, staff, students, Trustees, and alumni on a strategic plan for the University's future. In one of our meetings, a student reminded us that the key to our success as an institution was to “deliver on the promise.” I find myself thinking about that phrase every day and have come to believe that the promises we make are derived from debate, discussion, and experience over time and form the basis for how we go about “Inspiring Knowledge and Wisdom,” I plan to focus the balance of my remarks today on three elements of our promise, each of which can be seen as a promise in and of itself: (1) our distinctive mission, (2) our commitment to global citizenship, and (3) our concern for civic leadership and community engagement.

Colleges and universities in the United States are frequently divided into four or five broad categories: community colleges, liberal arts colleges, comprehensive universities, and research universities. Illinois Wesleyan University does not fit neatly into any of these categories. The University is a liberal arts institution with professional schools and colleges in selected areas. For all programs, the liberal arts and sciences are the core of the educational experience. That fact is

embraced widely on this campus and creates both challenges and opportunities. I would like to single out three characteristics of the University that contribute to our distinctiveness.

Curricular breadth is a defining element of the University and enriches the educational experience for everyone. We embrace students who come to us dedicated to receiving a broad liberal arts education as well as those who come with specific career or artistic expectations. Many initial interests become modified over time as a result of experiences here. And the modifications occur in all directions: some students move from professional or artistic programs into the liberal arts, some who start in the liberal arts move in the other direction. The cross-program activity gets even more complex when co-curricular involvement and activities are considered.

The curricular breadth is clearly a benefit to students who come to us at various stages of personal and professional development. We create an environment that permits experimentation and growth and, most importantly, pathways of change. Regardless of the ultimate major, we also are able to infuse all students with an educational experience that prepares them for life, not simply for a job.

The nature of the University also provides distinctive opportunities related to diversity. We place a premium on this value for reasons related to social justice but also for intellectual and pedagogical reasons. We believe that it enriches the lives of everyone on campus if we engage in discussion and debate with those who have experiences and perspectives different from our own. Those differences are frequently tied to such characteristics as race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status but also emerge out of academic, artistic, and career interests. Our efforts to provide students with a diverse intellectual experience are strengthened as a result of a diverse curriculum, one that mirrors to the extent possible the society in which we live.

Finally, the lens through which we view teaching and scholarly or artistic activities is distinctive. I believe we have an opportunity to define this relationship in a special way. Much of the scholarly and artistic activity of the faculty is tied to our instructional program. I have heard more than one faculty member indicate that decisions about lines of scholarly inquiry or forms of artistic expression are chosen with student participation in mind. In addition, we look for genuine balance between teaching and research. We have work ahead of us to define this relationship more explicitly, but I am convinced that we have a model that is distinctive and consistent with the core mission of the institution.

The second promise that we make is relatively recent and relates to the fact that we live in a global society. We see the evidence every day in the creation of multi-national corporations; in the movement of products from one country to another as part of the assembly process; and in the speed with which communication occurs. We see it as well in the mutually dependent nature of financial markets, in joint efforts among countries to assess environmental impacts and remedies, and in the importance attached to monitoring political, social, and medical issues around the globe.

The promise that we make is that we will prepare students to live in a global society. Some elements of that promise are not new to us – ensuring that students are culturally and

scientifically literate, have well-developed writing and critical-thinking skills, and know when to talk and when to listen.

But there are special challenges today that are different and provide uncommon opportunities for a place like Illinois Wesleyan. Every graduate can expect to live and work in a society that is diverse in every way imaginable: politically, economically, socially, and racially. We also live in a world in which environmental conditions must be assessed and remedied across national borders.

Earlier this semester, Edward Walker, former U.S. ambassador to Israel and Egypt, was on campus to address the future of Iraq. One of the key points in his talk was that progress in Iraq is impeded by what he called geographic and theological ignorance. We cannot expect every student to understand the nuances of every culture, but we can work to instill an awareness of differences and a willingness to explore such differences as part of everyday interactions.

We can read about these changes and welcome discussion of them in the classroom, but I am convinced that our most genuine life changes occur as a result of an intense experience of some type. We see this all the time with students who study abroad for a semester or a year.

Not every student can study abroad, but I am convinced that the size of our student population works to our advantage in this regard. The possibilities include study abroad (and I hope we can expand our formal programs beyond the two in London and Madrid); May Term travel courses in which students are immersed in countries where political and social justice issues are being debated; internships that focus on the global consequences of environmental inaction; residential facilities themed around global citizenship; and carefully constructed modules on global citizenship in course offerings. We cannot leave this important matter to chance. We must incorporate into the undergraduate experience those opportunities that allow students to enhance their sensitivities and develop their roles as global citizens.

One of the historic strengths of Illinois Wesleyan is our connection to the community and the surrounding region. There is a tradition of positive interaction and mutual support.

I suspect not everyone here today may be aware that the first president of Illinois Wesleyan, Reverend Clinton W. Sears, would only agree to become president on the condition that a “substantial sidewalk” be constructed to link the college and downtown. He even agreed to spend \$500 of his own money to build that sidewalk, so important was it to construct that connection. The commitment of this community and region to Illinois Wesleyan has been demonstrated over and over again since its founding in 1850. We must deliver on the promise that flows out of that commitment.

Part of that promise is tied to the quality of the educational experience that we provide to students from the region who enroll here. I have learned quickly that the community has high regard for that part of our mission. The more challenging element is tied to the University's other contributions to the public good. Historically, universities were fairly isolated from the communities in which they were situated, hence the label “ivory tower.” Based on President

Sears' insistence on a sidewalk, I am certain that this was never true at Illinois Wesleyan, and it certainly is not true today.

A few years ago, Harvard Professor Robert Putnam wrote a book entitled *Bowling Alone*. One of the themes in the book is that interest in volunteerism, civic leadership, and community engagement had declined dramatically, presenting serious problems for the quality of life in communities and for our democratic form of governance. Well, I don't know if our students are “bowling alone” or not, but I do know that they are engaged in this community and that our faculty and staff actively look for ways to enhance these interactions.

My sense is that many students who enroll at Illinois Wesleyan come with community service interests and experience and quickly find meaningful ways to contribute to the quality of life in this region. In so doing, they reaffirm the covenant between the University and community, one that I embrace and hope to facilitate.

I have chosen to emphasize three of the special purposes of the University, ones tied to our mission, to global citizenship, and to community engagement. Each one is important in its own right and, along with others not discussed today, contributes collectively to our efforts to “Inspire Knowledge and Wisdom.”

In assessing the significance of the promises made at a particular point in time, I was drawn to an idea made popular by Malcolm Gladwell in his 2002 book called *The Tipping Point*. He describes a tipping point as an idea that spreads very quickly as a result of little changes that have big effects in a relatively short period of time. One of his examples is how a handful of kids reestablished the Hush Puppy as a shoe of choice for 1.6 million people in the space of one year as a result of buying the shoes in resale shops in the East Village.

I like the image evoked by tipping points, although I need to modify Gladwell's definition slightly. The modification relates to the staying power of the change — how long does the change persist. I think all of us find our interest increasing substantially if we believe that our actions make a long term difference for the University.

As I look at the history of Illinois Wesleyan, I find many examples of tipping points.

- Elmo Watson's history of Illinois Wesleyan would suggest that a financial tipping point preceded the appointment of Oliver Spenser Munsell as the second President and his brother, Charles W. C. Munsell as financial agent in 1856. President Munsell launched a successful endowment campaign that is credited with saving the institution from extinction.
- A proposal to move the University to Springfield in 1920 might be considered a geographic tipping point. This move was forestalled by an early cooperative effort between the University and the community leaders comprising the Bloomington Association of Commerce.
- The sevenfold rise in the endowment during Robert S. Eckley's presidency might be characterized as an endowment tipping point while the dramatic improvement in buildings on

campus during the presidency of Minor Myers could easily qualify that era as a facilities tipping point.

I stand on many Illinois Wesleyan shoulders this afternoon and I am grateful for the work that has been done in the past and for the dedication of those who serve and support the University today. I look forward to working with all of you in reaffirming our commitment to the distinctive mission of this institution, to enhancing our role as global citizens, and to strengthening this University's contributions to the public good. We will accomplish these goals and others established for the University through careful planning, through an investment in the people and programs that define the institution, and through continuous attention to the quality of our work. I view these as core responsibilities as president. If historians look back on my tenure as president and describe it as a tipping point for the core, nothing would please me more.