Transformative Power: Macalester's Mission and Purpose

Inaugural Address, March 6, 2004

Those who know me best might opine that I am rarely at a loss for words, yet I can find none now to express the depth of my gratitude for this extraordinary honor and privilege. I can offer only my most profound thanks: to the students, faculty, staff, alumni, and friends of Macalester College, who have graced me with a warmer welcome and a longer honeymoon than anyone has a right to expect; to the members of the Board of Trustees, who have entrusted me with the leadership of this superb place, and especially to Mark Vander Ploeg, who from our very first meeting has impressed upon me the height of his aspiration for, and the depth of his commitment to, his alma mater; to those who have spoken this morning, and in particular to Rik Warch, who has been the most valuable and generous of mentors; to my friends, to my family; to my mother, who is here, and to my father, who cannot be, but who would find in this moment inexpressible joy; to Adam and Sam, who are my sustenance and my delight; and to Carol, who above everyone else it is beyond my ability ever to repay. Thank you all.

Because seven months have elapsed since I actually assumed the presidency at Macalester, I have had more than the usual amount of time to consider possible topics for my inaugural address. This is not, I can assure you, entirely a good thing, since the more one thinks about addresses of this sort, the more thoroughly one ponders the significance of the moment and the lofty expectations of the assembled guests, the less certain one becomes about what is in fact right and appropriate—in short, the more inclined one is to

chuck the whole thing and to spend the day lost amidst the multitudes at the Mall of America. In the end, as is often the case for me, I was instructed by the beauty and wisdom of literature, and in this instance by the eloquence of perhaps the greatest poet of the last century, William Butler Yeats, who near the end of his life enacted a much grander version of my own poor struggle in his poem "The Circus Animals' Desertion," and who wrote in that context,

> I sought a theme and sought for it in vain,
> I sought it daily for six weeks or so.
> Maybe at last, being but a broken man,
> I must be satisfied with my heart….[1]

Yeats grappled during the latter portion of his life with the tension between appearance and heart, between the demands of being what he calls, in another poem, a "sixty year old smiling public man"[2] and the desires of a private individual, between the pressures of a visible and intensely scrutinized public life, in which every flaw is magnified and every word writ large, and the needs of a necessarily imperfect, occasionally uncertain, and always dependent human being. This is a tension with which college presidents, in our own more pedestrian way, are deeply familiar, and upon whose resolution the success of our presidencies and the richness of our lives may depend. I am reminded by Yeats that while the burden of public responsibility can never entirely be set aside, there are occasions when it is important to speak from the heart, and I am persuaded by my own instincts that this is indeed such an occasion. Now is no time for me to pretend to be what I am not or to profess what I do not most passionately believe.

And so I have been asking myself for some weeks what my heart tells me about this moment, this college, and the work I have now been called upon to do. Certainly it tells me that I am embarrassingly fortunate, more fortunate surely than I deserve to be. This is not a situation I could have anticipated or even imagined thirty years ago, or twenty, or ten, or perhaps even one. Like many of you in this room, I suspect, I explored in my youth a variety of possible futures for myself; some of these were more fanciful than others; a few, having to do with the New York Yankees, were clearly a stretch. In none of these scenarios did an eventual college presidency figure for an instant. Even after I had settled on a career as a teacher and scholar, and even as I became more and more passionate about and conversant with the mission and purpose of the liberal arts college, I never aspired seriously to a position of institutional authority. Like most scholars, I spent much professional time alone and came to savor the pleasure of wrestling for extended periods with small but knotty problems and with questions more aesthetic than practical; like many teachers I preferred the intimacy of the small group to the distance and chaos of the crowd. One can describe the daily life of a college president in many terms, but solitude and intimacy are not among them—the current occasion being, I submit, a case in point.

Yet, rather miraculously I think, having arrived at this moment, I feel with great conviction as if it is the right one, as if it is the destination toward which I have been moving, however unwittingly, all along. In what I promise will be my last borrowing from a modernist poet, I will remind you of T. S. Eliot's observation that "the end of all our exploring/Will be to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time."[3]

Though I have never been in this place before, I feel as if I am home; and though I had never imagined that this would be my particular work, I feel as if it is the work I have been formed to do, that best suits whatever gifts and talents I possess, and for which I have been for a long time preparing. While it is perhaps premature and vaguely funereal to term this the end of my particular journey, it is nonetheless the case that my arrival at Macalester seems to me both the conclusion of a long, indirect, and not always self-conscious period of exploration and the beginning of a new period whose challenges, trials, and rewards have yet to be fully revealed.

My heart tells me too that this is important work, not detached from the ostensible "real world," as is so often misleadingly suggested, but part of that world and, I would contend, even essential to it. There sits in my office a whole shelf of books dedicated to defining the aims, values, and virtues of the liberal arts college. I cannot hope here to add anything of novelty to a subject about which so many have already said so much. Since some truths, however, bear repeating, and since being a college president means in part learning to embrace repetition, I will reiterate the point that the sort of college of which Macalester is a stellar example is, in the words of Steven Koblik, former president of Reed College, a "distinctively American" institution,[4] as American as our particular form of democracy, our historic (if currently embattled) emphasis on inclusion, and our tradition of social mobility. Indeed, I would go so far as to argue that the centrality of the liberal arts education in America is in part responsible for the preservation of our characteristic political and social institutions, since that education, more than any other form with which I am familiar, is aimed at producing the sort of citizen without which

those institutions cannot flourish. The liberal arts are nothing less than preparation for the condition of freedom and evolved, I believe, as a defense against the descent of freedom into chaos and misrule. If this seems an over-statement, consider that the liberal arts model, like the society within which it was formed, rests finally on a belief in the transformative power of ideas, the necessity of collaborative action for the common good, and the importance of individual self-determination. Macalester's "Statement of Purpose and Belief" begins with the declaration that "At Macalester College we believe that education is a fundamentally transforming experience…[and that] the possibilities for this personal, social, and intellectual transformation extend to us all. We affirm the importance of the intellectual growth of the students, staff, and faculty through individual and collaborative endeavor." Substitute "citizenship" for "education" and one has a reasonable working definition of American social and political life in its idealized form. It is no accident that American colleges and universities began by the early nineteenth century to distinguish themselves, in mission and structure, from their more specialized, more exclusive, and more orderly European forebears, or that Thomas Jefferson chose to memorialize himself not as the third President of the United States, but as the author of the Declaration of Independence, the creator a state statute on religious freedom, and the father of the University of Virginia.

On other days, and in other settings, I will talk about the practical utility of a liberal arts education; on other days, and in other settings, I will provide statistics that document our success in sending students on to graduate and professional schools and to distinguished and rewarding careers in a variety of fields; on other days, and in other

settings, I will talk about the rigor of our majors, the value of our general education requirements, and the seriousness with which we take self-assessment. On this day, and in this setting, I want to state clearly my belief that a liberal arts education has as its goal the promotion of a depth of thinking and a breadth of spirit not subject to easy measurement and that to define our mission in terms that are too utilitarian and too quantifiable is to concede the ground we should most vigorously defend. Our success is best measured by the books our graduates choose to read, the philanthropic causes for which they labor, the things they build and re-build, the positions of leadership they occupy, the children they raise—in short, by the lives they lead, for which a liberal arts education is of course not wholly responsible, but to which that education surely and richly contributes. To a culture preoccupied with short-term benefits and uncomplicated answers this may seem evasive and old-fashioned, but it is true. Let me return again to our "Statement of Purpose and Belief," where we define the goal of developing "individuals who make informed judgments and interpretations of the broader world around them and choose actions or beliefs for which they are willing to be held accountable. We expect them to develop the ability to seek and use knowledge and experience in contexts that challenge and inform their suppositions about the world." We do not and cannot always succeed, but we are wholly clear about our goal of educating individuals to think critically and creatively, to respond with intelligence, composure, and empathy to unanticipated challenges and changes, and to shape, through their work and ideas, the civic, intellectual, artistic, and moral life of our times. Anyone who believes that this mission has become outmoded, that the world is less in need of such individuals than it once was, has not, it seems to me, been paying much attention.

And what role in particular has Macalester College played, should Macalester play, in advancing this liberal arts mission? You will be unsurprised to learn that this is a question to which I have been devoting much thought and that I have, in pursuit of answers, been familiarizing myself through study and conversation with the history of the college from its founding. In some ways, I have discovered, Macalester has changed dramatically. Among the original rules when the college was created out of the Baldwin Preparatory School in 1874 was the requirement that "Students will take their meals with the president and his family and will be expected to observe the usages which prevail among decent people….Without permission, students will not be allowed to leave the building after supper."[5] Though I have little interest in reinstating this expectation for all 1800 of our undergraduates, I am considering its enforcement on my two sons, particularly the part about observing the usages which prevail among decent people. The 36 students who enrolled in Macalester's first class in 1885 paid expenses including "fifteen dollars tuition for each of the three terms of twelve weeks, and three dollars a week for room, board and light. It was estimated that one hundred and eighty dollars would cover the yearly expenses"[6]—a sum about equal to our current student activity fee and about half the cost of an iPod.

In other ways things have changed very little. In 1873 Charles Macalester, skeptical about the wisdom of founding yet another college in yet another Midwestern town, complained that "The Country is Swimming with Educational institutions, most of them crippled and always in pecuniary trouble."[7] And the life of my great predecessor

James Wallace, as described by his biographer Edwin Kagin, sounds more than slightly familiar: "James Wallace," Kagin writes,

> though possibly sometimes an exhorter, was more often a circuit rider. For now began for him that seemingly everlasting trek from town to town, church to church, person to person, as he sought money and students for Macalester. This weekend he might be off to Duluth or Rochester, Owatonna, Austin, or Worthington; then he would hurry back for interviews in the Twin Cities and to the routine duties of his office at the college. Next week might find him in Chicago, in Pittsburgh or Columbus, Philadelphia, Washington, or Baltimore, or possibly settling in for a period in New York, wherever he might ferret out wealthy Presbyterians to interest in the college.[8]

Though one might now substitute Naples, Florida for Owatonna, and though our ferreting has become somewhat more ecumenical, the essential job as practiced by Wallace remains, in the main, intact, the challenges and joys of the presidency undiminished by time.

Of course more substantive consistencies mark the history and define the distinctive mission of this great college. The desire at Macalester to provide an education comparable in quality to—yet different in character from—what is provided by the finest colleges in the land is palpable and powerful. From the beginning we have tried mightily to balance the goals of excellence and access, of national visibility and local distinctiveness, of creating programs of the highest quality and making those programs available to a population less privileged than might be found at many of our peer

institutions. For many decades, and especially since the mid-century presidency of Charles Turck, the college has taken a resolutely internationalist perspective, even at moments when such a perspective has been unpopular, in the belief that world citizenship, and American citizenship, are forged most strongly in an environment that embraces a wide range of global viewpoints. We were among the first colleges to address openly and explicitly, if not always deftly, the opportunities and deep complexities of social and cultural diversity. For years this college has, more than most, attempted to wed what historian Hugh Hawkins has termed a Socratic approach to the liberal arts as philosophical questioning with "a Ciceronian emphasis on civic duty,"[9] building bridges, and not erecting barriers, between intellectual and political life. Decade after decade, year after year, we have aspired to play some role in the formation of individuals equipped to imagine, articulate, and inspire us to live up to the noblest ideals of American and global society.

These are good goals, difficult goals; we do not always succeed in reaching them; yet the fact that we continue to pursue them even in the face of substantial challenges is testimony to our seriousness of purpose and reason enough to see Macalester College as a resource worthy not just of preservation, but of enhancement. Those of us charged with the stewardship of this college—by which I mean both those of us who live and work here today and those who have benefited from the work of the college in the past—should feel not merely obligated but privileged to help advance its historic mission.

Perhaps the most striking feature of our past at Macalester is the extent to which we have throughout our history been enacting, on an institutional level, the transformative process we attempt to inspire in our students. Put simply, the history of this college is a case study in the value of perseverance, flexibility, and aspiration. It took eleven years from its nominal founding in 1874 for the college to enroll its first class of students; during virtually every decade from the 1870s to the 1970s the college was faced with the very real threat of financial exigency and even, at times, with possible collapse. One is tempted when reading the story of Macalester's first century to say of it what DeWitt Wallace said of the story of his father: "this is a saga essentially of suffering, acute and prolonged."[10] Yet time and again suffering was met with determination and threats of demise were turned into opportunities for institutional evolution. Throughout it all our students were educated thoughtfully and rigorously and a community of learners was created and nourished. Macalester has been hurdling obstacles for well over a century and has been reinventing itself almost from birth: in 1893, when a drive to establish an endowment was launched and the college opened its doors to women; in 1947, when in the wake of the second World War the college embraced a new vocational emphasis; in 1961, when the so-called "Stillwater Report" signaled a turn toward a stronger liberal arts orientation; in 1992, when the full impact of the largesse of DeWitt Wallace became clear and the college was granted the opportunity to aspire to a new level of national prominence and academic excellence. That it has managed to do this without ever losing sight of its core mission, and that it has arrived at the start of the twenty-first century as one of the pre-eminent liberal arts colleges in the nation, as one of the handful that can aspire realistically to prepare the best and brightest

students for positions of national and global leadership, is a truly remarkable fact. Truly remarkable. It is also, I propose, the foundation upon which the future of this college will be built and an example and challenge to the Macalester community of today. So let me conclude my remarks and formally initiate my presidency by asserting with the deepest conviction that if one believes those things to be strongest that have been most sorely tested, those goals to be most precious that have been most doggedly pursued, and those institutions to be most lasting that have fought most tenaciously for their values, then one must be optimistic about the future of Macalester College. The current version of Macalester, the version created for us by the efforts of our predecessors, is still in its youth, and I am excited and inspired by the prospect of witnessing, of playing my own small part in shaping, its maturity.

Brian Rosenberg

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[1] William Butler Yeats, "The Circus Animals' Desertion," lines 1-4.
[2] William Butler Yeats, "Among School Children, " line 8.
[3] T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," lines 240-42.
[4] Steven Koblik, Forward to *Distinctively American: The Residential Liberal Arts Colleges*, a special issue of *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* (Winter 1999): xiv.
[5] Quoted in Huntley Dupre, *Edward Duffield Neill: Pioneer Educator* (Saint Paul: Macalester College Press, 1949), 80-81.
[6] Quoted in Dupre, 80.
[7] Quoted in Dupre, 79.
[8] Edward Kagin, *James Wallace of Macalester* (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1957), 146.
[9] Hugh Hawkins, "The Making of the Liberal Arts College Identiy," *Daedalus* (Winter 1999): 4-5. Hawkins himself alludes to the work of Bruce Kimball on this topic in *Orators & Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1986).
[10] DeWitt Wallace, Forward to *James Wallace of Macalester*, 11.