



# CELEBRATE DEPAUW

The inaugural address of  
Brian W. Casey,  
nineteenth president of DePauw University

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## THE SMALL AMERICAN COLLEGE: A GOOD AND NECESSARY PLACE

Members of the Board of Trustees, Faculty of DePauw University, alumni, students, staff, friends and honored guests gathered here today – it is with profound humility that I accept these responsibilities. I pledge to you my faithfulness, and my every energy.

The first president of DePauw, Matthew Simpson, spoke the following words immediately after he was installed in office, at the first inauguration ceremony of this university: “Your speaker cannot be insensible to the interests of this moment. The surrounding circumstances, the impressive charge [to him], the high trust committed to his care, and the almost immeasurable responsibility connected with it, [these] all stand vividly before him. Insensible to feeling must he be, [does] he not tremble at the magnitude of this trust.” I too am awed by your trust, but I am committed to the principles of this place, as I am committed to its continued enrichment and progress.

For those of you visiting DePauw for the first time today, it may come as a surprise to you to learn that we actually don’t do this every Friday here in Greencastle.

In fact we have not assembled in this way, for these purposes, for twenty-two years. And now we come together in these celebrations, in one of the unique things that universities do.

I have had the good fortune to attend the inaugurations of a few presidents of a few universities. And at the time I thought about the people on the platform and thought that this was their day.

I am here to tell you, however, with a deep and abiding honesty, that it isn’t. Despite all the embarrassing evidence to the contrary on the campus this weekend, this day is surely not about this person who, by luck, fate, and sheer good fortune has been given the opportunity to speak to you in celebration of DePauw.

Today is about the eighteen presidents before me, all of whom worked with hundreds of faculty members, who – in turn – taught thousands of students, who themselves walked by this library that contains the thoughts and words of a million women and men. Today is also about Dr. Robert Bottoms, whom I thank for his friendship and his warm guidance. Much of what we are celebrating

today is a celebration of his good work and his great vision.

From this lucky vantage point, I can’t help but think of the next president of DePauw, and think what will be on her mind, and what faculty she will work with, and what students will be assembled with her the next time DePauw gathers for this old ritual.

So, this is but one turn of one season. But seasons should be marked.

Ritual allows a community to come together to proclaim that its work is crucial, its aim is true, its passions are real, its toil worth noting. I am enough of an historian to note that my words will unlikely be remembered much past the next issue of *The DePauw*, and that pomp and circumstance are simply glitter that covers the day-to-day. But still we gather, because it is important for us that we do.

I am glad that my brother and my sisters are here today sitting in the front row. And I am more than happy to note that they are raising their children – my many wonderful nieces and nephews here today – to revere education the way our parents did.

My mother was a teacher for thirty years, teaching literature and language. My father is a multi-talented man, but I think his greatest passion and his most personal gift is as a writer. My mother taught me to love schools; my father taught me to love words. It is deeply moving, therefore, for me to be able, today, to offer you – friends of DePauw – some words about this very special school.

Inaugural speeches are an odd literary genre. Drew Faust, newly installed president of Harvard University, noted in her inaugural address that these speeches are “by definition pronouncements by individuals who don’t yet know what they are talking about.”

So chastened, I decided to rely on my own academic field, history, to provide me guidance as I thought about the words I would offer DePauw today.

I was particularly keen to learn what the eighteen presidents before me had to say at their beginnings. So with the help of DePauw’s excellent library staff I gathered up all the past DePauw inaugural addresses – not exactly light weekend reading.

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And I was again struck by words from the first inaugural address.

President Simpson took time in his inaugural address to note that “The father who neglects or refuses to send his son to ... college ... entrusts him not to men of intellectual attainment and high moral worth, but permits him to associate with the licentious and the profane. [His son] is taught no science but the science of wickedness. He learns the foolish jest, the impure song, and the profane exclamation. His teachers are the drunkard and the debauchee; with them, [his son] joins in revelry and crime, and bids fair to disgrace his friends and injure his community, and brings himself to an untimely grave.”

I have, today, ordered our Admission Office to use that paragraph in all our future admissions brochures.

The risks of education by drunkards having already been exhausted as an inaugural topic, I would like – instead – to speak to you of history, and of this moment.

There are three histories and stories coming together today at DePauw: the least important of these is my own personal history (how did I come here?), then there is the history of the liberal arts college (how are they now?), and then there is DePauw’s history and current moment (where have we been, and where are we going?).

My own personal story can be summed up quite simply: I love campuses, and I love colleges and universities. I have been fortunate to have created a life for myself at a university. I know, of course, from years of personal experience, that colleges and universities are rarely perfect institutions. They can be quarrelsome and they can be contentious. They are usually engaged in an endless debate about their essential missions, as well as their peripheral activities.

They are, as Woodrow Wilson noted during his time as President of Princeton University, “unfortunately filled with people who have opinions.”

They can, in short, be exhausting.

But they are also places where we’re at our best. There are few – very few – places in the world where we gather in common purpose. On a college campus we live, and learn, and work together in beautiful settings. These are places where our youth come and become educated adults, where thinkers come to speak, where teams come to play.

Campuses are places where we encounter people who seem, at first, so very different from ourselves until we learn to see past that. Campuses can be islands of empathy and humanity.

They are our best, good place.

The writer, and DePauw alumna, Barbara Kingsolver, once said “The very least you can do in your life is to figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance but live right in it, under its roof.”

I come to work every day at DePauw now, under the roof of this hopeful place. My history has brought me here to this marvelous place and for that I am fully grateful.

And what is this place? To understand why DePauw is as it is now, I want you to imagine something with me right now.

Those of you who are facing me today are facing west. Imagine, for a moment, that you can see the whole western half of this nation. Looking west you would first be able to see Wabash College, and then Grinnell College. If you were to look a bit north you would take in Carleton College and Macalaster College. Further west still, you would see Colorado College, and Reed. You would see Pomona.

I, facing east, given the same gift of profound sight, would see Kenyon and Oberlin, Ohio Wesleyan, and further still, Amherst and Wellesley, Swarthmore, Davidson, Smith, Bowdoin.

There is a fabric of American higher education, a fabric consisting of nearly 4,000 institutions of higher education in this country. Amidst this rich fabric, however, there are only about 100 to 150 true residential liberal arts colleges.

Among the larger pattern in American higher education, these are the golden threads. These are rare places.

At the time of DePauw’s founding, if you had asked whether its supporters were intent on creating a private, residential, liberal arts college, they would have had no idea what you were asking them. First, there was no real idea of a public institution versus a private one. Public institutions – institutions created by and supported by the state – would come later in the 19th century. In 1837, when this school was founded, all schools were the dreams of private men and women.

More importantly, the founders would have been surprised at the thought that schools could come in a variety of forms and missions. DePauw was founded, as were essentially all the colleges founded before the Civil War, as a school committed to a traditional curriculum designed to train men to become ministers and public servants.

This is all men and women knew of when they spoke of an American college in 1837.

In the late nineteenth century, a few decades after DePauw was founded, however, this all changed, and changed dramatically. First came the emergence of the research university in the United States, of which the University of Chicago was the first, and perhaps still the greatest, example. These were the new schools dedicated to the research enterprise, the creation of knowledge, the training of scholars, the development of professionals, as well as teaching a traditional curriculum.

Schools such as Amherst and DePauw, which had remained committed essentially to their original forms, suddenly found

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themselves in stark comparison to something new. Their missions were put into relief, and into question. The debate about the liberal arts colleges began then, continuing to this day.

What then is the role and place of the small traditional liberal arts colleges in a world of research and professionalism?

One need not attend a liberal arts college to receive a liberal arts education today. Cornell and Duke offer their undergraduates a liberal arts education. One can major in English at Berkeley. Biology can be studied at Indiana University as well as DePauw. Physics courses are offered at DePauw, and at Purdue.

We have no monopoly on the liberal arts.

How is it then that these 100 to 200 small liberal arts colleges, the DePauws of this world, are not only surviving, but thriving? How is it, that despite the odds, despite the fact that this is the most expensive form of education anyone could ever have dreamed of, they have not just become good places, but necessary places? They thrive, I would argue, not because they are oppositional to the research universities. I venture that these colleges thrive because of the scale of these schools.

These are intentional communities. They are communities living and thinking together.

Imagine a place in which a vibrant, challenging, knowledgeable, and diverse conversation not only exists but is everywhere, including and involving an entire community, and then you can see DePauw – the DePauw beneath the banners of this celebration.

Our scale and our mission forces us to encounter one another at every turn. You cannot hide as a scholar, or as a citizen. When you think here, you think amongst your classmates. And when you remove yourself, the community sees and feels that removal. The fabric is woven tight at DePauw so any tear, any change, affects the whole cloth.

This is our great contribution . . . our striving in every way to lead a life of communal inquiry. We are bound in ways that connect us in the classroom and out. We are a community here at Roy O. West Library. We are an intentional community at East College, at Sigma Chi, at Blackstock Stadium, at the Hub, in the Dells, at Marvin's, at the Lilly Center, at the Olin Center, at the Duck, in Asbury and in Meharry.

We are 35,000 alumni. And 2300 students. And 23 living units. And we are bound up together in an enterprise that makes us better for being part of this most important conversation that is DePauw.

What next then for DePauw?

First, we must make sure that we are focused intensely on our core missions of education and community. DePauw's reputation will always rest fundamentally on its academic strength. Which means that the very soul of this university is placed, appropriately

and for all time, in the hands of our faculty. It will be my job to make sure that, as an administration, we focus our efforts on strengthening the faculty, and supporting their work. This means providing them with the time and the resources so they can think and create, to work as scholars and artists and as teachers.

Second, the faculty must invigorate our curriculum so that we ensure our students – and generations of future students – that we are providing an education that is engaging and relevant. We have begun this work this semester, and I am profoundly grateful and thankful for the energy with which the faculty have engaged this task.

Third, we must remain committed to diversity in every way and across every measure. Our curriculum needs this, our students need this, the world needs this.

DePauw sophomore Adam Johnson wrote to me about this the other day. He pointed out that “If everyone comes from the same or similar places then they see everything through the same cultural lens. They will always arrive at the same conclusions. This means they will never walk out of the classroom angry, distraught, or confused. Which means no one gets that passion, that drive to understand, that one thing that keeps them up at night.” Adam is right.

Fourth, we – all of us together – must increase the reach and reputation of DePauw in the nation, and around the world. As I have said in numerous settings, this is a jewel of a liberal arts college. We must make sure that every dynamic, compelling student in the country considering a liberal arts college or a school of music considers DePauw. That every young scholar who wants to come to a school committed to teaching and to creativity, considers working here. That those who are thinking of American higher education are thinking about DePauw.

Next, we must work with the city of Greencastle to make this a dynamic and beautiful place to work. We have a true partner in our new mayor who is on the stage with me today, and we have a city that has supported us for nearly two centuries. It is our turn to begin the work to revitalize our home. If we turn our backs on this city, we will harm this university.

Further, we must recognize and support the role of the arts in our curriculum and our campus. Built into our history is a commitment to music and music education. We also have an extraordinary history of writers on this faculty, and among our alumni ranks. Now with the Peeler Art Center and the Green Center for the Performing Arts, we have some of the finest arts facilities on any campus in this country. We live in an age where creativity drives the economy, and drives technology, and the ways we communicate and understand the world.

One of the greatest features of DePauw is the presence of the School of Music in its beautiful new building. The arts are in our DNA. There is music in our blood.

Let us own this, let us bring it to our students, and to this city.

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But in order to make sure that we are all charged with our DePauw task at this moment, I must now speak to the students of DePauw.

DePauw students – wonderful, wonderful DePauw students: you have made my journey to this campus and to this day beyond thrilling. You have welcomed me, you have energized me, you have said hello on every sidewalk. You have invited me to hear you sing, you have had me over for dinner, you have reminded me every day why it is that I come to work. I am thankful for you.

I want you now to make this a deeper, richer DePauw in a thousand ways – in ways that only you can. Talk to each other, talk to your faculty, talk to the alumni this weekend and in the months ahead. I have asked the faculty to begin a process of enriching our intellectual life. Do not let them have this conversation without your necessary voice. Do not fail this place.

Why do we come here? Why do we travel to Greencastle, why do we gather in ceremonies such as this? Because there is something in you that knows that there is honor in a small college and in our university.

Why do we love a college or a university? It violates nearly every rule of our American culture. In a world that loves the new, they are old. In a world that is busy, they promise time. In a world that celebrates the individual, they are places that insist on community.

So many features we expect to see at – and love about – a college would not survive outside of a campus: roommates, field hockey teams, Greek letter societies, a cappella singing groups. Bell towers,

iron gates, commencement ceremonies, inaugurations. They are all here. They are the fabric of this place.

The world is heavy with us today, deep and long. One cannot read the news and not feel the trials of the present, and not feel the need to worry about the future.

But at just these moments, we must return to and celebrate our essential task. Beyond the news of the day is this task. Beneath these banners is this task. When the tents go away, there is this task.

Our task is, of course, to give license to wonder, to create possibilities commensurate with our students' capacity to dream.

The first time I addressed a group of DePauw alumni, I stated that "the world needs DePauw." I feel that way more strongly than I did four months ago when I first said this. The world needs this good and necessary place. It is the hope of our students, it is the beacon of our alumni, it is the sustaining groves for our faculty. It is the hope of the world.

Thank you again for participating in this celebration of our university. I am honored and I am humbled to be here amongst you. I am amazed that my life presented me with an opportunity to speak of DePauw when there are so many who could.

I invite you to continue this celebration of this American university with me today, and for decades to come.

Welcome to DePauw.

And thank you.