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Sesquicentennial

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"SESQUICENTENNIAL"
MATRICULATION CONVOCATION

SEPTEMBER 26, 1996

Sesquicentennial. It's a word over which many Lawrentians and alumni have stumbled in recent years as we've been anticipating our 150th anniversary, though it is--I do believe--a word that Messers. Goldgar, Harrison, and Hittle could pronounce and spell in any contest they might enter. And while the official date of our founding will not occur until January 15, 1997, we will be celebrating the sesquicentennial throughout the academic year, both on campus and off. As I noted in one of our publications, it takes 150 years to reach a sesquicentennial, and it is best to make the most of it once it arrives.

Clearly, this is our first and only sesquicentennial, but it is not the first anniversary celebration conducted by Lawrence. As best I can tell, no festivities marked our 25th year, but there was quite a fuss at what was called the "semi-centennial" in 1897, another at the 75th anniversary in 1922, a third at the centennial fifty years ago, and a fourth on the occasion of our 125th year in 1972. There is something charmingly dated about several of these early celebrations.

In 1897, for example, Lawrence put on a two-day celebration consisting of no fewer than ten fairly somber speeches--on such topics as "The Christian College a Necessity," "The College and the City," "The College and the State," "The College in Patriotic Service," and "The College and Its Alumni"--four undoubtedly lengthy prayers, twelve musical pieces, and one poem. Light-hearted is not a term that leaps to mind in reviewing *that* program. In addition, the college sent out a flier to all alumni entitled "How to Observe Lawrence Day" with eight suggestions, among them to hold a weeknight evening service "and sing college songs, and have toasts on college life and Lawrence University." As a then-serious Methodist college, those toasts were probably made with lemonade. Today, I'd opine, one would be hard-pressed to gather any group of alumni and expect them to be able to sing a college song; the beverage of choice for toasts I'll leave to your imaginations. As for college songs, please see the note in the convocation program and please sing exuberantly when this newest Lawrence song is introduced for the first time at the end of this morning's program.

The 75th anniversary was slightly more playful, and was marked by an historical pageant, featuring such characters as Marie Antoinette, Eleazar Williams as the Lost Dauphin of France, Amos Lawrence, Indians, and the

Civil War and World War I in dialogue with Alma Mater, among other players. I'll spare you a full rendition, but you will get something of the flavor of the thing with this brief excerpt, set early in the mid-1840s when The Spirit of the Wilderness confronts Amos Lawrence and pleads for his assistance. Lawrence wonders aloud what to do with his lands in the wilds of Wisconsin, and then the Spirit speaks: "I am the spirit of the Wilderness, the Soul of that great section known to you as the far away region of the Middle West. I represent people strong in body, in determination, strong in faith, self-sacrificing, enduring, ambitious, not for material gains alone, but for homes, for churches, for education. In the east are many schools. You believe in them. Are the young people of sturdy, pioneer Wisconsin less gifted, duller in mind, less deserving than those of Massachusetts? Should Geography decide the fitness of young men and young women for higher education?" Rhetorical questions, obviously, and good old Amos gives the predictable response; after much to-ing and fro-ing, Lawrence gives in and pledges \$10,000 to launch the college, though honesty compels me to note that Amos was not too enamored with the idea of a college that would include young women.

There were serious speeches and testimonials at our 75th as well, of course, a mode that clearly obtained at the centennial in 1947. Coming as it did two years after the end of World War II, the centennial was influenced by that experience, especially by the dramatic changes in the student population generated by returning servicemen who enrolled thanks to the G.I. Bill. Amos Lawrence's grandson delivered a sermon; Gordon R. Clapp, graduate of the class of 1927 and Chairman of the Tennessee Valley Authority, gave the commencement address; and other dignitaries participated as well. In his remarks, President Nathan Pusey observed that "Our world is richer because of the work of Lawrence College. It is richer in realized human potentials, in happy incidents, in love and understanding, in knowledge and discovery, in individual adventures and in various social goods. All who have served Lawrence have in the measure of their capacity been ennobled and transformed through their service. Wherefore it is fitting that all of us who are in any way her sons and daughters join joyfully in the Centennial Observances of our beneficent Alma Mater. She has wrought a good work. And we may also now feel confident that these first hundred years, with all their warm rich experience, are only the opening measures of a song of which the full, unfolded splendor is still to come."

Now, fifty years later, we pause again to mark another milestone anniversary of the college. Whether Lawrence has achieved its "full, unfolded splendor" may be debated, and to think that anyone would refer to the college as a "beneficent Alma Mater" is beyond the pale, but whatever else may be said, it is reasonable to assert that at its 150th year, the college

has remained faithful to the ideals and intentions of its founders and to the fundamental principles and purposes that have shaped its mission over the centuries. And those attributes indeed are worthy of celebration.

In many respects, the previous anniversaries at Lawrence strike me as having been more congratulatory than critical in their assessments of the college's past and then-present circumstances, evoking sentimental memories more than hard-headed appraisals. And perhaps those modes are predictable and proper; surely, our sesquicentennial has and will invoke such remembrances, many of which are captured in the just-issued publication "Time and Traditions." A milestone moment like this provides an occasion to reflect on and rejoice in the history of the institution, and we are blessed with a history worthy of such sentiments. Whether it is our early and long-standing commitment to coeducation, or the distinction of being both a liberal arts college and conservatory of music, or the privilege of perpetuating a tradition of women's education through the consolidation with Downer College, or the achievements of students, faculty, and alumni over generations, or our standing and stature today as a selective national college serving able young women and men from across the country and around the globe, there is much in which we can take pride.

Constancy of purpose, despite frequent financial travails in our early years and periodic challenges to the viability of the college, is one such source of pride. The college's character and identity were set forth by our founders at the outset and have informed the overall mission and purposes of the institution ever since. Our patron, Amos Lawrence, wanted the college that bears his name to be "an Oxford or Cambridge that shall be the glory of Wisconsin," thereby suggesting his expectation of having the institution exemplify and extend a venerable academic tradition. Our Methodist founders intended the college to be a place "for both male and female students where each and all should be entitled to equal educational advantages," giving "each student the opportunity of competing for any honor conferred by the University and of enjoying that honor when justly earned." That was a radical educational proposition in 1847 and we are proud to be counted as one of the very first coeducational colleges in the United States. And the early leaders of the college determined that it should be "erected on a plan sufficiently extensive to afford ample facilities to perfect the scholar," again expressing high ambition for the academic nature of the college. Though the charter made no explicit mention of the liberal arts and sciences, the collegiate course at Lawrence followed this model from the beginning, offering a course of study based on the ancient *trivium* and *quadrivium*.

Like almost all colleges established in the new nation prior to the Civil War, then, Lawrence was conceived in the first instance as having an educational mission that was, as one observer has put it, “a copy of a copy”: an American rendition of the English adaptation of the Renaissance revision of the medieval curriculum. With few exceptions, essentially all of the 900 colleges founded in the country before 1860 resembled one another in this respect, albeit with some individual variations. At least in terms of their organization and educational program, colleges in the newly settled west looked very much like colleges in the already settled east. Establishing colleges, in fact, was something of a mania in the first half of the nineteenth century; as I’ve mentioned, it was done about 900 times. These institutions were often fragile creations. As early as 1829, one observer noted that “colleges rise up like mushrooms in our luxurious soil. They are duly lauded and puffed for a day, and they sink to be heard no more.” Most of them sank. Though precise figures are not available, one scholar estimated that by 1928, only 182 of those 900 or so pre-Civil War colleges were still around.

Since only twenty percent of the pre-1860 colleges made it into the twentieth century, survival itself may be considered something worth commemorating at an anniversary such as this one. Lawrence certainly struggled to survive in its first fifty years, and its officers and agents undertook all sorts of schemes to keep the place financially viable: in return for donations, the college handed out perpetual scholarships, which could be used by the donor’s descendants from generation to generation; in the quest for funds, the college employed agents to scour the east for contributions, sometimes in less than scrupulous fashion; in order to pay the bills, the trustees sold off land in Appleton (in the latter part of the last century, Lawrence disposed of all of its acreage north of College Avenue, which then extended beyond City Park, only to have to purchase some of the property back for the chapel, the music-drama center, and the like); and at one point, in a short-lived move indicative of the challenges it faced, Lawrence cut tuition to zero (though it maintained a schedule of fees) in order to compete with the University of Wisconsin for students.

These struggles for survival took their toll, as President Huntley’s report to the trustees in 1882 indicated: “It has been a year of trials, embarrassments and difficulties such as I have never known before,” he wrote, “and which I do not think it the duty of any one man to endeavor to fight through more than once, and strange as it may appear I am nevertheless convinced that nine-tenths of all of our difficulty might have been avoided if only we had been possessed of money.” Oh, how familiar that sounds!

Lawrence's early travails were not only fiscal but philosophical. In addition to seeking the financial resources to support the institution, college leaders in our first seventy-five years also promoted a variety of programmatic initiatives designed to keep Lawrence viable. For much of the last century, for instance, the pre-collegiate preparatory program--what might be seen as the precursor to the present-day arts academy--had larger enrollments than the collegiate course, a circumstance that kept Lawrence in business, but which also detracted from the primacy of the college of liberal arts. And the fate of the conservatory, begun haltingly in the 1870s and then more formally in the 1890s, was also problematic; President Samuel Plantz recommended to the trustees in 1908 that if the school of music did not prosper, "it be closed and the building devoted to dormitory purposes or sold." Plantz tried other strategies as well. At the end of the last century and the beginning of this, for example, the college tacked a more practical, one might even say vocational, course of study on to the basic liberal arts and science program--offering such subjects as engineering, insurance, business law, commerce, business administration, and journalism--all of which were introduced, Plantz admitted, for purely pragmatic reasons in response to popular sentiments. "Among the changes in modern education," he wrote, "is the great drift from cultural courses to technical courses. Education is being looked upon as an exceedingly practical affair." Consequently, he let Lawrence drift with the tide, as it were, in order for it to compete with what he described as the "exceedingly utilitarian" educational program then being promulgated by institutions in the state system.

We do well to remember, then, that sustaining the college's existence from 1847 to the present has not been an easy achievement and that our 150 years have not been an uninterrupted ascent to our present situation. But despite the challenges and pitfalls, Lawrence never abandoned the essential core of liberal education first promulgated at our founding. Even Plantz remained committed to the college's primary identity and sought to enhance the liberal arts and science disciplines during his thirty-year tenure. But it was his successor who carried that aim even further. During his tenure in the 1920s and 1930s, President Henry Merritt Wriston dismantled the practical courses introduced by Plantz, promoted instead a more consistent liberal arts and science curriculum, and sought to rid the faculty of poorly trained professors and replace them with men and women with graduate training in the disciplines. Wriston, in fact, should be counted as one of the true heroes of Lawrence's history, as I believe it was his strong, unequivocal, and unapologetic articulation of the nature of a liberal college that firmly and forcefully set the college on the educational trajectory it follows to this day. And so, in this year of celebration, the legacy of Wriston is another source of pride.

If Wriston articulated liberal learning and the liberal college, Nathan Marsh Pusey gave Lawrence its most distinctive and enduring expression of that educational philosophy: Freshman Studies. Aside from a few years in the early 1970s when the program was abandoned as an all-college requirement and existed only in scattered iterations offered by several faculty members, Freshman Studies has been a defining characteristic of Lawrence for over fifty years. And while that course has evolved over the decades and will certainly continue to do so in the years ahead, we should celebrate its persistence, power, and influence as one of Lawrence's distinguishing attributes.

The sesquicentennial is an occasion to reflect on all of this and more--on the growth of the campus over the centuries, especially during the tenure of President Plantz; on the enhanced financial underpinnings of the college, begun by Plantz, bolstered by the consolidation with Downer in 1964, and extended by the college's recent successes in generating external support from alumni and others to further our academic mission; even on the long-gone traditions--the hat hunt at Downer, and the "best loved" senior women and spade and the spoon elections at Lawrence--that once informed and enlivened campus life.

But the sesquicentennial is also an occasion to look ahead, and to pay heed to the fact that just as getting from 1847 to the present was not without its trials, so too getting from our sesquicentennial to our bicentennial is likely to be fraught with perils as well. Lawrence today is a product of its past, of course, but Lawrence today is vital and vibrant chiefly because it has been able to hold fast to principles even as it has been willing to embody those principles in new practices. In today's climate for higher education, that ability and agility will be even more important. I do not want to suggest some apocalyptic vision here, but it is fair to note that prior Lawrence anniversaries did not occur at times when the collegiate enterprise was in such pervasive jeopardy. We celebrated a semi-centennial, to be sure, at about the time that the research university was gaining dominance in American higher education and when spokesmen for those institutions predicted the demise of the liberal arts college, when the president of Stanford said of American colleges that "the best will become universities, the others will return to their place as academies." Yet the prevailing mood at our previous anniversaries was predominantly a progressive faith that what we were is what we would be, that the path to the future was a straightforward extension of the path from our past.

Would that we could possess such buoyant optimism on the eve of a new millennium. Rather, we are faced with a plethora of dire warnings about the survivability of the undergraduate residential college of the liberal arts

and sciences, emanating from many quarters and citing many hazards. For some, the issue is technological; the advent of the information superhighway, the promulgation of long-distance learning, the availability in the near term of courses on the internet generated from a university in one part of the country and available to students in another, the presumed changes in the delivery systems of higher education made possible by the computer--all these are viewed as fundamental threats to the continuing viability of places like ours. Clearly, this condition is not going to abate and is surely to become more prevalent and pervasive in the years ahead, and Lawrence cannot afford to be indifferent either to the challenges or the opportunities information technologies present; rather, we need to devise ways to make optimum use of such resources to further our academic mission. That is a task we've tackled, but our efforts here cannot abate but must be redoubled. We need to travel the information superhighway, not sit idle or stalled at the on-ramp.

For others--and here we go again, déjà vu all over again--the issue is financial. Many institutions simply do not have the resources to support the costs associated with their programs and are devising a variety of coping strategies to deal with that challenge, a situation captured recently by a series of "Doodlesbury" cartoons, in which Walden College achieves fiscal health through enrollment increases resulting from a talent-blind admissions process and a phase-out of formal grading, on the one hand, and the abolition of tenure and the employment of gypsy faculty on the other. Lawrence is a long way from those conditions, to be sure, but attentiveness to achieving cost efficiencies on the one hand and to generating increased revenues on the other will remain a fact of life for the foreseeable future, in the *Lawrence 150* campaign and beyond.

For others, the issue is pragmatic; once again, there is high demand for practical, utilitarian, and vocational training programs, where the credential of the college degree is deemed more important than the education that leads to that degree. This is a recurring theme in American higher education, to be sure, dating from the nineteenth century into the twentieth, and while it is true that liberal arts colleges have weathered this storm in the past, we cannot simply assume that we will do so again now. To promulgate the continuation of the myth of the college as an ivory tower, divorced from and unrelated to the so-called "real world," may thus be seen as a recipe for disaster. Hence, we need to continue to find ways to connect liberal learning to the lives our graduates will lead in the twenty-first century.

We must, it seems to me, continue to explore and devise ways to extend our curricular offerings to reflect and examine the realities of national and global diversity, pluralism, and cosmopolitanism, of valuing the

experiences and expressions of those we might sometimes consider “the other.” Our duty as educators demands that we help prepare our students to be informed citizens of a changing world.

In addition, we will be well served by pressing ahead with developing more opportunities for students to translate their learning to their living, to use and apply their knowledge--in research, in performance, in internships--a process that has begun here but that deserves much more attention in the coming year and beyond.

Finally, for some, the issue facing the liberal arts college--indeed, the entire enterprise of higher education--is intellectual, a problem that is almost hydra-headed in its multiplicity. Much of this is by now familiar, if not already shopworn and tedious: the ongoing disputes within and beyond the academy relating to the so-called canon and culture wars--now joined by what are being called the “science wars”--highlighted by angry exchanges about multiculturalism, political correctness, and a variety of theoretical constructs, accompanied by the growing sense that much academic discourse has become so narrow and arcane that its relevance to any but the most ardent practitioner/believers is at best obscure, at worst lost.

Fin de siècle jeremiads abound, by now familiar in their mantra-like assaults. But there are new voices of alarm as well. We hear--or at least George Steiner hears--the whispers of a deep intuition “that the high noon of the arts, music, and possibly literature lies behind us in the West” and “that the chances for the reappearance of an Aeschylus, a Dante, a Michelangelo, a Shakespeare, or a Mozart are very slim.” And so, whither the humanities and the arts? We read, according to John Horgan, in *The End of Science: Facing the Limits of Knowledge in the Twilight of the Scientific Age*, that “the great era of scientific discovery is over,” that the big truths, the primordial truths about “the universe and our place in it” have already been mapped out, so that “further research may yield no more great revelations or revolutions, but only incremental, diminishing returns.” And so, whither the sciences? We learn from Donald Levine that the established disciplines in the social sciences “no longer fulfill the function of providing orienting frameworks for intellectual communities” and that he wonders what justification there may be for discrete departments of sociology, anthropology, history, and political science and what pedagogical or social good is advanced by their separate inquiries. And so, whither the social sciences? We receive from David Domrosch, surveying the current state of the scholarly book, the suggestion that many of them, in his terms, “are just journal articles on steroids.” And so, whither scholarship?

These charges and their companion pieces apply more to the state of the disciplines than to that of the liberal arts college *per se*, to be sure, but as we contemplate our future, we must recognize that these intellectual concerns exist and perforce affect how we conduct our teaching and learning mission. Simply put, given all of these current debates and disputes, we are hardly in a position to simply keep on keeping on, as if immune from them. Students and faculty in the humanities, the sciences, the social sciences, and the arts should pay heed to these charges and consider their implications for the construct and conduct of liberal education in the disciplines at Lawrence in the years ahead.

At this, our sesquicentennial, then, we must do more than celebrate our first 150 years. We must continue--and, I would suggest, in some cases we must begin--that self-examination about our mission and purposes, about our academic program and style, that will keep Lawrence vital and vibrant between now and its bicentennial. We do not want it said of Lawrence what one wag said of historians: "Lucky fellows, their future is all behind them." Nor do we want to be, as one critic once alleged about institutions such as ours, another plain-vanilla liberal arts college. Rather, we need to be a forward-looking and distinctive college and we must determine which attributes will best capture and convey Lawrence's special identity as we enter our next 150 years.

This is not a matter of creating the college anew, of shaking the dust of the past from our feet, of setting forth on some radically different venture. At our sesquicentennial, we will harken back to aspects of our history and traditions that are well and properly consigned to the past; we may remember them, but we certainly will not resurrect them. But we will also find in our history and traditions principles and practices that we might well recast and extend into the new century. We would, I think, celebrate the intentions of our Methodist founders to make Lawrence an egalitarian college where men and women were treated as equals. We would not, I think, wish to return to their practice of requiring members of the faculty to profess a belief in divine revelation.

We would, I think, applaud the sentiments expressed by Nelson Boynton, a student in 1854, who wrote an essay on intellectual freedom in which he argued that "the world is progressive and must advance; all efforts to bind the present and the future with the chains forged by the past" must fail and "the spirit of intellectual freedom will grow stronger day by day until the mind shall. . . become as untrammled as the free air of heaven." We would not, I think, applaud the fact that the faculty expelled Mr. Boynton from the college for holding such free-thinking and infidel views.

We would, I think, endorse the educational style President Steele reported in 1875, when he noted that students no longer learned mainly by rote recitations, but “are accustomed to co-operate with the teachers to make investigations for themselves, to consult a variety of authors, to examine specimens in nature and to bring the results of this kind up in class for examination, criticism, explanation, and discussion.” We would not, I think, wish to harken back to the limited curriculum in which these investigations occurred.

So while we may recall and reject some elements of our past, let us also recollect and reconfirm others. Let us find new ways to promote the egalitarian spirit that Lawrence proclaimed at its inception, to foster the independence of mind and belief in intellectual freedom expressed by Nelson Boynton, to extend the cooperative investigations of students with faculty and the examination, criticism, explanation, and discussion that they produce. Most of all, let us renew our collective commitment to that central and essential quality of a Lawrence education, the focus and emphasis on the intellectual, creative, and personal development of the individual student.

Here again, our traditions are compelling and informative. Reflecting on the import of liberal education to the student, President Wriston noted that it was not merely a matter of the acquisition and accumulation of courses and credits, information and knowledge. Rather, he argued, “The really vital question is, does [the student] have an individual insight into the issues presented to him, even scientific issues? It is not enough that something has been harvested from the instructor’s sowing and cultivation; has the student’s mind become fertile, so that what is sown may yield its increase? Has the student’s relation to his [or her] knowledge become a creative relationship? . . . Not all the knowing can substitute for the growth of a creative spirit, that flowering of the individual mind, which we may recognize, but cannot measure.” For the liberal college, he concluded, “The only conceivable objective, in dealing with students, is one which is individual to each. We must seek to help [the student] be a significant person. . . . To the regeneration of the individual student the liberal education is directed.”

That is an ideal and a purpose worth celebrating and extending as we observe our 150th year. Whether through advising, or tutorials, or independent studies, or senior capstone projects, or specially tailored projects in individual courses, or in other programs and approaches, students should actively seek and pursue, and the faculty and the curriculum should systematically enable and promote opportunities for that personal investment in creative and independent work, that flowering of the individual mind, that constitute the essential genius of our brand of liberal learning. This

educational style should be far more prominent and far less haphazard at Lawrence; it should be a style deliberately and creatively designed by faculty and seriously and persistently desired by students.

If we adopt and articulate that style of liberal learning, in college and conservatory, not as rhetoric but as reality, we will set liberal education at Lawrence apart and we will help assure that a Lawrence education will involve experiences that empower, inform, and enrich life both during the undergraduate years and beyond. Making the most of *that* Lawrence tradition will be, in the end, the most fitting and meaningful celebration of our sesquicentennial and the most effective and exciting projection of the best of Lawrence into the new century. Achieving that goal, I believe, is worthy of the dedication and commitment of all who care about Lawrence as we mark our first and anticipate our next 150 years.