

PROMISES TO KEEP: INAUGURAL ADDRESS
SUNDAY, MAY 7, 2006

Brothers and sisters, WE have promises to keep! These promises are deeply rooted in the history of Albright College, which we celebrate in this sesquicentennial year. These promises are also deeply rooted in the soil of our nation—a nation of immigrants and passionate pilgrims, like Jacob Albright, who came to this land of promise seeking freedom from tyranny and who founded small academies of learning all across our nation in the early days of our young republic. And finally, I believe that these promises are rooted in a shared vision of a learning community, a place of academic excellence certainly, but also a place of caring and compassion, of tolerance, of humane values, of enduring friendships, and of civil, rational discourse in a world where the forces of intolerance and irrationality threaten the existence of all that we hold most dear.

Congressman Gerlach, Commissioner Schwenk, Mayor McMahon, and other distinguished guests, members of our Board of Trustees, members of our faculty and staff, alumni, parents, students, family, and friends, it is an honor and a privilege to welcome you here on this glorious spring day in the 150th year of Albright College and as I begin my second year of service to this venerable American institution. We are honored by your presence, nourished by your friendship, and inspired by your support!

Albright College is but one story in the American story of higher education, and I am confident that each delegate of the educational institutions gathered here today has another story to tell. You represent the astonishing diversity of the more than 3000 colleges and universities across our nation, a diversity that is justly admired throughout the world. I am honored to welcome you today and to see so many old friends among you. I am deeply grateful for your presence.

I am also delighted to see so many former colleagues and old friends from across my peripatetic career—from

Ashland, Va, to Lexington, Va., to old Gettysburg. I am particularly pleased to see for the first time in many years my dissertation advisor, who helped me at long last to complete the requirements for my doctorate twenty years ago this month! Thank you so much for being here today.

I am blessed by the members of my family who are here today, including my brother from Georgia and the New Jersey branch of my Dillard relatives. And, of course, my own beloved Dottie and four of our children are here devoutly hoping that I don't talk too long!

I know my mother would love to be here this day, but she is surely very much with us in spirit. I owe her a great debt for much that I have achieved. And I know that in her now severely limited circumstances, one of her principal pleasures is telling folks that her son is the president of Albright College! I love you, Mom! Welcome to you all and thanks for being here.

From my very first days on campus last May, the faculty and staff of the college, and particularly my hard-working office staff, as well as many local alumni and friends of the College have warmly welcomed Dottie and me into the family and made this a very smooth transition. Dottie and I are also most grateful to our spirited and friendly students for their enthusiastic welcome, and we are especially pleased that some of them chose to participate in today's festivities. Thanks so much for being here and for sharing your talents with us on this special occasion!

As you well know, a gathering of this sort, results from many hours of careful planning and attention to thousands of details. Our trustees John Weidenhammer and Alma Lakin have co-chaired the inaugural planning committee with patience, vision, and good humor. I am deeply grateful to them and to every member of the committee, but I must also offer a special word of thanks to our own multi-talented artist-in-residence, Jeffrey Lentz, class of 1985, who served as chief of staff and creative director of the inauguration. My heartfelt thanks to you all!

Finally, I wish to offer my gratitude to all those who are *directly* responsible for my being here today. I refer, of course, to the extraordinary group of devoted individuals who serve so generously on our Board of Trustees and in particular to Sal Cutrona, our tireless chair. My thanks, in particular, to Karen Rightmire and John Baily, who co-chaired the presidential search committee, which so clearly made a brilliant choice! I am deeply grateful to all of the trustees for your warm welcome, good direction, and faithful support over the past twelve months.

In this Sesquicentennial Year, we recall and celebrate what we have been for the past 150 years. We celebrate the vision, the courage, and the perseverance of those who founded, re-founded, and nurtured this small college through wars, financial panics, schisms, relocations, and dramatic social change. We celebrate the many contributions of committed faculty and staff throughout our history and continuing today, we celebrate our students and alumni who were nurtured here and have gone forward to

become contributing members of society. And we celebrate generations of benefactors who have contributed their time, their talents, and their treasure to advance our mission. But we also look to the future, to what we can become in the years ahead, and here I think that all will agree: We have promises to keep!

To understand properly both the history and the promise of Albright College, we must recognize that it is a kind of love story, an affair of the heart. As Daniel Webster famously proclaimed in the Dartmouth College case of 1819, "*It is, Sir, as I have said, a small college. And, yet there are those who love it!*" (The Trustees of Dartmouth College v. Woodward (17 US 518 [1819])). We have been richly blessed by all those who have loved us for the past 150 years and continue to love this place today. Their continued devotion will be essential in the future.

Many of you will undoubtedly recall Henry Kissinger's cynical remark about academic disputes being so bitter because "the stakes are so low." Although there may be

times when this would appear to be true, I would argue just the opposite: the reason that our disagreements can, at times, become so passionate is because our ideals and our aspirations are so high. We know that we have promises to keep and sometimes the promises seem overwhelming, but to understand us properly, one must realize that beneath a sometimes crusty exterior lies a dewy idealism that is rooted in a lofty vision of a learning community.

Here again, we each have a different story to tell, but it is usually a story of conversion and transformation, a vision of the peaceable kingdom, of unity in diversity, of hope in the face of adversity, of light driving out darkness, of faith in the ultimate triumph of truth and justice, as inscribed on our College seal.

My own story of becoming an advocate for the liberal arts is certainly not unique, but it began with my undergraduate experience in a series of such improbable events that in retrospect it has always seemed providential. It is a complex story that is too lengthy to recite here, but in order

to give you a glimpse into the source of my passion for the work that I am privileged to do, I will—like Dickens in his *Christmas Carol*—invoke three spirits. In doing so, I will pay tribute to three dear friends who figure largely in my story and to whom I will always be deeply indebted. In the different ways that they touched my life, they exemplify the special nature of this community of learning that we serve and celebrate.

The first is a man named Bland Terry Jr., an alumnus of Washington and Lee University who died just this past February. In an act of breathtaking generosity, he befriended me when I was 17 years old and made it financially possible for me to attend Washington and Lee. Without Bland Terry's unsolicited—and initially anonymous—gift, I would not have had the life-changing experience that W&L proved to be. I know Bland was proud of me and felt that I had long-since repaid his confidence in me, but I welcome this opportunity to honor him and the spirit of philanthropy that he represents.

The second is the late Frank Johnson Gilliam, who was W&L's revered Emeritus Dean when I met him on a warm summer evening in 1967 at his graceful home adjacent to the campus in Lexington, Va. How I happened to be in Lexington, Va., on that summer's evening is where my story gets somewhat complicated, but suffice it to say that I had no notion that I would attend Washington and Lee when I met Dean Gilliam. By the end of that evening, he had convinced me that I would and waved away the apparent financial obstacles like a pesky fly. Dean Gilliam departed this life many years ago, but he, too, will always have my gratitude for seeing more in me than I saw in myself, for opening doors that I hardly knew existed, for expanding my sense of the possible. Although he played a unique role in my life, I now know that there are many, many others like him who have had—and continue to have—a transformational impact on the lives of countless young men and women. I am pleased to say that spirit of counsel and caring is alive and well today at Albright.

And, finally, I wish to honor the late James Graham Leyburn, former dean of Washington and Lee, founding chair of the department of sociology and anthropology, gifted musician, social historian, noted author, scholar, teacher, mentor, and friend. Dr. Leyburn was a revered figure at W&L, practically a living legend, but as a naïve freshman, I sought his counsel before I had time to be intimidated. The result was a friendship that nurtured me throughout my student days and continues to nourish me today. Although I have had the good fortune to be inspired by many fine teachers, Dr. Leyburn embodied for me the ideal of the scholar-teacher.

He was a living embodiment of the Socratic principle that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” One of his favorite concepts was “*arête*,” a word used by the ancient Greeks to mean virtue, excellence, effectiveness. It refers to those who make the best use of their capacities to do some good in the world. All who were inspired by Dr. Leyburn became devoted to an ideal that informs our daily lives with a restless aspiration for higher achievement.

This spirit, too, is alive at Albright where students are challenged to discover within themselves capacities that were previously hidden by setting and reaching goals that may have once seemed beyond their reach.

These three figures of such importance in my own story seem to me to embody three cornerstones of our mission. The first cornerstone is our commitment to academic excellence in a student-centered community. The second is our belief in the fundamentally social dimension of a liberal arts education, that this education is not a commodity to be taken off a shelf, but an experience that involves others, ideally in a residential context. Third, is our recognition that we are members of a larger community to which we must contribute and from which we must seek support. This last element includes our enduring gratitude for our fundamentally philanthropic nature, our recognition and celebration that we are stewards of a gift that has been lovingly handed down through generations and that we have a responsibility to pass this gift on to the next generation stronger and more secure than when we received

it. In all three of these dimensions, we have much to celebrate, but we also have promises to keep.

To fulfill the promise of our academic aspirations, we must continue to be inspired by the same restless spirit of “*arête*” that James Graham Leyburn instilled in his students. We must continually explore new pedagogies to meet the changing needs of each generation of students—mind, body, and spirit. We must develop and deepen our commitment to interdisciplinary education and find ways to engage all students in this “different way of thinking,” challenging them to cross boundaries, to escape from narrow provincialism, and to enhance their ability to work with others as team members and leaders. Finally, we must, and we will, secure the necessary resources to build our long-needed new science center, to renovate and further modernize our classrooms and laboratories, and to expand the facilities required to meet our educational objectives.

To fulfill the promise of our learning community we must provide a residential experience for our traditional day

students that supports and enhances their experience in the classroom. We must focus our resources on programs that enhance student learning by recognizing their different learning styles and developmental differences. For our accelerated degree as well as our graduate students we must explore ways to add value to their distinctive programs and assure them full membership in our extended community—as both students and alumni. We must also continue and deepen our commitment to service excellence to ensure that the experience of being at Albright is extraordinary in the ways we serve our students, our visitors, and one another. Here, too, we must secure resources needed to renovate, refurbish, and expand our residential and campus life facilities to better support our holistic vision of a learning community.

Finally, to keep the promise of our membership in a larger community, we must continue to seek ways to engage with the several communities to which we look for support. These include the Greater Reading area as well as our alumni across the country and throughout the world.

Since moving to Reading in 1928, Albright College has recognized that its fortunes have been inextricably tied to those of the larger community. We know that what's good for Reading is also good for Albright, and we thus applaud and seek to support the renaissance that is occurring in our hometown. Our principle avenue for supporting this renewal will be to pursue our mission with the same passionate commitment that has characterized the College for the past 150 years. In doing so, we currently contribute over \$40 million annually in direct economic impact, provide full and part-time jobs for over 500 tax-paying citizens, offer a broad array of cultural, educational, and athletic events, and provide thousands of hours in volunteer service to the community. In addition, we provide expert resources in areas from government service to environmental protection, from translation services to local firefighters, from tutoring of elementary children to our highly regarded pre-school learning center. Perhaps most importantly, we provide a forum for civil discourse on issues of pressing importance in our time. Thus, while we

remain committed to being a vital economic and cultural resource for the local community, we also endorse Peg Schumo's recent declaration that "what's good for Albright College is good for Berks County."

In that spirit, we would hope that the visionary leaders who are reshaping the future of our community would ask not only what Albright can do for Greater Reading but what can Greater Reading do for Albright!

I am delighted to welcome the alumni who have chosen to be here today. I asked that this inaugural weekend be scheduled to coincide with our annual alumni reunions in order to make clear my intentions to embrace the more than 16,000 alumni of Albright College and welcome them into a creative partnership to advance their alma mater. It is quite clear that this is a key to our future success. Here too we have promises to keep, and we will work hard to engage the energies and talents of our alumni so that they can lend their support more confidently and effectively to the work before us.

In closing I wish to offer a few thoughts on the continuing value of our relationship to the United Methodist Church. Those of you who know our history know that we are a Methodist-related college by “adoption,” so to speak, resulting from the merger of the Evangelical United Brethren Church and the Methodist Church in 1968. It is through the Evangelical United Brethren Church that Albright traces its founding back to leaders of the Evangelical Association founded in the eighteenth century by Jacob Albright.

Today, Albright College is a multi-faith community that strives to be an accepting place for persons of all faiths or persons who claim no faith tradition at all. We do not have, nor do we wish to have any sort of faith-based litmus test for full membership in our community. Nevertheless, we continue to affirm our relationship with the United Methodist Church and continue to proclaim our commitment to a holistic educational philosophy—mind, body, and spirit.

As we make this new beginning together, I would suggest that examining the meaning of that relationship and that commitment could yield fruitful dialogue. It is often noted that ours is a special community, that there is a spirit of caring and friendliness that is genuine and deeply rooted in our history. I noted this spirit from my first introduction to Albright and have experienced it daily throughout the past year. There may be more than one source for this special warmth, but surely the taproot can be traced back to the piety of our founders. I believe that the relationship between that piety and the caring spirit that we enjoy today is well described in one of my favorite passages from the late, great C.S. Lewis, from his sermon “The Weight of Glory”:

“It is,” Lewis wrote, “a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a

nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours.”

By invoking such an exalted vision of how humans should properly view one another, I sincerely hope that no one will accuse me of thinking that Christians are somehow immune to all the failings so fully documented in the historical record and in our own daily experience. Falling short of our ideals, however, would seem to be a poor reason for abandoning them. Indeed, this is why we will always have promises to keep. As we renew our commitments to the animating ideals of our College, it would seem appropriate

to recall the central sources of strength and virtue, of *arête*, that animated our founders. I would suggest that this source, this spirit, continues to animate us today and that we neglect it at great risk.

I am confident that if we nurture the spirit that inspired the zeal of Jacob Albright and the founders of our college, we will fulfill the promises that are rooted in our long history and look back on this Sesquicentennial year as a watershed. I am deeply honored to have been called to serve Albright College at this historic moment, and I embrace with joy the challenges that we face knowing that I am not alone but joined by a host of others who are eager to love this place forward into a new chapter in which we will achieve an excellence uniquely our own. Brothers and Sisters, we have promises to keep!

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