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UA3/8/10 Inaugural Address

Thomas Meredith
Western Kentucky University

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Inaugural Address

PRESIDENT THOMAS C. MEREDITH

WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

APRIL 14, 1989

The President



Dr. Thomas C. Meredith was named the eighth president of Western Kentucky University on August 5, 1988. He previously served as vice chancellor for executive affairs at the University of Mississippi.

Dr. Meredith served ten years with the Board of Trustees of State Institutions of Higher Learning, Mississippi's governing body for its eight state universities, as the associate director for programs and planning. Dr. Meredith was instrumental in the development and implementation of numerous qualitative changes in higher education in Mississippi. Among those changes were new standards in teacher education and standards for admissions to the universities.

A native of Owensboro, Dr. Meredith earned the B.A. degree in social studies, with an emphasis in history, from Kentucky Wesleyan College in 1963. He received the M.A. degree in education administration and supervision from Western Kentucky University in 1966 and was awarded the Ed.D. degree in administration and supervision with an emphasis in secondary and higher education from the University of Mississippi in 1971.

The University

Western Kentucky University was established in 1906 by the Kentucky General Assembly and stands today as a center of learning supported by the Commonwealth of Kentucky. Students receive general and specialized higher education at the undergraduate and graduate levels through the university's four undergraduate colleges and the graduate college.

Western Kentucky University reaffirms the institutional commitment to the educational ideals declared by Dr. Henry Hardin Cherry, its first president: *to be a live school and to impart to its students a burning zeal to do and to be something; to let the reputation of the school be sustained by real merit; to lead the student to understand that a broad and liberal education is essential to the highest degree of success in any endeavor of life.*

Inaugural Address

Chairman Iracane, Chancellor Turner, members of the Board of Regents, faculty, staff, students, visitors and friends of Western.

I stand before you honored at the thought of having the opportunity to be inaugurated today as the eighth president of this great university. I am humbled by the faith and confidence shown in me by this dedicated Board of Regents. As I have read of the monumental accomplishments by my predecessors in this position, I am inspired to give my all to make sure that I don't let them down or to let down the thousands of alumni who have left this institution since its beginning.

I want to pause for just a moment to say thank you to Susan's parents—Charles and Betty Steen—for their continued faith and support. I also want to express more thanks than I can put into words to my mother who always kept me heading in the right direction. To my wife Susan and my sons Mark and Matt, I thank you for your flexibility and your understanding and your love. I want to thank all of you for being here, especially those of you who are long-time friends who have traveled far to be with me today.

I want to express a special appreciation to Dr. Lowell Harrison, retired professor of history, for his definitive book on the history of Western. It helped me to better understand the roots of this university today.

From its creation in 1906, Dr. Cherry led this institution for 31 years with an inspired determination to make it more than anyone expected that it could be; to make it a leader in higher education in this state and in this nation; and, most importantly, to provide an avenue for education for deserving men and women of this great state. He was successful in his endeavor.

When the state established this institution as the Western Kentucky State Normal School, the Bowling Green Business University was separated from the Southern Normal School and was declared to be a separate institution, working in close harmony with the new normal school. The Bowling Green Business

University, or B.U. as it was affectionately known, had its own separate, illustrious reputation until the time of its reunion with Western Kentucky State Teachers College in 1963.

Many great leaders have succeeded Dr. Cherry, and they have all adhered to the basic standards under which he established this institution. Dr. Paul L. Garrett became Western's second president and, in the tradition of long tenure set by Dr. Cherry, served as president of Western for 18 years. He was followed by Dr. Kelly Thompson who served for 14 years and Dr. Dero Downing who served for 10. Dr. John Minton became interim president and was declared president after serving for almost a year. He was followed by Dr. Don Zacharias who served this institution for 6 years. Dr. Kern Alexander served as this institution's chief executive officer for two and a half years and Dr. Paul Cook served an admirable stint as an interim President. And although I notice with some apprehension that the terms of the Presidents of Western over the years have consistently gotten shorter, I hope to reverse that trend.

As a new president, one would have to be somewhat suspect to assume this role, knowing that three former presidents and one interim president not only live in Bowling Green, but are all still associated with the University. I hasten to tell you that, to the man, no one has been more supportive of my presidency than each of these gentlemen. And for that, I want to publicly say "thank you."

At this institution we brag about the spirit of Western. And there are many descriptions of that spirit, and they all fit. And I'm sure you all notice the inscription on our seal which says "The Spirit Makes the Master."

President Kelly Thompson tells the story of the day that President Cherry took him to the front steps by which we entered this auditorium and pointing to the hills said, "Look as far as you can see and describe it to me." Dr. Thompson eagerly replied, "I see the horizon very clearly with the hills meeting the sky and the beautiful countryside between the horizon and the campus." And Dr. Cherry said, "You must see farther than that. You must see beyond those hills, beyond that horizon, for beyond are Kentucky boys and girls desperately in need of education. Remember that you must always see farther than you can see."

The spirit is also evidenced by the fact that large numbers of faculty and staff have been at this institution for long periods of time. They have stayed not because it was an undemanding sanctuary, but because of that special spirit that existed then and exist now—the spirit that says, give a little more than is required, because not only will the university benefit and the students benefit, but you will benefit inside.

Dr. Cherry had a well-known story regarding filling an apple bucket in his father's orchard. You don't fill the bucket to the rim, his father said. You fill it above the rim. You always give extra measure. He said this is a lesson you can use in all aspects of your life.

That spirit is also demonstrated through the genuine caring that exists here among the faculty, staff, and students. There is a desire for all to be successful. My theme for our students, and one that I share with incoming freshmen, was obtained from Dr. William Glasser, a noted author and psychologist from California. That theme says that at Western we will do everything possible to help you be successful. Our job is not to fail you but to help you succeed. We will use all of our resources; we will take whatever time necessary to assist you in getting your degree. However, if you choose to fail, it will be out of our hands.

I want our reputation to spread far and wide that, if you go to college at Western, you have to work hard for your degree. There are no gifts, but they care about you, and they will work with you every step of the way to help you be successful.

The major strength of this University is its *strong, competent, talented, and caring faculty*. That strength is enhanced and supported by a dedicated staff that is unsurpassed. Because our faculty and staff carry that Western spirit and impart it to our students and visitors, it continues to survive.

What is the purpose of Western? Our first purpose to me is to prepare our students to be competitive, productive members of society. Very simple. We must instill in them a desire to make this world in which we live a better place to be not only through the use of their talent and knowledge, but through humaneness and caring.

We must instill in our students the desire to continue to learn after they have left our guidance and leadership. An old philosopher once said that our job

is simply to touch the fire to the wick of learning.

We must inspire each of our students to reach his or her full potential.

And we can accomplish all of this through excellence in teaching and by being conscious of and attentive to how we treat those who have chosen us to prepare them for life. Even though we may be relentless in adhering to our academic standards, we must demonstrate caring and concern. We must be good listeners, we must not be afraid to stand tall for what is right, for our every action sets the standard for the future. Our actions will be mimicked by those we teach.

Teaching must be our real strength. It always has been and it continues today.

Herman Lee Donovan was officially the first enrollee in Western Kentucky State Normal School. He later became the President of Eastern Kentucky University and the University of Kentucky. But upon his retirement, he said, "I've never seen in any school such a passion for learning as I found on the campus of Western and teachers so anxious to serve students. President Cherry and a faculty of devoted, consecrated teachers called out the best in students."

The importance of faculty in teaching was stressed by A. Bartlett Giamatti in his inaugural address at Yale in 1978: "I believe the faculty is at the heart of this place. And I believe that at the heart of the faculty in a place like Yale is the teaching function. All the research we want to do, all the obligations we must carry as faculty are in some sense nurtured by and are versions of that first calling, which is to teach our students. We want always to do more, but we can never do less, nor can we ever forget that." Little did we know that such wise words regarding the importance of teaching would lead to the position of Commissioner of Professional Baseball.

Although we have no aspirations to be a comprehensive research university, we must be engaged in research if for no other reason than to enhance our primary function of teaching.

Some of our faculty are engaged in research that is pushing against the boundaries of existing knowledge. They will be recognized and rewarded. Others are engaged in finding new ways to apply existing knowledge. That is crucial, and they, too, will be rewarded. If one is going to be a part of the faculty at a university, then one must be alive and involved in one's

discipline and not just be a user. We must be engaged in finding ways to improve society.

The third leg of the university's triad, service, is critical, as we apply what we teach and study to the real world and then bring the real world into the classroom.

The number of college graduates in our society is still too low. This places an ever greater burden on those who are graduates. They must be broadly educated, and they must be the ones to perpetuate and further develop an appreciation for the cultural side of our society, particularly in the arts. Western is now in the process of restructuring its general educational requirements in a way that is intended to help develop this well-rounded individual.

We must provide experiences and relationships that will prepare our graduates to operate with confidence in a diversified world. This can be accomplished through having a diversified faculty, staff, and student body—diverse in terms of race, sex, place of birth, and educational attainment. We will increase the opportunities for these experiences at Western.

What about the future of Western? As I looked in the dictionary to see the meaning of the word inauguration, it referred to a beginning and a new start. And we all know that. But as I looked at the root of that word and saw the word augur—the root means foretelling, an omen, forecasting, to predict. Allow me to talk for just a few minutes about where Western is going.

Western must maintain and enhance its reputation that no one does a better job in the classroom than we do. We will begin planning an instructional resource center that will provide the kind of professional support for our faculty that will enable them to be even better. We will develop more widespread avenues for recognition of excellence in teaching.

The students being admitted to Western are the best in this institution's history, and the quality increases with each passing year. We must continue to increase the demands in our classrooms to meet this wonderful challenge. Students will rise to meet our expectations, particularly if caring accompanies the expectations.

We must increase the research and professional activity within our various disciplines. Support and recognition must be improved for activities in these

areas as well. And they will.

One of Western's expanded functions in the future will revolve around service. We will use our collective expertise to be of assistance to society. We will do this through a greatly expanded role in continuing education activities.

We will put in place an economic development center that will have all of our expertise conveniently and efficiently accessible to small business, industry, farmers, school systems, and potential investors in this state. The long-range impact on this region and the entire state will be beyond what we now envision. With the full development of this concept, we can and will make a difference in Kentucky.

Repeated changes in administration can lead to confusion among faculty regarding avenues for success. It is time to establish standards from the departmental level through the institutional level that will transcend changes—standards that will be clear, acceptable, and attainable.

In a few short years the number of retiring faculty members will increase dramatically at Western and at other institutions across this country. Our professional ranks will be depleted very quickly. At the same time, we are expected to experience a new enrollment explosion. We must have in place a plan to be competitive for the small number of new faculty members that will be available. We are working on that plan now.

As the demand for the limited resources provided for higher education increases, it will be incumbent upon our institution to establish clearer priorities among its many activities. And we will.

I cannot let the mention of resources pass without stating the critical need for improvement in faculty and staff salaries at this institution and at all the institutions in Kentucky.

The continued development of our support staff and supervisory staff is critical and crucial to the success of this university. We will begin planning programs that will allow our staff to improve themselves for promotion. We will also begin planning programs to enhance the communication and administrative skills of those with supervisory responsibilities.

We will continue to develop those international connections which allow our faculty and students to be involved in meaningful experiences abroad.

We will maintain our commitment to our off-campus centers. Their importance continues to grow.

And we will continue to work with the Council on Higher Education to make higher education more accessible to the citizens of this state.

As our population of nontraditional students increases repeatedly, we must be prepared to meet their special needs. They now comprise 32 percent of our enrollment. I have just received a report from a special committee I commissioned to study this very issue. We will make the necessary adjustments.

We are located in the fastest growing area of Kentucky. The population of Bowling Green and Warren County could possibly double in the next 25 years. The impact on this institution, which has already grown 25 percent in the last 5 years, may be phenomenal. We must be prepared to meet this challenge. We are excited about our partnership with Bowling Green, our region, and this state as we meet the challenges and opportunities of growth. We must not only meet those needs, we must make a difference.

We must, however, remain committed to our theme of not sacrificing quality for quantity.

We will initiate new procedures for determining just how well we prepare our students. No one knows that answer better than our graduates and their employers. We will ask them. The prelude to that process is to clearly identify what we are trying to accomplish in the first place.

I have long believed that the key to success is confidence and that one has confidence by being prepared for the challenge. It is our job, our opportunity, to adequately prepare those who have come to us for that purpose.

Soon we will initiate a private fund-raising effort. We can no longer depend on adequate state support to help us be competitive, to enable us to provide the kinds of experiences our students deserve, to provide the service our state needs, and to attract and retain enough qualified faculty. Western alumni and friends have always been generous to this institution because of their love for and belief in her. The time has now come for that generosity to expand. The golden opportunities facing this great university can and must be addressed through the enabling support of those who believe in Western Kentucky University and those who harbor that deep abiding love for the institution on the Hill.

President Dero Downing pointed out to me a saying on a large mural in the Margie Helm Library,

"Back of the deed was the doer, back of the doer, the dream." We will continue to dream, and we will continue to be successful.

I know that Western is destined to be an even greater university than it is today. This dedicated and supportive Board of Regents is committed to that end. Those who now labor furiously without concern for the clock in Student Affairs, Administrative Affairs, Business Affairs, and Academic Affairs are already convinced that we are moving forward rapidly. Our competent and caring faculty is making it happen, and our students and alumni are feeling it happen.

As I continue my tenure as the President of Western, I bear in mind a cross-stitched saying that my wife did for me a number of years ago. It serves as a guiding force for my daily activities. Let me share that with you:

"This is the beginning of a new day. God has given me this day to use as I will. I can waste it or use it for good. What I do today is important, because I am exchanging a day of my life for it. When tomorrow comes, this day will be gone forever, leaving in its place something that I have traded for it. I want it to be gain, not loss; good, not evil; success, not failure, in order that I shall not regret the price I paid for it."

From what I have observed, I believe this philosophy guides many at Western already.

Let us commit ourselves anew to our noble profession of higher education. Let us commit our resources, our time, our energy, and expertise at an even higher level for the future. None of us will ever regret the price we pay.

Thank you.

