

INAUGURATION CONVOCATION ADDRESS
Friday, October 25, 2002
Skinner Memorial Chapel

Robert A. Oden Jr.

“Carleton and the Liberal Arts:
Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow”

My thesis this morning is notably uncomplex. It is that the Carleton of today and tomorrow has been shaped by the Carleton of yesterday, that those values and attributes we most treasure and on which we are going to concentrate in the years ahead are precisely those we owe to the wisdom and foresight of our predecessors. We are going to pay attention to Carleton's history not because we fear that ignoring this history would condemn us to repeating it, but rather because we owe so much to our predecessors and because the almost eerie prescience of a century and a half of Carleton faculty, students, staff, trustees, and others has shaped a college unlike others. Our predecessors knew what they were about.

What are some of the foundational and continuing characteristics of Carleton, and how do we work with and upon these in shaping the Carleton of the future?

First and ever foremost has been an insistence upon the perdurable value of the liberal arts and upon this as a college where teaching the liberal arts is our singular mission. That is not as obvious as it sounds. It is worth recalling how distinctive is the American tradition of teaching the liberal arts.

Almost alone in the world, we make the astonishing claim that four years devoted to a variety of disciplines before our students turn to professional training are worth the time. And if the time, then, a fortiori, worth the money: Much that we do requires funding, to be sure, but money is replaceable, while time is not.

Almost everywhere else in the world, and at a great many American colleges and universities, students begin their professional training much earlier than we do. Almost everywhere else in the world, if an 18-year-old student knows that she wishes to become a physician, she begins some kind of medical school study immediately. We at Carleton join those teaching and learning at liberal arts colleges in arguing for a different and a better route. And what I've just said geographically can also be said chronologically, for throughout the history of American liberal arts curricula, arguments have been formulated and essayed again and again against this curriculum.

Our founders and their successors throughout Carleton's proud history have insisted upon our adherence to the liberal arts. Thus, the College's fifth annual catalog, dated December 1872, proclaimed that “it is the aim of the Board of Trustees and of the Faculty, to provide an education liberal and

thorough, embracing moral culture as well as mental discipline.” Ninety years later, in 1962, the sole Carleton graduate to become the College’s president, John William Nason, accented, in his inauguration remarks, his belief in “liberal or liberating arts.”

But why, and what? What does a liberal arts curriculum yield, and why did our founders insist upon its primacy? Many others, over the centuries, have described the role played by a liberal arts curriculum in strengthening mental discipline, in transforming passive training into active educating, in teaching us how to learn and how to welcome rather than to fear new ideas, in liberating us from the constraints of narrow and provincial thinking, in helping us to lead generous and interesting lives.

To these and other worthy defenses of the liberal arts, I would add some of my own answers. First, we study the liberal arts because we know that such study allows us to put things into context. I once said to Fay Vincent, former commissioner of Major League Baseball (the last true commissioner), former Carleton trustee, and a man I am proud to call a friend, something like the following: “Fay, you have worked with the SEC, you have helped to run leading American corporations, as baseball commissioner you granted medical benefits and pensions to the veterans of the Negro Leagues. How does one person do so many different tasks so well?” Fay’s answer was, “Because I studied history at Williams.”

We study the liberal arts because broad and subtle study, filled as it is with a lively sense of ambiguity, means that we can put the rest of our lives into a richer and fuller context. A liberally educated architect literally does

this, sensing the context of shapes and spaces as one might not without such an education. We can say the same of a liberally educated teacher or businessperson or attorney.

Another formulation of what the liberal arts are all about resulted from hours of conversation with a former colleague at Dartmouth College: a liberal arts education is the beginning of thinking seriously about what it means to live a worthwhile life. Put rather differently, and this is quite personal, much of what matters most in life is what we can and do avoid talking about. The demands of the moment, and they are considerable, mean that we can go days or weeks or more without talking about the bases of our deepest convictions, about love, friendship, integrity, our obligations as free citizens. We cannot and do not avoid these and similar questions here at Carleton. We rather join Robert Frost in his conviction that college is where “young people are having it out with themselves about God and man and sociology and poetry.” At Carleton, we rehearse and review and refine questions about what matters most in life because we think these questions are interesting in and of themselves, are worth pursuing even in the absence of any immediately obvious utilitarian benefit. We rehearse and review and refine these questions because we are a liberal arts college. Those who founded and who have shaped Carleton insisted upon this. So do we.

Whatever our definition of a liberal arts education, the doing of it takes time. And time—as Carleton’s board chair, Ranny Riecker, said to me during a walk last summer—may be the world’s last luxury. It is also a necessity here at Carleton. We can do all we want and need to do at a pace that allows for the kind of reflection and contem-

plation required to think seriously about what it means to live a worthwhile life. As I spoke about time as a quality and not just a quantity this summer before a group of Carleton graduates, someone reminded me of something that Garrison Keillor said shortly after he moved to New York City: that one could take a taxi or a bus or the subway or walk, but in the end, it did not matter much, since one got to his destination in Manhattan in about the same amount of time. A liberal arts education worthy of the name demands some walking.

I am not talking about our all lapsing into permanent leisure. Nor am I saying that we should not always expect the best of our students and ourselves. I am saying that we can and will shape here a liberal arts education that is mindful of time’s gifts and time’s demands. Simply defining this as a challenge goes a long way toward helping us to face the challenge. Making the most of time, and not allowing time rather to make the most of us, is our challenge.

Among those characteristics upon which those who came before us have insisted and upon which we will continue to insist is the conviction that a liberal arts education of the first order is defined by and filled with an encounter with difference. The encounter with difference, pluralism, a recognition that we are all across the globe in this together—these and similar phrases often are fitted in under the rubric of *diversity*. There is little wrong with this term, and it has a proud history. But it is precisely our regard for diversity that suggests to me that we need continually to define and redefine the notion and to search for and find new vocabulary to describe something that so matters to us.

Whatever fresh vocabulary we choose, why does the encounter with difference matter to us? Because it is fashionable? Because most speakers in contexts like this one feel a political need to speak about pluralism and the like, whatever their convictions? The answer to both questions is no. Pluralism, an awareness of other cultures and other contexts, is central to how a liberal arts education has long been defined at Carleton. Here are some of the reasons why. We stand firmly and proudly with our predecessors in defending an education characterized by encounters with difference because:

- Our students will live and work in a world encountering and embracing differences, and we are engaged in helping our students learn how to live the rest of their lives.
- The free and uncensored play of ideas and opinions and arguments and positions is central to the fabric of a liberal arts education, and a college peopled by those representing and trying out such ideas and opinions and arguments is finer for the presence of these people.
- We know, with Robert Kagan, author of *In over Our Heads*, that “the single greatest source of growth and development is the experience of difference, discrepancy, anomaly.” This experience comes in all kinds of firsthand and secondhand forms, but one form is immediately encountering differences personified.
- We feel a moral commitment to a variety of underrepresented groups—first-generation college students, people from rural and other settings, American minorities, international students and faculty—and we see acting upon this moral commit-

ment among our tasks. I am speaking here chiefly of students, but also of faculty. The two go together, since a widely representative faculty attracts a widely representative group of students.

- Pluralism and wide representation are significant factors in the college choice of the world's most talented students.
- Carleton cannot claim to be a college of the first order unless we are a college characterized by our encounters with difference.
- It is timely. Right now, and with a particular eye to significant judicial decisions ahead, defending what is added to a college by diversity and would be sadly and irretrievably missing in its absence is of paramount importance as rarely before in the history of American education.

Though justifications for the experience of difference have themselves differed over the past century and a half, the fact of this experience has played a long role here at Carleton. The initial two Carleton students were admirably gender representative: one woman and one man—who, speaking of Carleton traditions, later married one another. Though it was not until 1949 that the first African American graduated from the College, two African Americans enrolled in Carleton's Academy before the close of the 19th century.

A key to the prominence of the international at the College was a generous grant from the Frank B. Kellogg Foundation in International Relations, which allowed our curriculum to become nationally known for its offerings in international relations. That curriculum, in turn, clearly played a role in Carleton's grad-

uating so many whose careers were devoted to diplomacy and foreign service. Carleton established an Asian studies program in 1964, and began to expand opportunities for off-campus study.

Nor did our concern for matters international begin only in recent decades; nearly 80 years ago, Watts Pye from the Class of 1903 wrote the following in a letter to President Cowling:

The time has come when we Americans must be awakened as we have never been in the past to our international responsibilities, and it will be a great thing in the life of the men and women of Carleton to have been associated with a college which is committed permanently to the work of cultivating international friendship and good will. The world is too much of a neighborhood and the nations are living too closely together as neighbors to make it possible for anyone to live unto himself.

So, too, at Carleton we have long prized fluency in languages other than those we learned early in life. Attaining fluency in another language is clearly the best way to encounter and enter fully into a different world.

Here, in Skinner Memorial Chapel, on October 11, we held a panel called "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Perspectives on Tolerance and Diversity," a convocation panel that was markedly free of bitterness and as markedly open and fair in assessing Carleton's successes and failures in these and other regards. We are a human institution, and we are thereby an imperfect institution. But we do not ignore our imperfections in welcoming tolerance and pluralism and in realizing fully their demands and their promise.

It is a convention—as it ought to be—to insist upon freedom of speech and expression throughout American life and to place a particular insistence upon academic freedom in the academy. Carleton has acted upon this insistence from the beginning. In 1872 Carleton announced in its catalog that it was "under no ecclesiastical control, nor . . . sectarian in any of its methods or influences." There is no evidence of sectarian or ecclesiastical control throughout our history.

Following the Scopes trial in Tennessee, a Baptist minister from Minneapolis attacked President Donald Cowling, the trustees, and the faculty for teaching the theory of evolution. When President Cowling defended the faculty, they thanked him, noting that "neither you nor anyone else in authority at Carleton has even suggested that a member of the faculty teach anything which his scientific training, his best insight and his conscience did not dictate." President Laurence McKinley Gould, in the context of threats from Senator Joseph McCarthy, spoke loudly and clearly on behalf of academic freedom. President Gould argued in his inaugural address that "at long last all definitions of colleges and education end in the simple concept that it is the truth and only the truth that will make men free."

When the new library was dedicated in 1956, Archibald MacLeish, poet, professor, and former librarian of Congress, marked the moment with the following declaration:

Young men and women will find defenses for freedom of the mind in this place by finding here what freedom of the mind can mean. And the whole country will know that one more bulwark has been raised against ignorance and bigotry and fear: a tower which will not yield.

Academic freedom is a phrase that is easy to rehearse. Living academic freedom is far more demanding. It means that we entertain for and in ourselves ideas and arguments far different from those we have long found comfortable. It means that we listen with care and respect to ideas and arguments we are tempted to reject upon hearing them. It means that the unhappy custom at many colleges and universities of shouting down or preventing the appearance of speakers known for their controversial views is a custom that does not obtain at Carleton. And it means that we are acutely attuned to the fashions of the moment, to what is and is not correct at the moment, and are as acutely aware of our responsibility to question such fashions.

Carleton long has held to, and we will continue to adhere to, our obligation to make a Carleton education available to everyone insofar as this is possible. Put in the language of admissions and financial aid: We use our precious financial aid dollars to provide access. We think there are few higher goals than saying to potential applicants for whom a Carleton education remains a distant dream in the absence of financial aid, "We can remove the distance. We can fulfill that dream." Carleton's using its financial aid funds to provide access is more distinctive than many may realize; we here depart from what is becoming the norm across the nation. In so acting, we are again acting in accord with Carleton history, and we are acting on the basis of moral conviction. Naturally, we wish we had more financial aid endowment, and, as naturally, we will work to build just this in the years ahead. But what matters most is how we spend our financial aid funds. We spend these funds to provide access to a Carleton

education that would otherwise remain inaccessible to many.

Continuing to plumb Carleton's history and present, let me move to a more distinctive characteristic still: our historical and continuing stewardship of our campus and our land and of the earth. Some weeks ago, I read to some students several chapters from Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*, and I remind all here today that the location of much of Leopold's work is but a few hours east of here, north of Madison, Wisconsin. Aldo Leopold, whom I have regarded for decades as our finest environmental writer and steward, wrote of our obligations to the earth long decades before the initial Earth Day. Leopold begins *A Sand County Almanac* with these words: "There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot. These essays are the delights and dilemmas of one who cannot." Leopold also wrote, "That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is the extension of ethics."

What, aside from our proximity to Sand County, has this to do with Carleton? It is this: We long have joined Leopold in our inability to live without wild things. The College's history abounds in evidence of this, beginning with statements made by Horace Goodhue, the Dartmouth graduate who was our first faculty member and later dean of the faculty and a trustee, and continuing through the inauguration of President Sallmon, who insisted in 1903 that his inauguration be accompanied by the planting of 24 elms on campus.

President Donald Cowling devoted long weeks and months to traveling coast to coast

to remind the country of the education to be had at Carleton, but he did something at least as important here in Northfield. As the memorial rock that greets me and many others most days when we run or walk through the Lower Arboretum reminds us, Donald Cowling succeeded in persuading others that establishing a large tract of land for an arboretum was not an irresponsible act. President Cowling did not act alone. Already in 1894 a faculty committee had voted to study the idea of an arboretum. Professor Harvey Stork kept alive and furthered the idea. D. Blake Stewart, "Stewsie," superintendent of buildings and grounds from 1920 to 1971, supervised the transformation of farm land into arboretum and rescued wild flowers, trees, and ferns for transplanting. Stewsie's hand is evident wherever there is green on and around the campus—the landscaping around Leighton Hall, for example, and where the campus falls off to the west across from the football stadium. Still, it was President Cowling who bore the brunt of the criticism for so dedicating so much land, and there were those who thought that in championing an arboretum at Carleton, the man had lost his grip. May we all suffer such moments of imbalance.

We are incomparably the richer because of what President Cowling and Stewsie and many others, up to and including Professor Emeritus Ed Buchwald, Professor Mark McKone, Myles Bakke, and countless other staff members and students have done for us in guarding this land and in returning parts of it to the kind of long-grass prairie that once defined much of the Upper Midwest. I never run past the memorial stone near the southern entrance to the Lower Arb—and I take this route most days—without pausing and uttering a silent prayer of gratitude to

President Cowling and Stewsie and their successors. I invite you to join me in according to them and others the respect and gratitude we owe to them.

Nor does our stewardship of the earth cease with the borders of the arboreta or the borders of the campus. We have a particular obligation to shape the spaces and buildings here into those in which and from which we learn the most. The spaces and shapes that surround us here and far beyond are not a pleasing addition to a liberal arts education; they are rather part of what a liberal arts education demands of us.

Another kind of stewardship has long defined Carleton: the engagement and support of Carleton graduates and families for the College. Here in Skinner Chapel, at our opening convocation, I asked all students to look about the chapel and to note the faculty and staff members who had supported them and who made possible a Carleton education. I then reminded the students that there were thousands of other faces, faces upon which they were not gazing, faces of Carleton graduates and others across the globe who also were supporting them, who also were responsible for their Carleton education. If we have much in which to take pride at Carleton, in little can we take such honest and continual pride as in the Carleton tradition of supporting the work of the College.

Carleton is not all about buildings or endowments. Carleton is rather all about people. But the people who are Carleton need support—talented students and faculty and staff need and depend upon funding. We depend upon and are immensely grateful to the ongoing support and engagement of our

graduates. Singular steps were taken in enlisting the support of our graduates by Presidents Cowling and Gould. Still, no one in Carleton history has done more to advance the tradition than President Steve Lewis, and this is but one of the many ways in which we are abundantly grateful to him.

Finally, let me say something about intellectual curiosity. This is what first drew me to this great college, and this is what we most prize in our students, faculty, and staff. I would not trade all the world's standardized test scores or testimonies to academic achievement for evidence of a hunger to learn. The accord we grant to intellectual curiosity is also firmly rooted in our history. Laurence McKinley Gould was a Carleton professor and president, but in addition to these proud titles and before he possessed either, he was an explorer—an explorer of the Arctic, to be sure, a man who wrote a volume entitled simply *Cold*, and the true founder of our Department of Geology, but also an explorer of the mind and of the heart. We might otherwise label that pioneering spirit *intellectual curiosity*.

If life is too short for so much we wish to do, it is most especially too short for all we wish to explore. Another book worth reading and re-reading, another language to be learned, another theoretical construct to come to understand, another experiment, another theorem, another century's history from yet another country—it is the hunger, the aching to explore these that most defines Carleton. Our commitment to intellectual curiosity is also what requires all of us on the faculty to remain engaged scholars. Our mission is teaching, but we know that we cannot feed hungry minds unless our own minds are similarly hungry and similarly dependent

upon shaping anew the knowledge in each of our disciplines. President Gould said, "Whereas there are many productive scholars who may not be good teachers, I have never known a good teacher who was not better if he were interested in some kind of creative activity." Intellectual curiosity, a hunger to learn, a passion to understand, a commitment to exploration—these are not aspects of a Carleton identity. They are rather who we are.

Concentration upon the liberal arts, the prizing of encounters with difference, the stalwart defense of academic freedom, making a Carleton education accessible, our continuing stewardship of this campus and of the earth, the engagement of Carleton graduates with the College, and our abiding respect for intellectual curiosity—these define the College. And what is my role in all of this? It is to advance arguments such as those advanced today, and to keep these and other arguments alive. It is to remain the student of ideas and languages and history and religions that I have long wished to be. It is to work with faculty and students and staff and graduates and the Board of Trustees to preserve what most defines Carleton and to change what most needs changing. It is to work on your behalf with Carleton people across the globe to secure their continuing engagement with and generosity to the college. But most directly and simply put, my role is this: to assemble here on this hill above the Cannon River as talented a group of staff, students, and faculty as can be found anywhere, and then to set you free.

For your presence with us this morning, for what you have done and for what you will do to shape a Carleton at once committed to the strengths of the past and to the aims of the future, thank you.

THE INSTALLATION CEREMONY
Saturday, October 26, 2002
Skinner Memorial Chapel

CHRISTOPHER THOMFORDE
PRESIDENT, ST. OLAF COLLEGE

Thanks for the invitation to represent St. Olaf College at the great event we're celebrating today, the beginning of a presidential leadership moment.

When we leave the Chapel today, I invite all of us, especially those of us at St. Olaf, to gather around Rob and Teresa to make sure that their life here is as fruitful and as balanced and as filled with justice, humility, and kindness as can be.

All of us at St. Olaf offer our congratulations, our prayers, and our abundant support to this new couple who have come into our community.

JEFFREY BOWMAN '88
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF HISTORY,
KENYON COLLEGE

In Knox County, Ohio, there is a trail along the Kokosing River, one not altogether unlike that skirting the Cannon in the Arb. Although my own running regime is less regular than Rob's, our two schedules often coincided. Last spring, when rumors began to circulate that the members of Carleton's presidential selection committee had done their job wisely and well, I encountered Rob more than once on this trail and—I'm ashamed to admit it—I taunted him. I told Rob that while the birds were chirping and the sun was shining in Ohio, to take such a run in Northfield at that time of year was, because of howling winds, sudden blizzards, and black ice, to invite injuries and suffering. This was a cheap and desperate ploy. I, a native Minnesotan who can boast more than one Thor and Lars among my ancestors, resorted to cheap cracks about the weather in order to persuade Rob to stay at Kenyon. It was a ploy destined to fail. The sons and daughters of Rob's native South Dakota are not daunted by a little ice, and Carleton's presidency was, after all, once held by a polar explorer.

Casting about for other strategies, I considered telling Rob that in Minnesota he would be surrounded by bait fishermen. I refrained from doing so not because my desperation knew limits, but rather because Rob's embrace of the manifold forms of human diversity extends even (I think) to bait fishermen and because he would see this as a sort of missionary challenge. A campaign would be launched, and within five years Minnesotans en masse would have swapped

their bait buckets and bass boats for waders and subscriptions to *Fly-Fishing Annual*.

My desperation was widely shared and should be taken as a sign of how we appreciated Rob's accomplishments at Kenyon. These are more easily reported than they were achieved. He took a campus near perfection and made it more beautiful still. He more than doubled our endowment. He found new ways of supporting faculty research. He extended health care benefits to the partners of Kenyon's gay and lesbian employees. He made great strides toward protecting the rural character of Kenyon's campus. That Rob did all these things and more is impressive. That he did them while respecting Kenyon's traditions, values, and quirks is, to my mind, nothing short of astonishing.

Rob's convocation address already has suggested something of how well he understands the particular promise of liberal arts education—its ability to allow students, in Rob's own words, "to think seriously about what it means to lead a worthwhile life."

As a member of Kenyon's faculty, I want to express our warm gratitude for all that Rob has done. As a Carleton alumnus, I welcome Rob's inauguration as a sign that both Carleton's future and its past are in very good hands.