

OPENING REFLECTIONS

CONVOCATION
JANUARY 17, 2002

DAVID S. WOLK
PRESIDENT

Welcome back to campus, Happy New Year, and a happy new life together!

I am extremely excited to be with you today. We have much to accomplish together. I would like to share with you my initial thoughts and reflections about our new journey together, but first I would like to recognize a few individuals who have so generously offered their counsel and assistance over the past month.

I cannot imagine how I could have made this transition without Joe Mark. His very wise counsel, his impressive sense of Castleton history and tradition, and his patient and helpful demeanor have been very much appreciated. I want to extend to you, Joe, my heartfelt gratitude and I want all of you to know that your Academic Dean, Joe Mark, is a class act.

I also want to welcome some new friends and colleagues, and those who are new to their roles.

I am very pleased to welcome Kelley Beckwith Gilmour, our new Dean of Administration. Many Castleton folks already know Kelley as the former Castleton Controller and now the talented Director of the SASI initiative. She will continue in that role over the next year, flexibly splitting her time among her Castleton and VSC duties. Bob Clarke and I have worked out a plan that will benefit both Castleton and the VSC. I am delighted that Kelley has accepted this promotion.

Given the changes in the responsibilities previously assigned to the Dean of Administration and

the new temporary part-time status of that position for at least this year, I am also pleased to welcome Peg Richards as the new Special Assistant to the President for Human Resources and Strategic Initiatives. As a member of the President's Cabinet, and reporting directly to me, Peg will be responsible for a number of important activities: initiating a new program to provide education, training and other assistance for Castleton employees; overseeing all the human resources functions of the College; and assisting with institutional research, grant writing, and entrepreneurship activities. I think it is particularly important and impressive that, along with her previous experience and expertise, Peg brings a faculty member perspective to this critical position, acknowledging that our most significant investment is and should be in the people who make up the Castleton family.

I also want to acknowledge the many good wishes and kindnesses I have experienced from so many of you. Of particular note are Rita Geno and Karen Craig. I must say that I was a bit surprised by the rather informal yet affectionate ways that Rita would greet me, but then again I heard her calling just about everyone else who came in the office "hon", or something like that. She is keeping me humble. Karen has ventured well beyond what one would expect. Her sense of tradition and her deep knowledge of Castleton and the community will serve me well, and I want you to know that it's been just over a month and I haven't yet seen the same outfit, or the same pair of shoes, twice.

I am hoping that my wife, Diane, who is here today, will not emulate Karen's love of different attire for every day of the year. Diane formerly worked at Castleton for five years in the Education Department and for the past two years has returned to her familiar, and respected, role as an elementary school Principal in Rutland. We are excited about our part of this wonderful community, and we look forward to welcoming you to our home on campus.

We do have four children, all of whom are special and gifted, of course, but you do not have the time today to listen to my rendition of their special gifts, unless you want to skip the refreshments to follow this speech. Suffice it to say that we have two boys, two girls, two of whom are at UVM, one of whom is headed there next year, and another who will be entering high school next year. They are great kids, or young adults as they like to think, and they look forward to their part in this community as well.

Early reflections

My first month at Castleton has been a delight. There are so many wonderful things about this place, including the very warm welcome I have received from so many of you. I have enjoyed my interactions with students, faculty and staff members. This gives me hope and excitement for a positive, upbeat climate and the sense of extended family and community that we all desire and deserve. This can only be accomplished in an atmosphere of mutual respect—characterized by the recognition that not one of us—students, secretaries, staff members, faculty, custodians, ad-

ministrators, maintenance staff or the President himself—is more important than any of the others.

How do we know that we have community, one that is characterized by mutual respect? How can we be, and feel, part of an extended family?

This is embodied in many ways:

—the faculty advisor whose counsel in the eleventh hour makes or breaks a student’s semester, and perhaps that student’s life;

—the student on his way to class who, understanding that the physical appearance of the campus reflects on each and every one of us, goes out of his way to pick up the piece of litter he sees on the ground;

—the professor who reaches out to a staff member who is undergoing personal difficulty;

—the custodian who offers a helping hand to a student;

—the secretary who drops everything because a co-worker needs her;

—the resident advisor who, despite her own work load, stays up late counseling a student;

—the maintenance worker who, despite a heavy work load, happily fixes anything and everything;

—the librarian whose pat on the shoulder brings comfort to the struggling student;

—the coach whose lesson in sportsmanship endures well beyond the last fleeting victory; and

—the President who understands that there is nothing more important in a high tech world than personal touch.

This is the kind of community that we cherish, and we deserve.

A vibrant academic life

Our students also deserve academic programs of integrity as well as a college climate that inspires intellectual curiosity. I particularly value faculty members who find the balance among their scholarly work, their community commitment, and their teaching and advising. The most meaningful teachable moments may occur in the classroom, but they might also transpire in a faculty office, in the dining hall, or in an informal encounter around campus. There is no doubt that those who are more intimately involved in the life of the college will reap greater rewards.

I want to tell you a story, one that you may have heard before, but one that is worth repeating. Thirty-two years ago, I read something that has remained with me ever since. As I was reading the Middlebury College catalogue, preparing to submit my application for admission—back in the old days when you actually put pen to paper, rather than submit it online—I found a story that has had a profound effect on my vision for education. Last year, I was helping my nephew with his college applications and I encountered it again. I would like to share it with you, verbatim, from the Middlebury College catalogue:

A national educational journal recounted the story of a student who had been asked in a physics course to explain how one could determine the height of a tall building using a barometer.

The answer given was, "Go to the top of the building, tie a string on the end of the barometer, lower the barometer to the ground, and measure the length of the string." The answer was given an F, although the student objected that the answer was perfectly correct according to accepted physical principles. When an outside mediator was called in, he had to agree that the student had a point. Nevertheless, it was agreed that the student would be given a second opportunity to answer the question more straightforwardly.

After six minutes of the allotted ten had been used, the student had still not written anything on his paper, and the mediator asked whether he did not know the answer. "No," he replied. "It is just that there are so many answers, I am trying to decide which one to give." Near the end of the time period, he quickly scribbled down an answer. This time the instructor in the course capitulated, and the student was given an A. The answer was, "Take the barometer to the top of the building and drop it off. Time the fall and then @ by the well-known formula about the rate of acceleration of falling bodies @ you calculate the height."

The mediator was fascinated with the ingenuity of the student and asked whether he really had other answers. "Of course," he replied. "Take the barometer out on a sunny day. Measure the shadow cast by the barometer and the shadow cast by the building, then knowing the height of the barometer, you calculate the height of the building."

"Or, a very simple and direct method would be to start at the base of the building and measure the building by laying the barometer along the wall to determine the height in barometer-lengths.

"Finally, of course, the easiest method would be to go into the basement and find the office of the superintendent. Knock on his door, and when he answers, say to him, 'Here, I have this fine barometer that I will give you if you will tell me the height of this building.'"

The student confessed, finally, that he also knew the standard answer. He didn't feel that the function of education was simply to memorize a formula or to regurgitate answers.

A vibrant intellectual life must be the foundation of our college. Last weekend I had the pleasure of seeing the new movie "A Beautiful Mind", based upon the book by the same name that chronicles the incredible life of John Forbes Nash Jr., one of the most gifted intellects of the 20th century who also happens to be a surviving paranoid schizophrenic and winner of the 1994 Nobel Prize in Economic Science. It is one of the best movies I have ever seen, and if you have not seen it I will not spoil it for you, but suffice it so say this: From Nash's life story there are many important messages, and many lessons to be learned, but the most profound for me is the illustration of how

the power of intellect can only be ignited by the power of love. When you read the book, or view the movie, think about the beauty, the meaning, and the power that connects intellect and love.

Reaching your dreams

Regardless of who you are, and regardless of your role on this campus, you need to reach your dreams. I want to help you do that.

Students—you deserve to be prepared, and to prepare yourselves, as lifelong learners so that you will find meaning in your lives. You can make a difference in this college before you go out to make a difference in the world. Whether you are a commuter or a resident, a traditional or non-traditional, you can start by helping me to craft solutions to the problems you encounter each day in your life on this campus. I will listen to you, learn from you, and help you help us improve the quality of academic and community life at Castleton. I hope that you will remember that the way you conduct yourselves, on and off campus, reflects directly not only on you, but on the college. You are our best ambassadors, and I hope you take that role seriously, and with pride.

Faculty—you deserve to be supported in your scholarly pursuits, in your enhanced connections with the Vermont community we serve, and in your desire to improve student learning. I want to help you reach your dreams of scholarly inquiry, community service and inspired teaching.

Administrators and staff members—you deserve a college that supports you in your efforts to improve the quality of student life on campus, assists you in reaching out to students so that they can reach their dreams, and promotes the kind of climate at this college that values your work in a way that makes you—remember this—really want to come to work every day.

Castleton's future

As we look to Castleton's future, we need to face reality. We need to be honest about that future. We need to tell the truth, tell it well, and tell it often.

That includes unbridled candor about the financial realities of public higher education in Vermont. Despite the efforts of the legislature and the governor in recent years to increase the allocation to UVM and the VSC, we still rank the lowest of all fifty states in institutional support for higher education.

We could continue to wring our hands and decry the plight of public higher education. That has been the most prevalent, albeit unsuccessful, past practice. Or we could adopt a more positive and aggressive approach. That would be to continue keeping the heat on Montpelier for fairer funding, while at the same time focusing on what we need to do here at Castleton to improve the financial picture and to plan for the future.

The keys to our financial future are quite simple. Obviously we need to continue the wonderful progress led by Bill Allen and his staff in attracting students to Castleton. And obviously everyone

in this room has a stake in the quality of academic and community life such that students will want to stay here. But beyond recruitment of students, and retention of students, we need to make a new and improved investment in external relations and college fund raising. Our connections with alumni are critical. The way we communicate to the public is critical. Raising friends and funds will lead us on the road to stability and success. It is my job to lead us on that journey.

We are about to embark upon a new era in college development. The Dean of Institutional Advancement, Donna Wolski, has resigned to pursue other interests. I plan to reorganize the office and to devote a good deal of my own time to this endeavor.

Furthermore, I must tell you that the financial status and oversight of the college deserves much greater scrutiny. Since I arrived here a month ago, I have gradually learned about a number of errors that will plague the college's fiscal well being until those mistakes are analyzed and resolved. These errors primarily relate to accounting for cancelled student loans. Unfortunately, none of the bookkeeping errors over the past two years will result in a more favorable status for the college. The good news is that I believe that with prudent fiscal management we will weather this storm. Our staff, led by some members of our Cabinet, is working diligently to understand and resolve these difficulties, and to make sure they do not recur. I will have more to report to you when we get to the bottom of the bottom line.

Tell the truth, tell it well, and tell it often.

A haven of mutual respect

Our college must also be a safe and respectful learning and living environment, where individual differences are respected, where diversity is honored, and where discrimination in any form is not tolerated.

Remember that we are responsible for the education and the welfare of ALL of our students, regardless of individual differences. This is the law. The law is quite clear that we must create and maintain a campus atmosphere that is safe, respectful, civil and free of harassment and hazing in any form.

I pledge to you that I will do everything within my power to honor and respect the diversity within our college community, and particularly to ensure such respect for all of our staff and our students, regardless of their individual differences based upon ability, gender, religion, ethnicity, race or sexual orientation.

Discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is a source of grave concern throughout our culture, particularly given the alarming level of alienation and isolation experienced by many young people who are victims of such discrimination. This is an emotional issue, but let us not shy

away from education regarding respect for the diversity of our community.

On my watch, I will be a very strong advocate for those who are victims of discrimination. I will not tolerate it at Castleton. Instead, we need to remember this: our greatest gift to ourselves will be to celebrate the power within us to honor, and not to fear, our individual differences.

How I can help

First, I am a change agent, not someone who derives satisfaction from maintaining the status quo. I want to really make a difference in the lives of our students and all of us who serve them. But the Castleton challenge will require an enthusiastic investment of time, and I am convinced that on my part there must be an enduring commitment.

Second, I have always been committed to improving higher education in Vermont. I am the only person to have served on each of the three higher education boards in Vermont—five years on the VSC Board, three years as the Vermont Senate representative on the VSAC Board, and until recently for a few years on the UVM Board. I also have served on the Vermont Higher Education Funding Commission since its inception four years ago. Furthermore, I served for seven years as a Vermont delegate to the New England Board of Higher Education. This recitation is not meant to advance the case that I am a glutton for punishment, but rather that I understand the special relationship of higher education to Vermont and how Castleton can take the lead in benefiting our state. We have enormous potential to lead.

Third, I believe that our students ought to be treated as if they were members of our own family. Whenever I walk through a dorm, whenever I review a program, whenever I watch an athletic event, whenever I view a performance, whenever I participate in a class discussion, whenever I taste the food in Huden, whenever I hire a faculty member, and whenever I advocate for our budget, I will measure the potential effect on our students, considering all of them with the care and concern I would afford my own family.

Fourth, I must tell you that over four decades of contact with Castleton, what has always struck me, whether as a student in the summer of 1973, as a trustee in the late 1980's, as a part-time faculty member in 1991, as a principal and superintendent in the mid to late 1990's with a professional development school connection to the college, and as Commissioner of Education over the past two years with educator quality issues at the forefront, is the incredible potential of Castleton as the higher education leader in southern Vermont and across the state. Castleton's human element, its dedication to the academic and personal growth of students as citizens, its many campus and community opportunities, and its outreach to the greater community of Vermont, are impressive and growing, but may unintentionally be its best kept secret.

I want to help bring this to life. What is needed is to articulate clearly the benefits and promise of

our college not just to the college community but to a much wider public, including potential students of all ages, the business community, statewide opinion leaders, foundation executives, state and federal government funding sources, and the media, among many others. The key is to tell the truth, tell it well, and tell it often.

Fifth, you should know about my belief in “private candor and public support”. All faculty and staff, regardless of their work in the classroom, dining hall, administrative offices, residence halls, athletic fields, or buildings and grounds, serve as role models for students. All of us have chosen to interact with students on a daily basis.

It matters not that you are a custodian or professor, secretary or administrator, librarian or electrician. What matters is that we are one.

It is imperative that we all work together as a team, as an extended family, especially for those who see us as family members. An extended family, not a dysfunctional one, communicates with each other in a productive and upbeat manner, offering praise whenever possible and constructive criticism whenever necessary. It is the latter that I would like to address.

One of the most difficult tasks is to convey negative information, anything that someone is not likely to want to hear. If that information or opinion is delivered calmly, respectfully, privately and candidly, then there is a greater likelihood for change and improvement. That level of unbridled honesty behind closed doors must be supported by a team effort to improve. But people deserve the dignity of private candor, and the college deserves the blessing of public support. The dignity of private candor and the blessing of public support: it is all about a climate of mutual trust and respect.

Finally, my history and my demeanor are such that I hope you will not hear empty rhetoric or meaningless jargon, nor will you encounter humorless or passive leadership. I have no patience for that. I treat people with dignity, and I expect the same in return.

I like to interact with those who are not afraid or unwilling to question my judgment. I appreciate being told the bad news along with the good news. So let’s create a lot of good news together.

If we keep our eyes on the prize—to support Castleton as our college achieves high expectations for success, to realize our unbridled potential to lead and to contribute to our state, our nation and our world, and to treat our students, and each other, with the dedication, the humor and the dignity we would expect for our own family, our extended Castleton family—together we will make history.

Thank you.

