Of Mission and Moment: A Shared Journey

Chairman Miller, Members of the Board of Trustees, Students, Faculty and Staff, Alumni, Distinguished Delegates and Honored Guests, Family and Dear Friends,

It is indeed an honor to stand before you now, officially installed, as the 9th president of Bridgewater College.

I would like to welcome everyone here today and thank you for taking the time to join us as we celebrate the history and mission of Bridgewater College. Thank you to those here on the platform who have already provided thoughtful words. I am grateful for your participation. A special thanks goes to all those who planned and worked with great care and diligence over these past several months to be sure that this occasion would be a special one for us all. I offer humble thanks to the members of the Board of Trustees - the very good stewards of Bridgewater College - who have entrusted me with the leadership of this institution. I commit to you, and to everyone here today, to lead with integrity and care, to serve with humility and respect, and to earn anew every day the trust that true leadership and true service demand. Finally, loving thanks to Suzanne and Emily and Will. Too often they have borne the sacrifices that my choices have required – but their love and support have sustained and nurtured me always.

Those here today who know me well know that I much prefer to speak without a prepared text. This preference traces, at least, all the way to my very first teaching position when I would never bring more than a few notes with me to class. Those who know me well, and especially the students I taught, will also know that the absence of a prepared text has never been an impediment to filling up my allotted speaking time – and then some. And so, while there was some temptation to stand here today with just a few notes in hand, the importance of getting my words just right – and the necessity of keeping those words appropriately brief – demanded that I come with full text printed out. And so I have. Whether or not the words are just right, I promise they will be appropriately brief.

A number of years ago, I was asked to deliver a commencement address, and in preparation, I researched essays about commencement addresses - what makes some good, what makes some great, and what not to do under any circumstances. I found lists of "do's" and "don’ts" designed to make a commencement speech soar. One of my favorite pieces of advice was too remember that Commencement is a celebration - don't make the speech a "downer"! ---- That someone thought this particular advice is necessary is a separate issue, but it remains good advice nonetheless.

I remember thinking about those lists of do's and don'ts and how the very same "things" that make speeches great can also make them flops - be funny, but not too funny; be eloquent, but not too
formal; share your perspective, but remember the day is not only about you; be brief and offer
insight, but not too brief and don’t use cliches; --- and on and on and on.

I share that anecdote with you because, of course, in preparation for today I would have loved to
research essays about academic inauguration addresses. But, of course, such essays don’t exist. There
just aren’t enough academic inaugurations (thankfully) to generate sufficient interest. Unlike with
commencement addresses, the institutional goal regarding inauguration speeches is NOT to hope
that every student gets to hear one.

So I couldn’t do any research about academic inaugural addresses. I did, however, read the addresses
of a number of other college presidents – some of whom I know well – and in each case I learned
something about the person. But more than that, I learned something important about the college
they were set to lead. And that’s not a bad piece of advice for delivering this very special address – be
sure to share something of yourself AND something of the institution that you are called to lead. So
with my comments today, I hope to share a sense of mission and moment at Bridgewater College, and
how they are part of a journey that we all share. And if I do this passably well, perhaps you will come
to appreciate, as I have, what a valuable and special mission we strive to fulfill here, and what a
moment of opportunity it is that has presented itself, and why I feel called, and fortunate, to be here.

We held our annual Founder’s Day celebration just last week – a tradition that dates to 1920 when the
College was a mere 40 years old, but already beginning to move beyond the lives of the College’s
first leaders. Institutions may live for centuries, but certainly individuals do not, and it’s important,
especially at a College that values community as we do, to remain connected to the mission and
vision and narrative that accompanied the founding of the institution and continues to nurture it still.
And so, Founder’s Day has, in 95 annual installments since 1920, helped to keep the Bridgewater
College community connected to our history as we contemplate our future and the journey that has
been shared by all of those fortunate enough to be a part of the BC story.

That story began in 1880 WITH Daniel Christian Flory, a 26-year-old member of the German Baptist
Brethren Church when he founded Spring Creek Normal and Collegiate Institute – later to become
known as Bridgewater College. The year before, Flory had taught Greek and German at what is today
Juniata College, and believed that that educational “experiment” might be a good idea here in the
Shenandoah Valley. Flory was himself a product of liberal learning at the University of Virginia, and
established in Bridgewater a co-educational liberal arts college – one committed to “the development
of all aspects of [our] nature, the moral, the physical, and the social, as well as the intellectual.” He
was passionate in his belief that “the effective education of the human mind demanded the highest
possible standards of scholarship and the unrestricted opportunity for study, meditation, and
expression.”2 We use much the same language today, and our current mission statement reflects a
shared commitment to these ideals; and many individuals – faculty, staff and students - have been living out those ideals for 134 years.

DC Flory was, clearly, deeply committed to the notion that liberal learning was essential to our nature. He believed that mission (liberal learning) to be especially relevant in the particular time and particular place in which he lived. Support for Flory's belief and his endeavor, however, was not universal. Far from it, in fact: it was believed that those opposed to his new school far outnumbered its supporters. Many thought that higher education was impractical: it might encourage worldliness and “spoil” the young men for work on the farms. Many viewed Flory's school as "the production of a wild theorist or a crank," and believed that it would not be in existence for very long. In spite of all the obstacles, all the headwinds, Flory moved forward. He was attuned to a moment and committed to a mission that he knew would serve it well. And here we are today, sharing in that mission and beneficiaries of that moment. And while longevity alone is not a measure of greatness, certainly perseverance in the face of challenge and fidelity to mission are requisite preconditions to longevity. And they represent a necessary foundation for greatness – the greatness that is embodied in the transformational experience envisioned by Flory and the extraordinarily rich lives our graduates have led for well over 100 years.

I smiled when I read those stories about Bridgewater’s past, wonderfully chronicled in Francis Fry Wayland’s “big red book” – the story of Bridgewater’s first hundred years. Imagine… a school of liberal learning being the product of a wild theorist or crank… Imagine the courage it required to act on deeply held beliefs in the face of significant and public critique. It's comforting to know that today, in our society, we've grown beyond such thinking about liberal arts education. I’m relieved we can laugh now at that time long ago, at a culture skeptical of the liberal arts, and to a notion of education with a horizon wider than simply job preparation. Thank goodness we don't live in a time such as that.

Thank goodness indeed. Unfortunately, we DO live in a time such as that. These are trying times for higher education. Issues of cost and access and completion and quality are the stuff of mainstream media with an almost metronomic regularity. To be sure, there are real challenges facing higher education, but there exists a growing wariness or skepticism about the value of higher education in general, and of the liberal arts in particular. And this skepticism seems different in kind, and not just in degree, from times past. Higher education has always had a public purpose, has always been directed in important ways toward the public good. Certainly that public good includes economic prosperity, but it has always included much more. A democracy cannot flourish, economically or otherwise, in the absence of an educated citizenry. Now it seems that a broader public purpose is of far less importance than narrowly tailored private gain: the value of higher education is increasingly
being equated solely with economic success and less and less with the development of an engaged citizenry.

And, ironically I suppose, this skepticism about the purpose and value of higher education is coming at precisely the same moment when the challenges we face as a local, national and global community demand a holistic perspective, they demand the fruits of liberal learning. There is a need, I think, to engage big challenges boldly, but also with humility and a deep understanding of the obligations we have to each other – especially when the “other” is from a different background, or belongs to a different culture, or is a member of a generation yet to be born. We need to ask not just what can be done and how to do it, but also what ought to be done and how best to do it. The challenges and needs that command our attention and fuel our worry also demand the education of engaged citizens – the very sort of educational commitments that are under duress. We are, right now, today, living in a moment of challenge and opportunity in higher education and in the world around us.

How fortunate are we, then, to be celebrating today an institution committed by mission to the very principles demanded by this moment. How fortunate are we to have 134 years of institutional memory to share this journey with us. As early as the 1881-1882 session, our School’s catalog described the four-year “Classical Course” of study as... “designed to prepare ‘for any profession or calling in life...’” That same commitment animates the life of this academic community today. At this moment, when many question the value of a liberal arts education, as many did 134 years ago, the opportunity clearly exists for Bridgewater to achieve a very public and very prominent level of excellence, and for our graduates to have a profound impact on the world – all by remaining true to those core principles that have guided us and sustained us on the journey we now share.

That mission compels us to educate the whole person, to nurture intellect and talent, to pursue truth and understanding, and to cultivate judgment and respect for others. This is what a liberal arts education is meant to be: persistent and purposeful study committed to the notion that we live and learn in relationship with others and that we have obligations to more than just our own well-being. We nurture sensibilities and cultivate habits of mind. Certainly, this liberal learning prepares our graduates for a career (even if many do not believe this to be so), but more importantly, it prepares them for the personal synthesis needed to discern their profession as vocation. This is a path not only to economic success, but also to personal fulfillment. Bridgewater occupies a position that speaks to the concerns and goals for higher education in general: that we prepare students for careers - for lives of professional accomplishment - but more than that, we empower them to become productive members of an engaged citizenry.

In 1962, the year before I was born, President Kennedy in a speech at Rice University said: “...we meet in an hour of change and challenge, in a decade of hope and fear, in an age of both knowledge
and ignorance. The greater our knowledge increases, the greater our ignorance unfolds.”⁵ We’re all aware of that speech, even if we’re not familiar with it: it included the famous “we choose to go to the moon” line, and articulated a national commitment to the space program. Certainly the challenges of that decade, of that moment, were significant, but so too are those we face today. We live in a moment of increasingly rapid technological change, change breathtakingly more complex than that imagined by President Kennedy in 1962, a moment of developing societies and cries for social justice, of a global economy that often seems to lack foundation, and a moment of climate change and vanishing resources. None of these challenges, or the many others we face, have simple or easy solutions. None of these problems are one-dimensional. We live in a moment in which the challenges we face will only be solved by those who can embed a disciplinary excellence, in biology or history or economics or any one of many others, within a context of the connections between disciplines – and the wisdom to use their talents in service to authentic human goods. This is what Bridgewater’s mission is all about, a mission that is responsible to students in the 21st century and accountable to the world in which we live today. Even so, I think it would be clearly recognizable to DC Flory. And this mission reflects a fundamental principle of higher education: that the pursuit of truth is an essential guarantor of human dignity. This principle is integral to Bridgewater’s heritage; it connects us still to our roots in the core principles of the Church of the Brethren, and represents an ongoing commitment to transforming the lives of young people – a commitment that we all share.

The Presidential Medallion of Bridgewater College, which I now wear, carries the seal of the College and proclaims our ideals and our heritage. The inner symbols, the Flory family coat of arms, the open book of knowledge, the state flower and bird of Virginia, and the personal seal of Alexander Mack, the founder of the Church of the Brethren, remind us of our heritage and the strands of influence that have shaped our identity from our founding to this very day. The Latin words “Bonitas”, “Veritas” “Pulchritudo”, and “Concordia” circle the inner symbols and extol the core ideals that sustain the work of our community. Goodness, Truth, Beauty and Harmony. These ideals have a rich philosophical underpinning that would require more time than we have here to explore well. For now, those words, our seal, serve as a reminder of the seriousness of our work, and an inspiration in the quest for knowledge by our faculty and by our students. Our seal is a symbol that inspires the pursuit of “wholeness” – mind, body and spirit - for all the members of our community.⁶ These symbols and these words surround us on banners right here on the mall, and they can serve as a reminder of the mission and moment and journey we share.

The occasion of inauguration is meant to celebrate history and mission; the past, present and future, of an academic community – a journey shared. But that journey is also shared by many who are not a part of our academic community – it is in many ways a common purpose of higher education, and that’s why we celebrate with representatives of many other institutions today. Each institution has a mission and a history and a community unique and profoundly important to them – just as ours is to
us. And just as the combined efforts – the shared journey - of our students, faculty, staff, and alumni are essential to Bridgewater’s success, so too are the combined efforts and shared journey of a diverse and robust group of colleges and universities to the success of American higher education and our shared goal of an educated and engaged citizenry. Bridgewater College, indeed, all of American higher education is like a fabric, a tapestry. The fabric is strong and the tapestry beautiful because of the nature of individual threads, but stronger and more beautiful still by virtue of the many threads woven together.

I joined the Bridgewater community last June, but we waited until today to hold this ceremony on purpose. The wait allowed us time to get to know each other better, so that we truly celebrate as a community. The wait allowed us to hold inauguration in close association with our annual Founder’s Day and Alumni Weekend ceremonies – and symbolically connect our past to our present and our future. And it allowed us the time to plan and celebrate more fully the life of the college with the events of this week just past – events dedicated to highlighting the accomplishments of our faculty, staff, students and alumni. My hope is that in celebrating the College in this way, we re-dedicate ourselves to a shared mission committed to pursuing truth, to living lives tempered by beauty, to aspiring to goodness, and to achieving a vision of unity and community – the harmony of living in relationship that is enriched as we share our journey together. May we always be committed to the mission and the moment and the journey of Bridgewater College.

Thank you all very much.

Notes:


3. Ibid.


6. Text in this paragraph is taken from a description of the Presidential Medallion of Bridgewater College used in various places by Bridgewater College.