

HEIDELBERG UNIVERSITY INAUGURATION

President's Address: "*A Thread of Purpose*"

6 November 2009

To every member and friend of the extended Heidelberg University family, to every neighbor from Tiffin and throughout Ohio here today, to all of my professional colleagues, teachers and personal friends who have travelled far to join our celebration, and to my immediate and extended family who sit before me now, I say "Thank You!" It is hard for me to express in mere words the ocean of gratitude, honor, responsibility and joy that you have bestowed upon me. I am deeply humbled and tremendously inspired.

Madam Chairperson and all members of the Board of Trustees, you have granted me the gift of this role and the opportunity that goes with it. I am thrilled to join your committed leadership.

Heidelberg Students of the present, the past, and the future, you are the reason why this institution exists and are at all times the guiding star. I am energized to help you succeed and to foster an even stronger Berg Pride among the 14,000 Alumni worldwide.

Heidelberg Faculty, you are the central driving force and soul that delivers our core mission and purpose. I am privileged to join you as a colleague on our march forward.

Heidelberg Staff and Administration, you are the dedicated individuals who devote all your talents to providing programs, services and support for the whole enterprise year after year. I am fortunate to work among you.

Tiffin and other Community Guests, you are the gracious people who have welcomed my family into your neighborhoods, schools and associations. I am proud to be a citizen of Tiffin, Seneca County, Ohio.

I am so grateful to you, President Emeritus McCardell, for your participation in the ceremony today. Susan and I met at Middlebury College in 1976, the same year that you joined as a faculty member to teach American history, and you have been a friend ever since. I thank President Emeritus Thomas de Witt and President Michael Alexander, both of whom are representing Lasell College here today. It was an honor to serve as your trustee for many years. I extend a special acknowledgment to Dr. Dominic Dottavio, Heidelberg's 13th president and now the President of Tarleton State University in Texas, and to Dr. James Troha, our Vice President for Institutional Advancement and University Relations who served as our interim president last year. I am following your good work.

Colleagues and Teachers, you are the ones with whom I have worked professionally and studied academically over many years. My sincere appreciation goes to you, Professor McLaughlin, for representing Harvard today and continuing to advise me professionally since graduate school. I remain indebted to all of you for the gifts of learning, opportunity and success that you have given me.

Dearest Friends, you are everyone with whom I have travelled most intimately, growing up as a child in Oregon, attending college and graduate school in New England, living as a student in Germany, working as an adult in Massachusetts, and exploring together in all of those places. To Dr. Uli Freund, my greatest friend from Germany, thanks for coming such a distance. To Reverend Bob McKetchnie, our minister from Massachusetts, thanks for participating. I am so touched by everyone's generosity in attending our event today.

My Family, you are why I am here. Since meeting as students at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio 60 years ago, Mom and Dad, you have shown me a right path to this moment. Kathleen and Jack, long ago you made me your most lucky older brother. My several Aunts, Uncles and Cousins, you remind me how broad one tree can grow. Susan, Ashley and Aidan, you are the Insular Tahiti in my life that Herman Melville describes and something I hold as sacred. Our love for each other is the reason why we came here together. I am nearly stunned to be standing before all of you.

Let me conclude with a special note of appreciation to the Inauguration Committees and to the many individuals who devoted a lot of hours in making our celebration events possible this week, all of whom are recognized in the program. You have done a terrific job! We thank you. It has been my sincere wish since the beginning of our preparation that we minimize our costs and broaden the participation in these events. I hope that we have succeeded.

It is an incredible feeling to look out across virtually my entire life at this moment. The key is to remember to breathe. I accept this charge as bestowed and embrace the challenge as understood.

We celebrate nearly 160 years of excellence at this Inauguration.

Heidelberg College opened for business on November 11, 1850. We were five teachers with 25 students, women and men, taking four courses in one school house. Over the next four years, *The New York Times* was founded, the Republican Party was formed, Walt Whitman wrote "Leaves of Grass," and construction began on our Founders Hall. The first graduating class in 1854 consisted of one woman named Margaret Shelman and one man named George Mechling. From the beginning, this college has maintained its commitment to teaching in the Liberal Arts and in professional programs. We began with a focus on Teachers and Preachers. Then, over time, we developed expertise in the Humanities, Arts, Sciences, Languages and Social Sciences. Our aim has always been a high standard of academic excellence and spirited inquiry with the goal of providing life-enriching opportunities for our Students in preparing them to succeed.

We see a *Thread of Purpose* in all that we offer and do. In the last month of his life in August 1993, the great American poet and family friend from my home state of Oregon, William Stafford, reminded us about direction and continuity in his poem "The Way It Is" and that we need to hold true to our core as all things in life are always changing:

There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.

You don't ever let go of the thread.

We of Heidelberg have never let go of that thread—our shared mission to provide an excellent higher learning opportunity for our Students and to enable these young adults to fulfill their lives of purpose with distinction. Today, we are proud to be strong in our undergraduate Arts and Sciences, respected for our highly effective Teacher Education training, known for our unique “Life of the Mind” Honors Program, recognized for our National Center for Water Quality Research, and excited about our new Media Communication Center. We are also energized by the growth of our graduate offerings in Education and Counseling; in Music, which launched its new masters program successfully last summer; and in Business, which has just started construction on the new Adams Hall School of Business, a state-of-the art world class undergraduate and MBA facility to be housed inside historic Laird Hall. Bound together by an acute sense of community commitment across all disciplines, our core business for nearly 160 years has been to enrich lives and transform generations.

Yet at the same time, we are wise to remember that all things evolve because the thread “goes among things that change.” At the dedication of Heidelberg’s new College Hall in June 1886, President George W. Williard set that expectation for our community then and now:

“A college that is faithfully doing the work assigned it, is all the time needing something new and different as the work of each year widens its sphere of usefulness and opens the way for something higher and better.”

By the way, the cost of construction has certainly changed over the past 123 years. It cost about \$50,000 to build College Hall in 1886, which is about what it cost us recently to install a “French drain” system and make other essential repairs around the foundation of that same University Hall.

We need to take full advantage of ourselves. Heidelberg has opportunities that we should embolden, enhance and expand. There are always ways to get better, whether by advancing strengths or by addressing weaknesses. Through hundreds of individual and group conversations over my initial four months on this job, including my ongoing one-on-one private meetings with each fulltime Faculty member, I know how deeply devoted this entire community is to ensuring Heidelberg’s lasting success. With conviction, I invite us to consider some important questions together because we need to find our diamond. How do we become more competitive in the higher education marketplace? What makes Heidelberg University most distinctive and signals what we are truly “best” at doing?

Our traditions give joy and meaning to the pursuit of excellence.

Millions and millions of people around the world have read the wonderful Harry Potter books written by J.K. Rowling. With an eye on the role of important traditions, there is that captivating and foretelling moment in the first book, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, when Harry and other “first years” are lined up to be sorted into their houses:

“Welcome to Hogwarts,” said Professor McGonagall. “The start-of-term banquet will begin shortly, but before you take your seats in the Great Hall, you will be sorted into your houses. The Sorting is a very important ceremony because, while you are here, your house will be something like your family within Hogwarts. You will have classes with the rest of your house, sleep in your house dormitory, and spend free time in your house common room ... I

hope each of you will be a credit to whichever house becomes yours ... I suggest you all smarten yourselves up as much as you can while you are waiting.”

Now, does that sound like someplace nearby and familiar? While spending the past four months trying to “smarten myself up” in all ways Heidelberg, I have been struck over and over by the vital energy embedded in our rich campus traditions and the community spirit represented through such enduring practices.

As students, we still wear Heidelberg Beanies when we start and test our critical decision making skills at the outdoor T-Bridge Ceremony. We look forward to running through the Faculty Gauntlet when we finish our degrees. In the Wickham Great Hall, the newer class banners wave proudly alongside those that are nearly a century old. Our societies and fraternities began as special local literary societies in the 1850s and they remain exclusively our own today. Greek Sing gets everyone going in November. We ring the Victory Bell after football wins (Tomorrow!), eat midnight breakfasts during exams, participate in Alternative Spring Break, tour with the choir and the baseball team, and sing the Messiah on campus every December. And the Alma Mater? Well, I believe that someone sings it around here at least once a day. Stay tuned! All of us wear, use, carry, or proclaim the “h” and we all believe deeply in our hearts that every Student is a Prince. These practices, habits and symbols reflect our pride and spirit. They give us color ... Oh yes, we have three of those too!

Heidelberg, which started as a coed college when that fact was highly unusual, has a long tradition of pursuing a path of increasing student diversity and multiculturalism while standing as a welcoming community. We need to continue flourishing as a diverse community of students, faculty and staff, while expanding our enrollment more deliberately beyond Ohio and ensuring that we attract more female students.

We also have historical partnerships with institutions of significance that enrich the lives of our Students, Faculty and Staff. Our affiliation with the United Church of Christ has endured since our founding by members of the German Reformed Church. Our faculty and student exchange program with Tianjin Normal University in China is now 23 years old. Our American Junior Year abroad program with the University of Heidelberg in Germany is now 52 years old. Meine Damen und Herren, allerdings, wir sollen diese einmalige deutsche Verbindung zwischen unsere Universitäten immer für die Studenten stärker machen. Auf jedenfalls, Ich bin wirklich stolz und sehr begeistert zu sagen, Ich bin Heidelberger!

Our traditions, beliefs and values speak to the central philosophy of our core academic mission and offering. We are here to learn, mentor and grow together. That will continue as we expand our institutional reach, promote our international learning, and broaden our educational appeal to greater numbers of strong students. These possibilities trigger additional questions. In what manner should we take “our Heidelberg” to more people and to more places in meaningful ways? How do we enhance global learning opportunities for our Students and Faculty?

Another distinguishing feature is that we engage our community.

Since my arrival in Tiffin four months ago, the spirit of volunteerism among our Students, Faculty, Staff and Alumni has been uplifting. Community service, outreach and connection matter tremendously here. I continue to meet wonderful folks who bring individuals and groups together for good intentions. I know that President Paul Marion of Tiffin University and I will work

effectively together in connecting Miami Street with East Market Street. I embrace that goal because the City of Tiffin and both universities must prosper together.

A mere decade before Heidelberg College was founded, Alexis de Tocqueville, the French historian and sociologist, travelled through our country and wrote his famous book *Democracy in America*. He described the beliefs and values, the towns and institutions, and the unfolding practice of citizenship across our land. Of course, we Buckeyes must pardon him for his focus on New England:

“The New Englander is attached to his township because it is strong and independent; he has an interest in it because he shares in its management ... he invests his ambition and his future in it ... and in the end accumulates clear, practical ideas about the nature of his duties and the extent of his rights.”

We are an example of that wondrous community of citizenship. Our Heidelberg “Township” will continue to partner collaboratively with the municipal government, local businesses, service organizations, and educational institutions. The call for “Tomorrow” in “Tiffin” includes all of us together! We need to strengthen our existing community service and service-learning programs. We should explore how to make our Center for Historic and Military Archeology an integral part of the American Civil War Museum of Ohio in Tiffin. We must certainly use our new Adams Hall School of Business to make ideas such as a Guest Speaker Bureau, global conferencing, student consulting teams, internships, and nonprofit partnerships as robust as possible. Again, we need to pause and ask ourselves some things. How can we work more effectively together, with a view on forever, in this great town? How can Heidelberg University become a more compelling community magnet to attract increased commerce into Tiffin?

At all times, we are building student success.

Our thread of enriching lives and transforming generations must work its way through each individual student, one unique student at a time. When Maya Angelou delivered her Inaugural Poem “On the Pulse of Morning” to this entire country in January 1993, she said “Give birth again to the dream,” and invited everyone to grasp the hope that is always truly America.

That is why we remain so intently student-centered at every turn. We who are so blessed to work in higher education stand at the front edge of that powerful fiber of hope and extend our hands to students every day, every semester, every year, and every generation. Over the past 15 years, our Faculty has created and sustained two magnificent programs that feed great educational opportunity and enhance student success: the annual “Minds at Work” Student Research Conference in February and the comprehensive “Life of the Mind” Honors Program. Both are growing because the Faculty and the Students have made them challenging, dynamic and relevant.

We want our Students to succeed in and out of the classroom. Athletics has played an important role at Heidelberg since baseball was organized in 1883, football was revived in 1895, and we joined the Ohio College Association in 1907. Through organized league play and informal athletic opportunities, we encourage our Students to pursue active and healthy lives. Ultimately, Heidelberg Athletics contributes to the whole learning experience through teamwork, leadership, and individual responsibility. It is also about fun and social gathering. And we are thrilled to be hosting our first home football game in over 60 years on our campus ... on our Mayer Field ... tomorrow against Marietta College!

We focus on student success in critical ways, including Financial Aid. I am proud that Heidelberg chose to cover the entire \$425,000 shortfall in grant money for our 294 new and returning students who suddenly lost their Ohio College Opportunity Grant in July, only a few weeks before the start of fall semester. We will continue to work as hard as possible to make a Heidelberg education affordable, accessible, and all about value.

As we look forward, we need to ensure greater success for our expanding student body. The number one priority at Heidelberg University is Academic Excellence. We need to elevate our attention on improving the core academic mission and offering. Toward those ends, we should introduce a sense of “Faculty Eminence” in how we support the Faculty’s efforts to strengthen their teaching, advising, researching and programming. We must also create a more vibrant “living and learning” residential opportunity for our Students here on campus. I would ask us to consider what is missing at Heidelberg and how do we fill those gaps? How can we do a better job of preparing students for their lives and career paths?

Our core thread is to fulfill a shared purpose with distinction.

We sit today surrounded by many students who are the path breakers in their respective families, for they are the first generation to attend college. Proudly, we are home to about 30% first generation college students. We are also surrounded by students who represent the second, third, fourth, and sometimes the fifth generation family member to attend our institution. Great people have devoted their lives to Heidelberg Students since the beginning. The two Good brothers, Jeremiah and Reuben, helped found this College in 1850 and they devoted 58 years collectively to teaching our first generation of young men and women. Mr. Henry Leonard, affectionately known as “The Fisherman,” worked as the Financial Agent (“fund raiser”) for 32 years here until he retired in 1888. Our longest serving president was Reverend Charles Miller, whose term spanned 35 years from 1902-1937. Mr. Mark Friedley retired as Trustee Emeritus in 2008 after serving on our Board for 36 years.

This thread of devotion continues as Faculty and Staff members support our Students with that same passion today. We are a community of committed colleagues who work as groundskeepers, researchers, office managers, coaches, teachers, cooks, plumbers, assistants, custodians, program coordinators, clerks, technicians, librarians, counselors and administrators. Many among us have already given 20, 30, and even 40 years of excellent service to Heidelberg. All of these outstanding individuals serve to enrich the lives of our Students. That is our passion statement.

In the years ahead, we will seek opportunities to strengthen ourselves. Our aim is to prepare students to act effectively and to lead with integrity in a world of continuous change because we want our Students to succeed as global citizens who think critically, communicate clearly and serve thoughtfully. That is our scale for measuring outcomes. With an open mind of practical inquiry, we must all engage in substantive conversations around the issues and questions that matter most toward more clearly defining who we are, shaping how we want to be, prioritizing what we want to offer, and focusing how we want to move forward in the higher education world that we inhabit. We cannot, and we will not, lose a confident grip on *Our Thread of Purpose*.

One of the most insightful and important books about organizational success that appeared in the business and leadership press over the last 10 years was the international bestseller *Good to Great* by Jim Collins. Many people are familiar with some of its key principles like “First Who, Then What” and “The Hedgehog Concept.” I had the privilege of working at Dunkin’ Brands when Mr. Jon Luther

used the Collins model as the foundation for leading positive change. Today, I return to the closing passage in *Good to Great* for the bell that gives tone to our lives here at Heidelberg University:

“When all these pieces come together, not only does your work move toward greatness, but so does your life. For, in the end, it is impossible to have a great life unless it is a meaningful life. And it is very difficult to have a meaningful life without meaningful work. Perhaps, then, you might gain that rare tranquility that comes from knowing that you’ve had a hand in creating something of intrinsic excellence that makes a contribution. Indeed, you might even gain that deepest of all satisfactions: knowing that your short time here on this earth has been well spent, and that it mattered.”

With the institutional and community joy that this occasion invites, let us celebrate together today and over the next few days. Then let us get back to the work that we cherish on behalf of Heidelberg University. We have many important matters to tend, great opportunities to grasp, and exciting places to reach. Let us go forward together—Faculty, Staff, Students, Alumni, Trustees and Friends—with a learning spirit, knowing that sometimes we will falter, but that we will always become better. *Our Thread of Purpose* calls us to the next 160 years because it matters! I am already travelling with every one of you.

With deep gratitude of mind and heart, thank you.

Robert H. Huntington
November 6, 2009
Tiffin, Ohio