



Inauguration Address

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Over the last 8 months (tomorrow!), many of you have heard me talk in one form or another about calling, frequently in the context of my own calling and how I ended up here at Centenary. But today, I want to talk about our calling together as Centenary College at this time and place and how we will live that out in our new strategic plan.

First let me reiterate that this is our calling **together**. I am certain that, like me, most if not all of our faculty and staff feel a special calling into their individual positions. Lord knows they are not in it for the money. But it is especially important to discern our **collective** calling. Many of you are familiar with the work of Jim Collins and his book *Good to Great* where he talks about the importance of getting everybody on the bus and in the right seats. But I heard a talk about a month ago and the speaker challenged that metaphor. It's problematic, as he pointed out, because the only one working on the bus is the driver. Everybody else is in the back playing games on their phones.

Instead, he suggested the better metaphor of the rowing shell, where you need everyone rowing. And as I began to push on the metaphor in my mind, I realized it's even more accurate. Not only do you need everyone rowing, but they need to be in sync, otherwise the boat starts to wander off course, weave back and forth, and worse case, crash in to the shore. Our common calling, as set forth in our mission statement and operationalized in our new strategic plan, will assure that we are all rowing in the same direction and with the same rhythm. And one of the imperatives, or pillars, of the plan is that Centenary will commit to providing our faculty and staff with the resources, culture, and infrastructure to carry out our calling.

So we are called. Called to what? I entitled this talk "Called to this time and place" but I suppose that needs a little fleshing out. "Called to this time." Centenary College



must continue to do what we have done for almost 200 years: prepare our students with the tools so that they are both fulfilled as individuals and valued in the marketplace. We must continue to articulate passionately our belief in the value of a liberal arts education and reject the narrative that that education is somehow disconnected from the needs of our society and community.

We are told, depending on which visionary we are listening to, that the world is disrupted, turbulent, connected, flat. However you choose to characterize it, we live in a world that above else is defined by change. Our students will have to negotiate that change. Fortunately, the skills we prepare them with are exactly what the market is calling for. Communication, critical thinking, teamwork and perhaps above all creativity.

One of the few things that seems reliably predictable about the future is that anything that can be automated will be. I heard an anecdote a few months ago and my friend Rick Bateman from BPC who I am honored to say is here today gave me the exact source of Tom Friedman, say that the factory of the future will consist of a machine, a man, and a dog. The man will be there to feed the dog and the dog will be there to make sure the man doesn't touch the machine.

As it has been since the Industrial Revolution, tasks that involve essentially repetition without creativity will be done by machines. It's just that the machines have gotten better. In the end, though, we still need the people that have the creativity and agility of mind to solve the problems in the first place.

Some of you may have seen Mark Cuban's comments to Business Insider a couple of weeks ago. Now I know we have some Texans here and I can't comment on



Cuban's prowess as an NBA team owner, but I know he's got a good track record as a businessman and forward thinker. He said, "I personally think there's going to be a greater demand in 10 years for liberal arts majors than there were for programming majors and maybe even engineering, because when the data is all being spit out for you, options are being spit out for you, you need a different perspective in order to have a different view of the data. And so having someone who is more of a freer thinker."

A freer thinker. That's precisely the original meaning of "liberal" in the context of liberal arts. One of my colleagues says we need to be helping our students learn "uniquely human skills." In our strategic plan, we address both the curricular and co-curricular experience. We know that as much student learning takes place outside the classroom as inside, so we will emphasize the need for a coherent experience that allows students to make meaning from all aspects of their time here.

We will continue to emphasize the need for our students to be exposed to the global community they will work in, building on the programs that have made Centenary the college with the highest percentage of students that have an international educational experience.

We are also called to this time to answer not just the needs of the marketplace, but the needs of our society. The oldest tradition of the academy is the pursuit of truth through dialog. We are all descendants of Socrates, who taught through questioning, through asking his students to examine their ideas, pushing at the weak spots, revealing the critical core. "Iron sharpens iron" the Bible tells us. Disagreements are not inherently wrong. We seem to have turned away from the idea behind the phrase "reasonable people can disagree." Today, if you don't agree with me, you must be evil, stupid, and/or disloyal. As educators, we must stem this tide. For the sake of our society, our



nation, and our world, we must model and support the ability to reason through our differences. And to be able to acknowledge our own fallibility. Oliver Cromwell said “I beseech you by the bowels of Christ, to think it possible you may be mistaken.” We must be able to change our minds as we engage with others of different minds in the pursuit of truth.

We are also called to this **place** and I mean that at a number of levels. At the most local, Centenary needs to be actively engaged as an anchor for the Highlands neighborhood. We want to be partners with other institutions, agencies, and individuals to bring about a safe and dynamic community. We will continue to make our campus spaces available and welcoming.

Moving outward, one of the pillars of our strategic plan from the very beginning has been to enhance Centenary’s position as Shreveport-Bossier’s college. We have been here for 109 years. As a private residential liberal arts college, we play a unique role in this community. And it is a role that is valued by many of the leaders in our community who benefitted from such an education, whether here or at our sister institutions around the region and the country, some of who I am pleased to say are represented here today. While Centenary is small, our economic impact is significant and the presence of a great liberal arts college in the community is an important factor in businesses and individual’s decisions to relocate here.

We will be part of the revival of our city and area. As we plan and develop new academic programs, we will have the needs of our community as a top criterion in making those additions. Building out from the success of the Center for Family Owned Business, we will be working to help our Shreveport Bossier workforce address their requirements for continuing education and other types of non-degree education.



We need to work with our higher education partners in this area. I am accustomed to working in a strong consortium of colleges and universities. I truly believe we are not competitors; we each have our own institutional charges, our own strengths that we bring to the table. We look forward to working with our other great institutions in the area to help students have clear pathways as they “swirl” between schools.

One of the goals we have identified is to build on our strength as a cultural center for the ArkLaTex. From the firm foundations of the Meadows museum, and the Marjorie Lyons Playhouse and our music program including the world travelling Centenary Choir, we can go farther. Our Provost, Dr. Jenifer Ward, has insightfully identified that we sit at a unique cultural crossroads. We can draw on the Cajun and Creole heritage of South LA, the cowboy cultural of TX, the Ozark legacy to our north, and the Mississippi traditions to our east. This rich tapestry offers untapped potential to both showcase and study the way these cultures live and intersect, how we tell stories, and how we can preserve our roots.

Finally, we are called to both this time and place by our heritage and history with the United Methodist Church. I am honored that so many clergy accepted my invitation to join the academic procession. Centenary is proud of its many graduates who are serving churches in both ordained and lay roles and we will be building and strengthening the Christian Leadership Center as well as our ties to the Conferences, the local churches, and the Perkins School of Theology. There are also some exciting new opportunities being developed among the consortium of United Methodist colleges and universities.

As we do all these things—and others, including strengthening our athletics program, we will accomplish our most immediate need, to grow enrollment. Centenary will always and proudly be a small school, but it is no secret that we are currently too small.



I am confident that we are putting in place strategies and plans that will bring us more students while not compromising our academic standards or diminishing the quality of our student experience.

As many of you know, although I am a lifelong United Methodist, I spent the last 16 years working at a Franciscan college and came to know a fair bit about St. Francis. He's a fascinating man, much more complex than the little figure on the birdbath. And he shares a lot with John Wesley, but that's a topic for another day. In his final moments, as he waited to join who he called Sister Death, Francis turned to his followers at his bedside and said "I have done what is mine to do. May Christ teach you what is yours." As a community, we have spent the last several months discerning what is ours to do. And now it is time to move to action. Some of you have heard me quote Dr. Martin Luther King—it's one of my favorites. "We are now faced with the fact, my friends, that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, **there is such a thing as being too late**. Procrastination is still the thief of time. . . The tide in the affairs of men does not remain at flood—it ebbs. We may cry out desperately for time to pause in her passage, but time is adamant to every plea and rushes on."

And so must we. I truly believe we have a bright future together as a college and as a community. I am humbled to be entrusted with the legacy of this great college and excited to lead it towards its third century. So: Forward, Forward, Centenary.

