

Central College Heritage Day 2001 Address

Arend D. Lubbers

One of my earliest memories was the smell and sight of clouds of dust as our green Hudson left the pavement on Iowa Highway 92 somewhere west of Washington. The year was 1934 and there was a stretch of unpaved road between Washington and Oskaloosa. It was hot, very hot and dry. My parents, my brother, my grandmother, and I were en route to Pella where my father was the new president of Central College. All our lives, in different ways, would be affected permanently.

We moved into Dunn Cottage, the president's residence named for the most revered of Central's Baptist presidents. Dunn Cottage had a screen porch across the entire front of the house. In spring, summer, and fall, we dined on it, played games, had parties, and my father, an occasional smoker at the time, smoked a cigarette. The roof had a guardrail, so on the hottest of Iowa nights, we threw our mattresses on the roof and slept there. The view from the porch was a panorama of the entire campus. The president could see all; perhaps the porch roof was designed for that purpose. His son could see all, too, and though he didn't know it at the time, a college campus became his natural habitat, and he would never be comfortable away from one.

My father, Irwin Lubbers, came to save Central College in the depths of the Great Depression. He may not have understood it that way when he accepted the position. He was ready and eager to become a college president. He wasn't there long before he knew what he had to do. His initial salary was \$6,000, a handsome sum in 1934, yet there was not money to pay it. Nor was there money to pay the professors and staff members. He called a meeting of the faculty. I suppose it was on the third floor of Jordan Hall, where the faculty and the president met the first Monday evening of each month. In his address he asked them to accept a salary at half of what their letters of agreement called for, and he guaranteed that he would find the money to pay it. He immediately campaigned through the churches and made good on his promise. He reduced his salary by half as well, and in 1945, the year he left, he finally earned the salary of \$6,000 he was offered initially. Those were the days when students often paid tuition in produce from their parents' farms, and what was received was on the menu at Graham Hall or on a faculty member's table.

My father carried four-by-eight cards with him on his fundraising jaunts. He marked them, placing a dollar figure in each rectangle he drew on this card. At the beginning, the categories were modest because money was so scarce. He

would work his way through town, drinking coffee in the Central Park Café or playing checkers near the Gaass Law office, and one of his friends, perhaps prompted to do so, would ask, “Irwin, how are you coming on your four by eight game?” My father would pull out the card and say, “I crossed off ten spaces in the first two weeks, and I surely hope to do at least five this week. Albert, I don’t think you took one of the spaces. Look (showing Albert the card), I have at least one left in each category, which will you take?” And so Central kept going.

When he came there were some fine faculty members, and there were weak ones too. He also a rock solid dean, Hentry Pietenpol, who held the college together admirably. In his early years my father made some star appointments. Bill Wing, then in his early twenties, in literature and French; Bill VanderLugt in philosophy; Vernon Bobbit in art; Alice Lammers in the library; and Richard “Babe” Tysseling as coach. You didn’t have a football coach, basketball coach, track coach then—you had a coach. Tysseling did it all. Later Harriet Heusinkveld came on board. When my father left eleven years after arriving during that hot, dry summer, the faculty was strong. He had not only saved the college, he and the faculty were commended by the North Central Association in the report that granted Central initial accreditation.

Fourteen years later the boy who watched all from the front porch, who occasionally unlocked windows by day so he and his buddies could sneak into college buildings by night was grown enough to be summoned by then president Gerritt VanderLugt to return to the college as vice president for development. The thought was, “The old man could raise money, maybe the kid can too.” After one year, Dr. Vander Lugt left the presidency. I wasn’t privy to the deliberations of the search committee for a new president, but I was told some faculty signed a petition asking the board to appoint me. The trustees took their “leap of faith” and made me the youngest college president in the nation.

What was President Vander Lugt’s legacy? To me the outstanding achievement of his short administration was the gathering to the college of the finest teachers any college of liberal arts could hope to attract. What was my charge? To find more students for the faculty to teach. There were about four hundred students, the lowest enrollment of an accredited college in Iowa. The softly spoken second charge was, “Let’s win some football games.” In the community it was not so softly spoken.

Football and admissions came together in an interesting way. Babe Tysseling was not athletic director, only a football coach. His record was good, but lately other conference schools had not adhered to an agreement to limit sports expenditures while Central did. Central football was troubled. Babe needed an

equal playing field and he got it. Only a season into Babe's rebuilding program, the director of admissions resigned in January. On a sunny winter morning I walked over to the gym and said, "Babe, I need your help. We lost our admissions director in mid-recruiting season. Will you step in until we find the right person for the job?" Well, we had found the right person. He didn't know it then, nor did I. That admissions office took on new life. As we relentlessly moved toward football season, I began to worry. Babe was working what I considered a miracle in a few months, and I said, "Babe, it's your choice – football coach or admissions director. You have the admissions job permanently if you want it." I think he believed I wanted to replace him as football coach when he accepted the admissions job. I was concerned only in finding a person who could direct admissions, and Babe, in a short time, had proven he was that person. You can always find a football coach, and did we ever find one!

Ron Schipper was football coach at Jackson, Michigan, High School. He had never coached college football. I called my old political science professor and former football coach at Hope College. He said, "Get Ron." I did, but it wasn't easy. The rest is history. Never a losing season. His record started at 6-3 then 7-2, 7-1-1, 8-1, and 9-0. Central had thirty-six years of winning football including a national championship.

The enrollment figures were more impressive than the football record. From the four hundred students in 1960 the march up the mountain was steady and rapid. By the fall of 1968, there were more than thirteen hundred enrolled. My primary and secondary objectives were secured by two able football coaches, one practicing his profession the other using those organizational talents for another purpose.

What happened at Central as a result? Studies said a college needed at least eight hundred students to be viable. As we reached that number, the economics of scale became apparent. There were more resources to be used for the mission of the college. The faculty had more money and more students. Combine that cadre of good professors and a few more dollars for their use and a formula is in place for a burst of energy. The word went out about good teaching. It is interesting to note that a survey asking freshmen where they first learned about Central revealed that the largest single attention catcher, even among women and nonathletic men, was the highly successful football team.

I had another responsibility as president, one that came naturally, but I had not consciously defined it, nor had anyone done it for me. I can illustrate by telling about my trip to Sully. I don't remember the year, but we had held our first dance on campus. A parent of a student and a member of the Reformed Church in Sully alerted me to a move to discontinue the annual sizeable contribution

from the church to the college because we permitted dancing. He and the minister wanted to head it off and invited me to a meeting of the consistory. I knew a few members, one fine old man in particular who had befriended me. He was the leader of my opposition. Once we had established that he and the other opponents believed that dancing led to premarital intimate relations, I asked the minister how many members of the church were in between the ages of seventeen and twenty-one. He replied about thirty-five. "Among that group how many had to deal with the problem of pre-marital pregnancy? I asked." He could think of five. I told the consistory we had eight hundred in that age group, most of whom danced, and I knew of only one premarital pregnancy. We concluded with a friendly discussion. It appeared our detractors would not carry the day. Though my friend did not prevent the contribution, he had the last word as the meeting concluded. He leapt to his feet and said in a loud voice, "Dancing is a sin." It fell to me to take the sin out of dancing. That is a way of saying there were old views and old ways that had to be relegated to the past for the college to communicate effectively to students in the 1960s and beyond.

Perhaps the greatest accomplishment of my administration was putting together the team of administrators who reported to me and operated the daily functions of the college. Jim Graham, the reluctant dean, who had to be persuaded to stay in a job that he did superbly. Bill Thompson, whom I met for the first time in a dusty New Jersey hotel parking lot and persuaded to come to Central and help put it on the map. He did it with class. Bill Hinga, a friend from high school and college days, came from Maryland to become an incomparably good dean of students, later vice president, serving with me just as his father had served with mine at Hope College. Mart Heerema, who was a mentor and model to me during boyhood years, at last accepted my continuing appeal to leave the Rolscreen Company and return to his alma mater as business manager. I have never known a more creative college financier. And, of course, Babe Tysseling. My personal ties to these people and others on the faculty and staff made leaving Central difficult. When Ken Weller succeeded me, I knew the period of strong leadership stretching back several decades would stretch forward into a new era, and so it did. And it is renewed and continuing to be carried on by President Rowe, the faculty and staff, the present day keepers of the ethos.

I have speculated on Central's ethos and its sources. What are they? First, the foundation in the Baptist Church, given over in 1916 to the Reformed Church in America, made the traditions and the teaching of the Christian religion bedrock for the institution. However they are expressed at the college, issues are likely to be debated within the Christian context. When you think of it, the church needs that; for knowledge, the business of the college, must always flow to the church if religion is to be liberated from its worst tendencies. That happens best when educated people not only comprise the church's leadership but fill the pews.

Central graduates those people. The college's character was formed by Christian practice and the intellectual swirl that surrounds the tension between knowing the truth and seeking it.

Second, Central is defined by a close and unusual relationship with the community of Pella. From the time the Dutch Calvinist minister Hendrik Scholte gave land to the American Baptists for a college, the community and college have been bound together. They care about each other.

When Peace Street was closed, the bricks torn out, and the bulldozers tearing up the earth for the lake in the middle of the campus, Mart Heerema called me in New Jersey, where my family and I were visiting. Mart told me that the whole town had come to the site and, upon viewing the upheaval, thought we should stop. Protected by distance from public opinion, I said, "Keep digging." I relate this incident because it illustrates the community's interest in decisions at the college, and even a desire to participate in them. Also, it was to the industrial community patriot, Pete Kuyper, that we turned for resources. Though there are inevitable town and gown rumbles, this college and this community are more intertwined and affect one another more than is common. Central cannot be explained without this understanding.

The alumni/ae are the third source of Central's ethos. I knew the alumni/ae before 1968. Since then, I have observed with great interest the interaction between the college and its graduates over the last thirty years. All colleges are defined by their graduates, but each has its own characteristics. Central shaped its graduates, but it appears to me that the widespread and intense interest of many graduates shapes the college as well. No jarring breaks with the past take place because of this relationship, only reinforcement of what Central is and, also, the momentum to build and plan for the Central of the future. The alumni/ae help maintain the spirit and, at the same time, advance projects that bring change for academic and social improvement.

The final element in the ethos is the faculty. Throughout my remarks I have referred to the faculty because they ultimately may be the major determinant of what Central College is. There are two faculty characteristics that make this so. For years, a high quality of teaching has been standard. Over the past fifty years, the reputation for the college has continued to improve. Teaching is the primary reason. All colleges are expected to have an adversarial relationship between faculty and administration. Some professors and administrators thrive on it, though it is never healthy and seldom necessary. The faculty here has always shown a willingness to be members of the team with administrators. When, on rare occasions, they are faced with a decision unacceptable to them or what they consider mismanagement they appear to use the best methods rather than the

worst to address them. Cynicism does not reign here, and that single factor has been a force in Central's progress as well as a characteristic of what Central is. This does not mean that the usual tensions are nonexistent. I remember meeting with a young, yet tenured, professor who thought of himself as a young Turk. He talked about "we" and "they." Of course, I was "they" and the faculty whom he presumed to represent were "we." Fortunately for me, I had come recently from a discussion with two new untenured assistant professors who complained about the influence of tenured, old-guard profs. One whom they mentioned was my discussant. I had the pleasure of interrupting to tell him, "Sorry you're no longer a 'we,' you are now a 'they.'"

In our family's Dunn Cottage time, my father would tell me bedtime stories. He invented a fictional character named Pella Fella. One night, after a story, I asked him if Pella was the center. "The center of what?" he asked in turn. "You know, the center of everything." A child's concept, its, but I believe Central is the emotional center for many who have walked the campus, worked in its halls, and felt its spirit. When I was a child, I hurried to the gym for basketball games. When Homer Voskuil, Huck Wagamon, Tryg Gruffman, and their teammates ran on the floor, and Mr. Rockwell's band stuck up "CUI," I would shout ecstatically, "CUI OH CUI. May your glory never die." No one had explained to me that CUI stood for. For all I knew it was "see your eye," and that seemed strange. But I knew I was shouting for my team, my school, my dad's school, my mother's school, the only school. Tears welled up when we lost; exhilaration exploded when we won. I was at the center and whenever I come here I am coming back to my center, and I think many others feel the same way.