

Inauguration remarks of Dr. James L. Peterson
Delivered during his Investiture Service at Gustavus Adolphus College
April 16, 2004

Now, with a heart full of gratitude for all of you who have chosen to join us today, I wish to make a few special acknowledgements. First, I salute the Board of Trustees, for their invitation to return to my alma mater as its 14th president. I am most grateful for that invitation - nearly every day. We had a board meeting this morning and that was their last chance to call off the inauguration, if they thought this wasn't working out. They chose not to. So we move ahead.

Secondly, I want to give thanks to the students. Whether you're aware of it or not, you give this new president great joy - every day. I am especially honored by your presence and your participation today.

To my new colleagues and friends, the faculty - thank you - for your hospitable welcome to the academy. I do appreciate the patience and the honeymoon you have afforded me (so far) - and thanks for donning your academic finery today. You look good!

Thanks to the administrative and support staff for their warm welcome, especially to my Administrative Council colleagues, because without your skills, experience and commitment to Gustavus, (and your good humor), imagining the future during this first year would be impossible for me.

Thank you to all of you who have taken time to be here today, close friends from my former life in the museum community, other old friends from other lives long ago, my new higher education colleagues, good neighbors from St. Peter, college classmates, alumni, parents and friends of Gustavus. Thank you all for coming to celebrate with us.

And special thanks to Monsignor Greg Schaffer who joins us from San Lucas Toliman in Guatemala. It took me nearly 60 years to claim a mentor in my life - in fact a personal hero. I do that now. It's an honor for me, and the entire Gustavus community to have you with us, Padre Gregorio.

And brief but profound thanks to my family, for as in any family, in no small measure, they bear responsibility however unwittingly, for my being here. As most of you know, we are very much a Gustavus family, (three generations so far – and a possible fourth sitting here in front) - Mother, father, brother, wife, daughter, maybe grandchildren - all Gusties with the exception of my brother who got confused and went to Macalester, and an errant son who chose St. Olaf. So the Gustavus tradition runs deep in me, as does the Lutheran tradition, with a Lutheran pastor father, a Lutheran pastor spouse, and a Lutheran pastor daughter-in-law. One final acknowledgement is for the steadfast encouragement and freedom to dream and to stretch. Susan, thank you for that.

There is a theme that's clearly running through this inauguration weekend. Shortly after I arrived, I used the phrase "the promise of Gustavus." It seems to have stuck. But before I say anything about that promise and how I think about that, I want to give credit to the sources of that promise. It should come as no surprise that it arises from multiple sources. I believe that's what makes it such a firm and compelling promise.

First, most certainly the promise of Gustavus comes to us from its grounding in mission – in its reason for being, in its statement of purpose, in the clarity of its claims of what difference this college really intends to make in the lives of its students and in the world.

Our promise also grows out of our statements of values, of what we care about. We hold these values high at Gustavus – Community, Service, Justice, Faith, Excellence. Also, the promise flows out of a vision of the future, ideally a commonly shared vision, for this community to embrace and work toward together.

The promise of this college grows out of its rich history and traditions. It grows from deep roots in the imperative of serving immigrants, in our case primarily Swedish immigrants. It grows out of ties to Sweden and many of its traditions and institutions. Certainly it comes to us grounded in our Lutheran understandings of education, embracing open dialogue, promoting critical inquiry into both faith and reason, and the search for vocation, being called to use our particular gifts in service to the needs of others.

The promise of Gustavus comes from people - extraordinary people! - those rocks who created our history and traditions - the people on whose shoulders

Gustavus stands today. Dr. Potts named some of them earlier. Those of you who have history here could add many more great names. But more importantly, it comes from the people who walk this campus today, people who teach, who inspire, who learn together, who support, who maintain and manage, who counsel, discipline and challenge. The Gustavus promise comes from all of us.

And of course, most importantly, at our core, is the promise of God carried in each of us through the Lord Jesus Christ. Fresh from our Easter celebrations of the resurrection, that promise of God's love and hope and life in us inspires all we do here.

Now, what about this promise? I've been told that a new president's inauguration speech is the most important she or he will ever make on campus - because it's the only time most people might actually be listening. Emboldened by that possibility, I wish to be extravagantly presumptive (this is very difficult for a middle child to do) and speak today for the entire Gustavus community. I wish to make promises on our collective behalf - promises from the Gustavus community to the Gustavus community. For while I could promise these things on my own, I cannot deliver them. But we can. Should we choose to do so - we can - together.

Let us promise first what might be expected but should be reaffirmed this afternoon, and that is our continuing commitment to hold high the value of teaching, learning and practicing the liberal arts. Our colleague, Will Friert, presented a wonderful lecture a couple of weeks ago about the liberal arts calling what we do here "a conversation... an ongoing conversation." Bart Giamatti, former president of Yale, and a former Commissioner of Baseball, used the term, "...that serious and splendid conversations..." He called it "the music of civilization, the sound of human beings shaping and sharing, mooring ideals to reality, making the world, in pain, work."

That's wonderfully poetic, but it is also our work. The promise of the liberal arts is education for life, preparation for life and lifelong learning. It's preparing students to answer questions we don't even know yet. In matters of faith as well as reason, this is ...learning to love the questions - all of them.

We make the promise here to coach students in the art and science of thinking and innovating as well as understanding; of questioning as well as

answering; imagining and creating as well as practicing; leading as well as following; creating change as well as managing change. This is who we are. This is what we aspire to do.

Secondly, let us commit together to continue active engagement with the tension between honoring our “rootedness” in the church, in our Lutheranism, and at the same time, being informed and enriched by the whole universe of knowledge, traditions, theologies and world views. I think we must promise to embrace that tension, and find our way to be nourished rather than troubled by it. Surely we can create ways to harness both tradition and trajectory and thus, again in our own way, build academic strength, embrace a diversity agenda, promote international perspective, and support a stronger and more vibrant life of faith on campus and off. This is not an easy task. But I happen to think this particular community of learners is not only capable of doing this but can challenge itself to become a model for others.

Next, let us recommit to our core values: Community, Service, Faith, Justice, Excellence. These are the promises we make about what’s important around here, what behaviors we talk about, that we model and reward, that we share as some of the glue that holds us together over the years. Let us be sure these are not simply attributes named and described as a part of a formal college policy or trotted out on ceremonial occasions. It should be our intention that they can be discussed and debated, periodically questioned and challenged, defined and redefined, practiced purposefully, and made relevant to individual and collective life on the Gustavus campus and beyond.

We must commit ourselves to doing a better job of telling the world how good we are at what we do here on this hill and beyond. We must get better at measuring, monitoring, marking and celebrating our successes. As stressful as it might be for some humble Scandinavian psyches, we need to become much louder and prouder about telling our stories - to prospective students, funders, alumni, and indeed to ourselves! I like the phrase my colleague Bill Frame, President of Augsburg College has used, “militant modesty.”

This Gustavus community like any other, is far from perfect and we need to acknowledge our failures too. But we are in many ways far better than we profess. Let’s all promise to tell our story better.

And let's not forget to keep working at communicating well with each other, too. We can't work well together if we're not talking to each other.

Next, let's commit to spanning our disciplinary boundaries. I think we can promise ourselves new views of how we organize our thinking, our teaching, our academic structure and our administrative organization. If part of our task is to free students to think beyond their own boundaries and beyond traditional ways of doing and thinking, we should certainly be challenging the college to do the same in all it does.

Here's a last promise we can make together. It's the biggest one of all. Let's commit ourselves to taking serious steps toward preparing for the future. First-year students fifteen to twenty years from now must encounter a Gustavus vastly different from today's. Changes in the college's environment will have occurred at an unprecedented rate and the degree of difference between now and then will be significantly greater than any like period in the college's history.

If my grandson, Sam, not yet four, is fortunate enough to encounter this college as a successful, vibrant, high quality institution, some very important promises will have to have been fulfilled. Let me just name a few.

Sam's fellow students and faculty will have to look a lot different than they ever have. They will have to come from more and varied cultural, ethnic, economic and geographical backgrounds. This greater diversity of the campus community will add depth and breadth to Sam's view of the world. It will challenge him and help to prepare him for life and leadership in communities that will be substantially different than the one he lives in now.

The way Sam learns inside and outside the classroom will be strongly directed by technologies most of us can't imagine today. How he uses technology to communicate with his professors, advisors and the campus community and with his family at home will be hugely different than students today. This not-yet-four-year-old, is already more comfortable with electronic buttons than his grandfather.

As some of you know, that doesn't take much, but imagine what his cohort's expectations will be for technology support when they arrive on this campus. Gustavus will have to be wired in new ways.

Sam's academic opportunities will have to far surpass what has been previously available here. A thriving competitive Gustavus will have to be providing the very best of instruction and instructional support, in every single department, in every classroom, lab and studio. It will have to provide maximum opportunity for faculty/student interaction and faculty development. On both the curricular and co-curricular sides, and in administrative and support functions, there will be no space for mediocrity anywhere on this campus.

Sam's college will have to be financially more stable and more secure - better endowed. It will have to be generating more revenue from a greater number of sources. It must be able to claim a higher degree of accessibility to students from all economic strata. It must move faster and make change more readily. It will need more volunteers working on its behalf. I have no doubt that it will have forged new partnerships and created new cooperative systems with other colleges and universities. Many of those potential partners are probably represented here in this chapel today, by the way.

But let us be clear. These future conditions, these attributes, these promises (to continue stretching the theme here) are not just things to imagine – or notions to throw into an inauguration speech. Promoting diversity, supporting new technologies, strengthening the academic program, communicating better, moving faster, generating new revenues. These are not desirables! They're imperatives! Sam and other prospective students will not be offered a quality Gustavus education unless, starting now, we promise each other, everyone who's a part of this community, that we can and will act to make a difference, a more sizable and notable difference, than we have ever made before. We all know the world in which this college operates a decade or two from now will be nowhere near the same as it is today. This college must be prepared to reflect that new world.

As I move toward closing now, you might well be asking, "How on earth are we going to fulfill all these promises we make to each other? How do we get all these things done?" Indeed! How can we look back, in five years or 20 years, and have cause to celebrate real successes – to say to each other - "Well done! Not only does Gustavus survive. It thrives!" And maybe just as importantly, how do we avoid the specter of collective disappointment over the perception of a series of broken promises?

I suggest the following:

1. By maintaining a stronger sense of urgency and fervor for our work
2. By significantly expanding the number of volunteers actively engaged in that work
3. By actively promoting deep, lively and civil intellectual and spiritual discourse
4. By better integrating our financial, organizational and people resources
5. By finishing our current strategic planning work and then focusing intensely, campus-wide, on those things that we decide matter most. We do need to talk about these plans and ideas more than we have so far - but not much more! Because we have much to do...

The final part of the answer as to how we execute these kinds of promises is sitting in this chapel. The cartoon character Pogo might have said it this way: We have met the promise – and it is us!! Indeed it is the Gustavus community at large that will succeed in these endeavors, or not. If we all sit back now and wait to see if Jim Peterson delivers on these promises, we will surely fail. I cannot deliver on these promises. Rather, it is my great expectation that we can share in the making of these promises as a community - that we can share in the work necessary to accomplish our goals, and that we can then share in the great satisfaction and great joy that will come from their achievement.

Thank you for listening today. Thank you all for joining in this celebration of new beginnings. Thanks to the Gustavus community for allowing me to be a part of delivering on our promise. You have my promise that I will do all I can with you to help this college continue to build an even stronger and more vibrant future.

And now I close - and after a bit more of our celebration this weekend, we return to our everyday tasks, to the good and glorious work we do on behalf of Gustavus and its future. Because, to paraphrase Robert Frost, we have promises to keep. We have promises to keep.