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Remarks at the Memorial Service for Irwin J. Lubbers, delivered at Hope College on September 15, 1985

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MEMORIAL SERVICE FOR IRWIN J. LUBBERS

Sunday, September 15, 1985
Hope College

(Remarks by Arend D. Lubbers)

I remember driving on a dusty road that pierced the rolling waves of cornfields, the excitement elevating in anticipation of the high clackety bridge that crossed the Mississippi at Davenport. Muscatine, then Davenport, over the bridge, and on to the valley of the Rock River. The high banks on the right, fields and pastures on the left, past Chief Black Hawk's statue high above the river - remote, elusive, and for a boy, fascinating. Into Rockford, then industrial Beloit, on to a new terrain with pastures and cows and fields with a hint of sand and the water beyond.

Milwaukee could not be avoided and for a boy from a little Iowa town, even driving through Milwaukee was always an event. Then there was a 40-mile shot up the lake to Cedar Grove. Population 999. Past the town limits. Past the shops on main street. One block beyond the bank, a turn to the left, four houses down, another left into a gravel driveway, and the journey ended. A rush to the porch where an old man with a once-handsome face and a moustache bent down, hugged us against his scratchy whiskers, his eyes continually twinkling. Always, I thought later, with delight at seeing his family, and with a pleasure he anticipated at recounting for us the latest story or event he had heard and enjoyed.

Then, running into the house, embracing around the waist a woman who seemed to envelop us in spirit, but firmly with her arms as well. Her face was broad, always serene, yet not remote. She also could break into a beautiful laugh when amused or pleased. I always thought she was a person who understood. She could cope. She never lost control without having a passion to control.
These were my father's parents. They were such friendly people. They were Dutch. They were midwest, like so many first generation ethnic Americans. Midwest. Like Lake Michigan; like fields of grain and barns and cows; like the small towns. Their tradition included Fourth of July celebrations, town anniversaries, family reunions, mission fests in summer where missionaries with commitment explained why and told of needs and places beyond the midwest. They lived where the church with admonition, praise and love was present, insistent, accepted, and enjoyed.

I came to appreciate how deeply religion penetrated their subconscious and how happily their consciousness. There was no weight, no burden. They were not highly educated, but they were wise. There were two qualities of their immigrant parents that must have carried through them to their offspring...determination and vision. Vision for the future, for the family, for the enterprise embarked upon. Certainly the seventh of their ten children came by those qualities. They named him Irwin Jacob and endowed him with all the qualities that they had taken from their heritage and from the rich Wisconsin, midwestern Christian environment in which they had matured.

On my boyhood visits to Cedar Grove there was always mention of the academy. As a little child I didn't know what an academy was, only that my Dad had attended it and it was good. The vision of those Dutch immigrant farmers saw beyond the fertility of their land, beyond even their need and desire to praise and worship the God with whom they lived so closely, beyond to the minds of their children and their children's children.

At the Wisconsin Classical Academy Irwin Lubbers had his spiritual commitment to the Bible enhanced by learning to appreciate its literary beauty. Shakespeare entered his world along with the dramatic and romantic poets. Here the force of Walt Whitman captured his imagination. The writers and poets took hold of him and never let go, and you who knew him well and listened
to him often know that. You remember his dramatic flare, his love of coincidence, how expansive he could become. His use of words and the personality that accompanied them were part of his essence, his charm, his success. When communicating, his worst efforts were listenable, his best eloquent. Why else would a boy listen to his father's speeches at every opportunity, filled with respect and admiration?

The space between the administration building and the President's residence at Central College was open campus. About 5:30 I often observed my father leave his office, walk along the diagonal sidewalk toward the house, sometimes stopping to chat with a group of students or a professor who was on the way home. I liked to watch my father walk. He had a longer stride than most men 5' 11" in height.

One day a student, friend of the family, said to me as we both watched my father walking home, "He certainly has a purposeful stride. He must have self confidence." I liked his confidence; it was a mainstay of our family, and I am sure that those of you who worked with him gained a sense of well being from it. It did not come from self-importance. I never found a trace of that in him. It came rather from the core of his being where belief resides. He believed that there were always solutions to problems and a way to the solution would open for him. That was his faith and it was well founded. You could see it in the way he walked if you observed closely enough.

I liked to see him walk down the aisle here at Dimnent Chapel - dressed in academic regalia, the organ making triumphant sounds, and the choir and audience, to the strains of a great hymn, singing the processors to their appointed places. He had the ability to make symbolic ceremonies an ennobling human act.

On these occasions the heritage that enriched this college was passed on to the existing generation to be assimilated and added to in the daily life of the campus. No one understood where the college had come from better than my father. No one's personal
values reflected more fully the institutional values of the college. Out of this understanding and fortuitous blend of individual personality and institutional identity came the leader and the leadership for the immediate postwar period.

The result, the accomplishment of so many, was a college that emerged, with its purpose and values intact, as one of the first rate liberal arts colleges in America, a college better than it had ever been. In some mystical way those times when he presided over or addressed the assembled college community in high ceremony or worship, I understood that all of this was happening.

In the final years our children, Nancy, and I would climb in the car after dinner and make the five minute drive to Porter Hills. Led by the children bursting into the unlocked door of their small apartment, we would invariably find my mother and father sitting together on their small sofa, hand in hand, watching television. The old competitive spirit and love for games continued. That was fought out at the scrabble table. Any dangerous differences in their relationship or in the family were long ago benign if they ever existed.

In reflecting on the happiness we all had during the years of my parents' retirement, I remembered a statement he made years ago upon receiving a significant honor. He said, "After the love, loyalty, and approbation of my family, this recognition gives me the greatest satisfaction." Even as he pursued his career, fulfilling his professional ambitions, I always felt he cared most for us. Certainly the mutual need we all had for one another was the bedrock emotion of his personal happiness. He carried the secure family heritage of his childhood with him into his marriage where it was matched by values of loyalty, faith, charity, and good will equal to his own. Strengthened and encouraged by his relationship at the home base he was able to give that thoughtful consideration and genuine interest to friends and colleagues
for which he was well known.

Reading through notes he made for speeches and sermons I came across what must be an Easter meditation. The text is from Luke 24 verse 5: "Why search among the dead for one who lives?"

His notes state "Too often in the past the resurrection of Jesus has been presented as a simple resurrection. The Gospels speak of no simple resurrection. The body had gone into the tomb, had been changed, and Jesus did not return to ordinary life. This was a transformation."

For my father this transformation led to life in a new dimension. My mother, my brother, and I, along with my wife and all his grandchildren, surrender him without rancour to a life in a new dimension. Our sadness is ameliorated by the gratitude we feel for having him with us for so long, and for the enrichment that has come to our lives because he was a husband, father, and grandfather that elicited from us those life giving feelings of affection, respect, and appreciation.

For 50 of his nearly 90 years he was either a Student, Professor, President, or Trustee of Hope College. This is where he wanted us to take note of his new life, a place that meant the most to him when he shared our condition. Our family is grateful to President VanWylen and the Hope College community for this celebration of his life and to all of you who have come out of admiration and friendship.