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Lubbers Legacy Remarks, delivered on June 13, 2001

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Lubbers Legacy Remarks

Wednesday, June 13, 2001

Forty years and ten months ago I began my journey. But my life took form and my career direction was set in earlier years. My parents' profession and my affinity for it charted the course. When I was about to enter my profession as an academic, one of the world's great statesmen was bringing his to a close. As a boy shielded by the geography of mid-America from the ravages, if not some consequences of world war, I watched, listened to, and read Winston Churchill, a giant of emotional courage, who became my outside hero as my father was on the inside. Elected again Prime Minister in 1951 at 76, the effects of age brought him to the close of his career in 1956. He concluded one of his last speeches in Parliament with the admonition, "Never flinch, never weary, never despair." Faced with the challenge of a college presidency a few years later, that was a ringing piece of advice. I have tried never to flinch when faced with a tough decision. I have never wearied of my task or responsibility. Rather, they have provided meaning, fulfillment, and joy for all my life. I have walked with discouragement and defeat, but I have never despaired. My better companions are faith, exhilaration, and gratitude. They accompany me all my days, and are prominently with me at this celebration you have so graciously given and attended.

At events when a career is brought forth for appreciation or honors awarded, the recipient of the attention is expected, and rightly so, to acknowledge those with whom his or her life is intertwined, and those whose talents and relationship with the honored one have, in all likelihood, made possible the recognition. James Brooks recently, upon receiving an award from Junior Achievement, undertook in his straightforward and eloquent style this task.

He said, "Every successful person I know who has achieved anything of significance is quick to acknowledge that success is only possible with the help of many others. It is the synergy of human talent and creativity in pursuit of common goals that achieves far more than any individual can accomplish." His sentiments are mine. Yet, I must do my own job. To say to family members what must be said is not always easy. To express what is personal at a public event seems out of place or inappropriate, but it is not. Home is where the strength is. The love that resides there and in the family gives confidence and security. One cannot achieve, in an agreeable way, without confidence and security. So those responsible should be recognized. Though the frequency of family recognition may tend to make it commonplace, it is truly a sacred moment. To my daughters, Mary and Caroline, and to my sons, Don, John and Andrew, I acknowledge that a father in a public leadership position causes stress. To have your father's successes and failures, perceived strengths and weaknesses, opinions and public stands, in the public domain to be commented upon and debated is not usually easy when growing up. Long hours of work, social activities, and travel can add to the strain. Yet, we have made it together through mutual love and approbation for one another. I am grateful to you.

Many who compliment me do so with this caveat, "You are all right, but Nancy is better. You could not have done it without her." I concur. Ours has been a partnership in marriage and in profession, a whirlwind filled with work, appreciation, mutual respect, friendship, enjoyment and love. You are a special person.

I wish I could recount for you the names of all my colleagues: administrators, faculty members and staff, and student leaders who are held deeply in my heart. I wish I could name each one of you who has transferred some of your treasure to make the Grand Valley dream come true because you have made my dream come true too. I wish I could campaign for each

elected official who, from the beginning to the present, through each generation, has given support to this new university and friendship to me. I wish I could publish a list of all of you, my friends, who have applied your special talent to the building of the university. To the Board members who served from the time Bill Seidman brought me here until the present, I wish I could shake your hand and give you a hug. No President has had finer support. Without it, there would be no thirty-two years. Because of you, all of you, "my cup runneth over."

Before I leave I cannot resist one last Presidential pitch. Grand Valley came to us late. What should have happened in 1900 happened in 1963. Since then, a small college has, with persistence, grown to claim a place for itself as a university in the region and the state. Imperceptibly, the institution has become an essential part of the region's infrastructure. Like the roads you travel, like the water that flows to your homes, like the electricity that gives energy to your enterprises, the university provides people, research, and service that if removed would bring down on this region shortages of people and opportunities from which it could not recover. That role the university has quietly, and at times not so quietly, worked its way into during the past 38 years. So as great and legitimate causes call to you – our synagogues and churches, our hospitals and schools, our agencies of mercy and aid – heed their call. But remember there is a need for you at Grand Valley – a need that is like a necessity, a bedrock need. What you give and what you do for Grand Valley is giving and doing for yourself, and the children who live amongst you.

And now I go – honored by what you have done for me, grateful for your disposition of kindness towards me, overwhelmed by the effort, attention, and attendance that you have devoted to me. You have made this the most memorable event of my public life.

At a young age I came to appreciate poetry by reading the English romantic poets, and I still turn to them when I seek beauty in words. As retirement reality takes hold, I face it with equanimity and invoke Robert Browning's words, "Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be, the last of life for which the first was made; our times are in his hand who saith, a whole I planned, youth shows but half; trust God; see all, nor be afraid!"

