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Memoirs
by Arend D. Lubbers
August 2014

Introduction: The Early Years

My father, Irwin J. Lubbers, became President of Central College in Pella, Iowa, in 1934. I was three years old when we drove from our home in Waukesha, Wisconsin to Pella and moved into Dunn Cottage, the President’s residence, named for Central’s most distinguished president. One stretch of road on our route was unpaved, and the choking dust spawned by the historic drought of 1934 is one of my earliest memories.

The hottest of summers greeted us, and the spacious porches of our new home provided some relief for dining and sleeping. In that house and the campus adjacent to it, my conscious life first developed. Even the Webster School where I enrolled in 1936 was next to where we lived. Of the nine years I was educated in the Pella Public School System six of them were in that school, a two minutes’ walk from home.

Most of my early life was lived on the Central College campus or at Webster School and its playground. My parents took me to athletic contests, and musical performances. I still remember the thrill of hearing for the first time Handel’s Messiah. Even as a boy they invited me to accompany them to lectures and occasionally to an event where my father delivered the speech. Though I understood as a child, I was intrigued; not bored.
Sometime during the years of growing up there developed in me the desire to be a college president. It was not articulated at the time, but I think it fixed itself in my subconscious.

In my reflections about why that happened I concluded that in the compact environment in which we lived, I observed my father’s work from a closer vantage point than do most children. My mother, too, contributed to the advancement of the college. My parents were a team, and I was always living in the midst of the team; where it worked and in the work it did.

The town of Pella had about 3,500 citizens when our family, comprised of my parents, my brother, Bob, and my recently widowed grandmother, arrived. The college had no money, and the town’s leaders were counting on my father to save it; which he did in fine fashion over the eleven years he devoted to the task. He, of course, was one of Pella’s most prominent citizens. When a town is small the important citizens are known to all. Their presence is pervasive.

When you are the child of one so highly regarded in a small town, small college environment, you are special child. You don’t know that until after your behavior is shaped by the condition. For some it is a likely contributor to adolescence. For me that was not the case. I liked the experiences and the attention, and the opportunities that came with being a special child. My subconscious, I believe, committed me to preserving that status throughout life. Risks were worth taking, even
necessary, but not too many, and not those that put the special child’s greatest needs in jeopardy.

A person like me, who liked the privileges my father’s position allowed, might naturally gravitate to the same profession as a means to protecting those privileges for himself.

Though the route to a college presidency is uncertain there are preparations you can make that incline you towards a presidency and help those who are responsible for filling the position incline towards you. Most presidents will be chosen from academia. Even those who come from outside the profession often have an academic credential such as a Ph.D. or J.D., and perhaps some experience in the university. There may be exceptions, but not many. So all with interest in academic administration perhaps allowing themselves a thought about the presidency best follow the path that qualifies them to teach and do research in an academic field.

I did not consciously decide on an academic career. Because of my family and my environment I naturally went into it without seriously considering another. When I was a child, my brother told stories to me about American heroes. With our parents we visited Mount Vernon, Washington’s Crossing, Valley Forge, and innumerable sites of historical interest. My academic field seemed as pre-ordained as my going into academia. The portraits of George Washington in my elementary school classrooms were as natural to me as family photographs at home.
After a B.A. in history at Hope College (INSERT??) I attended graduate school studying history at Rutgers University. With an M.A. and all course work completed for a Ph.D., I accepted a position at Wittenberg in Ohio. I had met Rutgers' President Lewis Webster Jones earlier when he was president of the University of Arkansas and he graciously received me on a few occasions during my graduate school years. At Wittenberg a dynamic president, Clarence Stoughton, was in the process of transforming that institution into a small university fit for the latter half of the 20th century.

These two presidents I observed, comparing their style and public persona to my father's. Lewis Webster Jones was a man of good character. He never stayed long in his presidencies, but he resonated integrity. I am unaware of the tribulations that beset him or who comprised his opposition, if any existed. I liked his manner, and found much to emulate in his kindness and transparency.

Clarence Stoughton was different. He appeared always to be a man on a mission. Wittenberg was his cause, his love, and his life. As a young first time instructor in history, I carried with me some of the standard prejudices young academics hold toward presidents, particularly if their enthusiasms beyond teaching and scholarships are evident. The president is not sufficiently academic. The president listens and acts according to the wishes of the constituents not as he should to the faculty. It is not surprising that these attitudes were mine. Living with my president father I was either unaware of them or firmly in his corner. At Wittenberg, as a young member of the faculty, it is not surprising these attitudes were mine.
Both President and Mrs. Stoughton demonstrated their interest in faculty, often inviting them to their home for dinner, even young instructors like me. They were likeable people, and the largeness of their personalities helped make Wittenberg a friendly place. His personality also led to a presidency of moral force and strong leadership that carried with it final authority. Not much time passed before I admired his qualities, and thought they were worth invoking if I had the opportunity. Only they needed some calibration more in line with my personality. There were other presidents I observed known through my father’s contact with them. By the time I completed two years of teaching I had made note of the qualities and style of many who held the position to which I aspired.

Then on March day I was asked by President Vander Lugt at Central College if I would consider the development position. I agreed to become Vice President for Development after I finished my qualifying exams for the Ph.D. at Rutgers. In 1959 our family of five moved to Pella and I began my work. It was to last only one year. Dr. Vander Lugt surprised me and others when he accepted a professional position at New Brunswick Theological Seminary in New Brunswick, New Jersey.

The search for a new president began. Able candidates came to campus, but no president emerged at the end of the interviews. I was told that a faculty petition urged the Board to consider me for the job. They did and I was appointed president beginning August 1, 1960; fifteen years after my father left the same position. There were two
anomalies: I was 29 years of age, thought too young by some to assume presidential responsibilities, and I had not finished my Ph.D. thesis. Notes still resided in boxes for I never completed it. Though I have not felt the lack of a Ph.D. hindered my professional journey, I strongly recommend anyone interested in becoming a college president complete the requirements for that degree unless there are unusual circumstances, and mine were. I believe no one will ascend to the high office without the degree. My path was swift and out of the ordinary.

My preparation came mostly through observation, not long experience in academic positions nor reading treatises on college administration. As I remember, I did read a memoir written by a retired president of the University of the Pacific and letters of a University of Oklahoma president. Then, and throughout my career, I gained insight by reading biographies of leaders in the fields of American and European history. There I found sufficient material to incite my imagination and to learn by example.

Though I was young with only three years of employment at two institutions I had an agenda, and I had an idea of what kind of president I wanted to be. The following chapters will attempt to illustrate how that agenda played itself out over forty-one years, and what kind of presidential person I became. I brought my temperament, my imagination, and my capacity to live with to the job. They proved to be what I needed.