



REMARKS ON THE INSTALLATION OF JEREMY HAEFNER AS CHANCELLOR

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“What Matters”

October 8, 2021

My remarks today might well be titled, “What Matters.” And I’ll address my remarks formally to Board Chair Denise O’Leary, and to Chancellor Haefner, but you’ll see at the end I have also a more expanded and yet intimate audience in mind. So, what matters?

When I was inaugurated as a university president, they made a big deal about my profession. They famously exclaimed, and with some entertainment at my expense, that now there was a “Doctor in the House.” They challenged me that I’d better take care of their house. It was their house after all. Of course, I liked the reference to caring. But I thought to myself – I am certainly more than my profession.

There’s an old, hackneyed joke about administrators that I’m sure you know: “They may not be able to read, but they sure can count. Well, you’ve found a mathematician. But what do mathematicians actually do? Here’s another time-worn joke explaining it all: “Mathematicians are people who can turn coffee into proofs.” Now, you may say the problem with mathematics is that it is so abstract. But isn’t it great to know your chancellor can at least count!

I ask you, “What REALLY counts?” It’s not the résumé. Not the profession. Not even the pedigree. In Jeremy’s case, University of Iowa . . . University of Wisconsin . . . University of Colorado at Colorado Springs . . . RIT. They are all fine, and are a reasonable start to things. But for your chancellor it could have been Bowdoin. Or Whitman. Or Colorado College. Or your peers, Case Western or George Washington University or Boston University. Doesn’t matter. That’s not what matters!

There are two ways I have always chosen leaders.

First, character. It’s not your record. Record must matter some, you might think. Last week, I was reading the book by best-selling author Michael Lewis called “The Premonition: A Pandemic Story.” In it is a quote, of all things, by a football coach, the Pro Football Hall of Famer, Bill Parcells. Here’s the quote — “You are who your record says you are.” That’s a win/loss thing. Are you the sum of your numbers? What really counts? If I’m the search committee or the board of trustees, how would I choose the chancellor? My own mentor and coach is in the audience today, because Jeremy is one of her protégés, too. She’s Marlene Ross, longtime director of the American Council on Education Fellows program, who probably personally launched a thousand leaders in higher education and helped forge who Jeremy is. [Ask Marlene to stand, and lead applause.] She taught us this about character: we can get at character by asking ourselves, would I work FOR this person? Would I really want to see them every day? [Yes!] I would want to work for Jeremy and see him every day. In fact, Jeremy, I just stepped out of my presidency, and I’m out of work. You got anything for me? People of character last. They wear well. They are not flashes of rhetoric. Former President Obama comes to mind as an example of a person who excelled because of character and his ability to speak the right thing to inspire others. I assure you Jeremy will wear well because of who he is, not merely because of his record.



My second criterion is vision. Vision is not about having a strategic plan. One of the visionaries of our history was the Reverend Martin Luther King. In his perhaps most famous speech, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, much of it extemporized, he spoke these words: “I have . . . a strategic plan! I have a strategic plan that one day . . .” Sounds ridiculous, doesn’t it? No, he had a dream. And we all caught that dream. Now . . . I know Jeremy is going to refer to the pillars of your collective planning today. It is expected. And he is not only recommitting to the principled imperatives of that plan but will extend and reify them and inspire and even surprise you. I once heard a senior vice president of the Society for College and University Planning say that there is no . . . such . . . thing as strategic planning. It’s all planning — smart planning, growth planning, long-term planning, operational planning . . . We all exaggerate our claims by calling them strategic. But surely, we were taught painfully in recent years that the plans of humans are fragile and vulnerable. Did not the murder of George Floyd and the ensuing Black Lives Matter movement stop us in our tracks? And for the sake of God and history, did not the pandemic of 2019 teach us anything? Yes! — that our precious plans are made to be broken. Vision is something that presidents and chancellors are required to have. And yet we ask people of vision to do plans. Being visionary means staying focused on the future when all around you are focusing intently on the fires they must put out right now. Or when the others of us are focusing on the past and what we accomplished. Visions inspire. They make us want to be a part of that great future . . . and draw us forward inexorably.

It is customary to bear gifts at great celebrations. Jeremy, this is probably the biggest occasion in your life after marriage and the birth of your sons. I could have given you tangible gifts today to celebrate the occasion. A briefcase, perhaps? Sounds like a college graduation gift. Or maybe we could all have come together and designed a new mace to carry in your processions. Universities do that. By the way, maces were instruments of warfare meant to induce coma by striking a fatal blow to the head of the opponent in warfare, perfected by the ancient Egyptians and Persians. . . . And, for some reason, it appears you have one on this stage today. Whoa!!

But . . . and here, you’re thinking I stiffed you, right? . . . no gift. Not quite. No, I’m a person who places great value in words. I could mention all the good nouns for leadership: Shepherd leader. Strategy leader. Commander. Captain of the ship. Mover and shaker. The trouble with nouns . . . they believe they know what matters about what leaders do or achieve.

Instead, I will give you the gift no one else will give you . . . as of today, and for all time, to have and to hold from this day forth — that sounds like a marriage ceremony doesn’t it — well, there is an analogy there about the meaning of today’s event.

So, I grant you today . . . two adjectives. You alone possess them. They are yours. Others can covet your adjectives! They are who you ARE . . . not what you did to get here.

Number 1: Perspicacious. It means you see things the rest of us can’t. You have the essence of wisdom, and your vision of the future is ahead of ours, sharply in focus, when the rest of us are clouded by the fog of the present . . . or when the rest of us are overly enamored of the glow of our golden pasts. Perspicacious. It’s your visionary nature.

Number 2: Perseverant. You persist when the rest of us fade, Mr. Marathoner. Your will is enduring, and your effort is immense. That’s the calling of a chancellor. You’d better try harder and longer than the rest of us. And as a person of character, you wear well in that extreme effort. Perseverant . . .



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This is a concert hall, so let me add an “encore” adjective, number 3 . . . because 3 is perfect.
Nonpareil: without equal.

And now I extol to this audience today the Jeremy Haefner I know. And trust. And admire. And deeply respect. I say that not only to the gathered academicians here, but — to perhaps more than anyone else — to Maurin and Nick and Ramsey and Omar, because I know, as a dad, a son, and a husband myself, it’s sometimes hard to know in daily life at home that the outside world really respects “Dad.” Jeremy Haefner is the real deal. And the University of Denver was prescient to have chosen him as the 19th chancellor of this great university.

Godspeed to the entire DU family with his leadership in the years ahead.