



What I Would Say if I Were to Give a Talk in the Chapel

By Lawrence B. Siddall '48

Greetings to you all. It is a real pleasure to be with you today.

I spent three years at Reserve, graduating in 1948. Here it is 2014. It's hard to believe that it has been more than 65 years since I sat where you are in this historic chapel. That means I'm 84 this year, old enough to be your grandfather. It makes me think that if, in 1948, we had an alumni member give a talk who had graduated 65 years before, he or she would have been from the Class of 1883. That would have seemed like ancient history to us. You may be thinking the same thing about me. Incidentally, 1883 was one year after the Trustees of Western Reserve College, which was founded on this campus in 1826, decided to move the college to Cleveland.

Do you know where the term western reserve comes from? It's connected to the state of Connecticut, which in colonial times had land claims that stretched westward into what would become Ohio. These claims in northern Ohio were collectively known as the Connecticut Western Reserve. Much of the territory was wilderness and home to American Indians. It must have been a huge challenge for David Hudson and his fellow Connecticut pioneers to make the trek out here and settle this town in 1799.

The transition for me in coming to Reserve was not easy. In the first place, I didn't have much say about enrolling here. I came from Oberlin, a small college town about 50 miles from here, where my father was a physician. Though my parents shared in most family matters, it was my father's decision to send me here, as he had with my older brother (John, a member of the Class of 1945). He told me I wasn't working hard enough in school. In hindsight I was not very assertive in questioning his decision, but I later realized that he had my best interest at heart. I'm curious how this decision was made in your family.

I thought I was a pretty good student before I got here. I arrived as a sophomore, and in the beginning I struggled to keep up with the academic demands. I lived in the Athenaeum and, on many nights, I had to stay up past lights out to finish my homework. To do this I rigged up a light bulb on the end of an extension cord that reached into my cramped closet so I wouldn't be caught violating a strictly enforced rule. I also had to repeat first-year Latin. I soon realized that I wouldn't be getting the good grades I had been used to. My self-confidence definitely suffered. I can well imagine that there are some of you out there who know what I'm talking about.

However, one thing I learned about myself here was that I had the capacity for hard work and persistence, even tenacity, which enabled me to meet the challenges I faced. Overall I was an average student, but I left Reserve knowing that the academic foundation I received was rock

solid. So I want to say, don't get down on yourself too much if you don't get top grades. You will do just fine after you leave here.

One time the light glowed a little brighter. In my junior year I got a 5 on a paper I had written. In those days a 5 was equivalent to an A; I recently learned that the scale has been extended to 7. When I got the 5, I thought it was a mistake. But sure enough, there was the teacher's comment, "Very good." I never got another 5, but this may have been a sign, because it turned out that over the years writing has been something I've been reasonably good at. It certainly made a significant difference in college and graduate school. While my writing during my years as a psychotherapist was limited to professional articles, in retirement I have branched out to subjects like art history, travel and a memoir. Whether I get something published or not, writing has been a source of great satisfaction.

My favorite teacher, or master as the term was then, was Mr. Reardon, who taught English. We called him Jiggs, but not to his face, of course. I suppose this nickname came from the cartoon strip *Maggie and Jiggs*. Is there still the tradition of giving nicknames to teachers like we did? They were passed down by the upper classmen, and I often wondered if our teachers knew of them. We called one who wasn't very well liked The Toad.

Jiggs Reardon was the housemaster in the Athenaeum where I lived for two years, first as a sophomore and then as a prefect in my senior year. A short, middle-aged man with thinning reddish hair, Jiggs was beyond casual in his dress. I can see him as clear as yesterday in his rumpled tweed jacket, unpressed trousers, and a knit tie whose narrow end always hung a few inches below the wide end. I recall several congenial chats in his first-floor apartment with books strewn about and the smell of stale cigarette smoke lingering in the air. In class he was demanding yet fair, even gracious I thought. In my first year we were reading *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy. One time Jiggs asked me what insight had I learned from the chapter we had read the night before. Embarrassed, I had to tell him I didn't know what insight meant. "Well class, let's help Larry out. Here is a word we should all know, so let's take a few moments to discuss its meaning and what we can learn from Tess' story." Mr. Reardon dedicated himself to teaching us the precious value of the written word.

I've always liked that Reserve emphasizes the importance of physical activity and incorporates a variety of sports at various levels for all students. I wanted to play football the most because that was my favorite sport growing up. Though I was on the varsity team for two years, at five-foot-six I was too small to play enough to get a letter. This was a real disappointment. I wish someone had taken me aside and urged me to play soccer instead. I could run fast and my size wouldn't have mattered.

I did earn letters in wrestling and track. Track was more fun. I wasn't fast enough for the dashes, so I ran the 440 and the mile relay. In those days we ran on a cinder track wearing thin-soled shoes with metal spikes. The last meet of my senior year was against the other prep schools in our league and was held at University School. We had a good team and when the four of us lined up for the final event, the mile relay, Reserve was leading by a whisker. We won in a close race with the fastest time all season. But would you believe it, we missed breaking the school record by only half a second.

In my day Reserve was an all-male school; females didn't appear on campus until 1972. In their absence, we imported girls for dances and the annual weekend house parties. Many of these young woman also attended private schools. I enjoyed these events, but it took a while to make the social adjustment. Coming from the small town of Oberlin, I was not as sophisticated as many of my Reserve classmates or these imported girls, many of whom came from upscale communities around Cleveland and Akron. Few of us in Oberlin were acquainted with country clubs.

Growing up in the '30s and '40s, it was the Big Band music of Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey and Lionel Hampton that we listened to. We had been dancing to this music as early as junior high school. Jitterbugging was also popular then, which I learned from my African-American friends.

In my sophomore year a classmate introduced me to his cousin, a student at Old Trail School in Akron. She was a real charmer and loved to dance. I invited her to several social events during my three years here and we acquired a bit of a reputation for our jitterbugging.

If I could give you only one piece of advice, it would be to learn a foreign language well and live abroad for a year. I can assure you it will enrich your life. I have to admit that my three years of Latin here was limited as far as foreign travel was concerned, but it was an excellent foundation. I like the thought that a foreign language can become a lifetime companion. Too many Americans don't make the effort because they wrongly assume that most people they encounter abroad will speak English.

My fascination with travel and learning about other cultures began in China, where I was born and where my father had been a medical missionary. After the death of my mother when I was 2, my father returned to the U.S. with me and my two older brothers and settled us in Oberlin in 1933. Family stories about China were an intimate part of my growing up.

I first went abroad as an adult courtesy of the U.S. Army, arriving in Munich in 1954. With a year of college German, my fluency improved with the help of a medical student tutor and a girlfriend who didn't speak English. My German got good enough that I spent a year studying art history at the university following my discharge there.

My geographic and cultural horizons expanded even further when, in the fall of 1956 at the age of 26, I drove with a friend in a VW Beetle from Europe to India. This was an 11,000-mile overland journey that turned out to be more risky than we thought because of unanticipated political unrest in the Middle East, but still was moderate compared to what you hear about in the news today. I concluded the journey by working my way back to the United States on a freighter as the ship's wiper, or janitor, a hot and dirty job that was made tolerable by getting to know the colorful characters that made up the crew. This six-month odyssey forever changed how I viewed the world and left me with a lifetime of memories.

My second life-altering adventure began when I joined the Peace Corps at the age of 67 following my retirement. I was assigned to Poland, where I taught English in a high school from 1997 to 1999. I made several close friends and have been back five times, twice to attend a wedding. I thought German was difficult, but Polish is off the charts. It's a Slavic language whose grammar, unlike German, has few parallels to English. Fortunately I didn't need it in my classes because we spoke only English.

When I applied to the Peace Corps I requested South America because I wanted to learn Spanish. Since my return from Poland, I have been studying Spanish and have taken it with me to Cuba, Spain, Mexico and several Central American countries.

In 2008, I published a memoir, *Two Years in Poland and Other Stories*, which in addition to telling about my Peace Corps experience, includes an account of my India trip. I encourage each of you to find your own unique way of documenting your life experiences.

When I was a student here I didn't realize that the architecture of the original campus was straight out of New England. It didn't dawn on me until I moved to Amherst, Mass., in the late 1950s and saw the Amherst College campus, also founded in the early 1800s. Both campuses, looking very similar, were designed with a beautiful chapel as the centerpiece.

Another New England connection is through the poet Emily Dickinson, Amherst's most famous resident. Her grandfather, Samuel Fowler Dickinson, lived right here on this campus for a short time in the early 1800s. Having exhausted his financial resources in helping to found Amherst College, he took a job at Lane Seminary in Cincinnati in 1833, three years after Emily was born, but left within a year and came to Western Reserve College as its treasurer. Sadly he fell ill and died here. Grandfather Dickinson may well have attended services in this very chapel.

One of the most significant differences between your generation and mine is the technology we have today. In fact, when I was your age my family had just bought our first television. To solve physics and math problems we used a slide rule, which, by the way, was an ingenious device. If you are not familiar with it, check it out on Google.

I haven't fully embraced the digital age like most of you have. I'm not on Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn. All that my mobile phone does is make calls and take photos. I do have a computer, of course. I also have a website.

Yet modern technology has virtually saved my life. Because of impaired vision due to macular degeneration, I wouldn't be able to read without the aid of a large video magnifier that sits on my desk, or write anything without special computer software. For these newfangled devices I am most grateful.

In conclusion, I want to say how much I have enjoyed being with you today and visiting your beautiful campus. With best wishes to you all.

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