Here is the text for the Founders' Day talk.

It doesn't include a number of extemporaneous insertions, most of them personal comments triggered by faces of friends I saw in the audience.

And it does include several paragraphs, totalling a page or so, that I left out in the speaking under the press of time.

I hope you find it worthwhile. Just let me know, please, if you want to print.

Laurence Barrett
This begins with Dr. Stavig's talk last fall at Honors Day. Those of you who were overseas missed his account of how you happened to be there and not here. For he told how our overseas program first took shape, back in the late fifties and early sixties. He told how Dr. Light first conceived of study abroad, and went to universities in France and Germany and Spain and set the program up, so we could send the first students in the summer of '58.

And without that there would have been no Kalamazoo Plan, not just because study abroad was to become a major element in the Plan, but because through Dr. Light's program we tested the waters of innovation and change, and found them invigorating, and were ready for more.

Dr. Stavig's account was a good, solid one -- a good Lutheran account. Nevertheless, listening to him, I kept feeling, "That's not quite all of it. There was something more." It bothered me a couple of days, and then I think I figured out what it was.

And once I'd put my finger on it. I realized he was just too smart to put it in. It's the sort of thing that would lay anyone wide open to the charge of romanticizing the past. Nostalgia -- or at least the appearance of indulging in nostalgia -- is always a danger, even for someone of Dr. Stavig's tender years, to say nothing of one of my age.

I'm interested in the future, not the past. Specifically, this morning, I am interested in what may lie ahead for Kalamazoo College. If, in talking about our future I talk of our past, and I shall, it is not out of nostalgia. It is only because the future of the College comes out of its past.

You know what I mean. When the data on our graph is pretty much limited
to the last few years, the trend we project is likely to be pretty much a
continuation of what we have just been doing. But if we go farther back and
consider more data, our curve may go off in a different direction. We may
make ourselves aware of graver dangers ahead, or of richer potentialities.
John Wickstrom will tell you that's why Herodotus and Thucydides wrote
history; it is, I am sure, why John teaches it. And it is what the Sioux
Indians meant when they said that a people without history is like wind in
the buffalo grass.

What Dr. Stavig was too smart to tell you about was the atmosphere
within which those events occurred.

Let’s begin with the setting. We’ll go back 30 years, to 1957. You
will have to redesign the campus a good deal. Begin with Dewing out there
and imagine oak trees where it now stands. Imagine away the library — but
take the books to Mandelle first, because Mandelle was our library then. Or
take about 15% of them. We didn’t have much of a library in those days.
Imagine away the fine arts building, the natatorium, Severn and Crissey.
More than half of the physical education plant across the street will have to
go. So will DeWaters. Hoben and Harmon and Trowbridge you can leave stand­
ing. The mortar is just drying on Upton, so you can leave that. You can
leave Welles, from that hardly-beautiful mural west toward the chapel, but
the snack bar, the dining spaces where you eat, the entire Hicks Center is
still to be built, so imagine that gone, too. There’s not much left, is
there?

Now for a bit of constructive imagining. Go down to the area you have
just cleared by uncreating Hicks and, in the parking lot where the driveway
turns right above the railroad tracks, build an almost square romanesque red
brick edifice as close to the tracks as you can get it. Pack it with faculty offices all mixed up so that the departmental flavors sort of swap around, as Huck Finn said of stew, and with classrooms, and biology labs and all the administrative offices. Put in four rooms for literary societies (the closest thing the College ever came to fraternities) and wood floors smelling of oil and stairs that creaked, and in the top floor the pitifully inadequate spaces that Nelda Balch's magic turned into a real, live theatre. When you have it all imagined, name it Bowen Hall.

And the dramatis personae. You must imagine a little college which has been heavily church-related but is rapidly moving away from that in emulation of the strongest liberal arts colleges -- again to no small extent thanks to the influence of Dr. Light. Imagine a college which, for the time being at least, is midway between the past and the future, and enjoying the best of both worlds. And the best of the past in 1957 was a faculty of old guard who insisted on a set of Queensbury rules for the infighting -- of which there was plenty. They were Christian Queensbury rules, if you can imagine any such thing. Frances Diebold and Luke Hemmes and Marion Dunsmore and the rest acted by them, always, and in so doing set the pattern for those of us joining the College. One of those rules was that, if you knew a person well enough, you could detest him or her for one thing and, at the same time, respect them deeply for something else. And the chief of them was that if you disagreed with someone you told them, and you told them first.

There are about 560 students, which doesn't sound like many now, but is up from 350 three years before, or a 60% jump in a college that hasn't had time yet to build for growth -- remember how many dormitories you just now imagined away -- and so is unbelievably crowded. It hasn't had time to build staff, either, and so is operating shorthanded. We taught four courses
apiece then, and Berdena Rust, who was the entire Business Office, did the work of three people. It was a small community, and it met Aristotle's definition of the proper city -- one small enough so everyone could know everyone else's name.

The picture will not be complete unless you imagine the President. Weimer Hicks' office was on the first floor of Bowen overlooking the campus. He sat in a swivel chair in a bay window, and he could swing around from his desk and watch his students or his faculty coming across from his Olds or his Mandelle Library when classes changed. He had a door which opened into Kay Stratton's office, and another which opened directly onto the hall, bypassing Kay. And it opened in such a way that he could look down the full length of the hall. You couldn't get by, if he wanted to talk to you, and the quid pro quo for that was that he couldn't very well escape if you wanted to see him.

Now for the atmosphere. You should know that only three years before when there were 350 students, the College had teetered on the edge of extinction. We were still operating strictly from hunger. We were poor. But, in contrast, there was that heady growth in enrollment and, equally heady, the endowment had more than doubled in those three years. We lived in a crazy tension between cold fear when we thought of the dangers behind and ebullient optimism when we thought of the future. It makes life intense, believe me.

When you have as small a community as that packed as closely together, living as intensely, you are either going to have open war or you will have something very different indeed. We did have our disagreements, no question of that, but perhaps because of the fear and the optimism, and certainly because of the Queensbury rules, the College was a small, tight community of
surprisingly supportive people. However much we disagreed, we believed in each other.

I don't just mean that we trusted each other. I am talking about something much more demanding than that. We had very high expectations of each other and would have been disappointed and distressed if those expectations had not been met. Generally, we were confident that they would be. In that sense, we believed in President Weimer Hicks. We were confident of the Trustees, particularly the Chairman of the Board. We knew the students very well indeed, almost all of them, and we believed in each one separately, each for his or her own special potentialities. And the students knew the Faculty and, for the most part, found some of them they could believe in, in turn. We all lived under the pressure of the expectations of others, always aware of their confidence. And their belief was catalytic. It put demands on us, it is true, but it was compelling; it stretched us; it made the most of each of us.

A compelling confidence in others, I am convinced, is essential to any real strength. We are, more than we like to admit, what those around us expect us to be. Children become what they do to a great extent because the rest of us believe in them -- or because we do not. Adolescents, breaking out of the shell of parental expectations, are so much shaped by the expectations of peers that we call it peer pressure. And I have watched men in war and am convinced that our ethics are rooted in what others respect, or will tolerate, or disapprove. I have known times when I was sure I would be dead within the next few hours, and I believe that courage is only the compelling expectation of all around you. At least mine was. A good crew is not just a group of men who have learned to function like clockwork together. It is that, but that's all wasted if they are not also a group with the highest
expectations of each other, living in an absolute confidence those expectations will be met.

I am convinced that this business of being believed in -- that is, being under the burden of high expectations -- is what a liberal arts college is all about. College students, having passed through adolescence and, we hope, left at least some peer pressures behind, are shaped by the expectations of the entire college community, and by their awareness of our confidence, by our manifest belief in them. I cannot teach a student to write unless I show that I believe she can write, and if she knows I am confident she can write, and believes in me, the odds are that she will write damned well.

The simple truth is there is only one thing a student can find in a college like ours that justifies the tuition we charge. That is the belief of true teachers, their demanding expectations, their compelling confidence.

This mutual confidence had a lot to do with why the things Dr. Stavig told you about worked. It is not just that we believed Weimer Hicks was a great President because he was. He was a great one because we believed he was, just as a student writes well because some teacher has a compelling confidence that she will. We hired young faculty, Dr. Stavig among them, with the highest of expectations -- unrealistic expectations, perhaps -- yet they met them, and partly because we were so confident they would.

Looking on from Humphrey 204, I am thankful to see that we still enjoy much of this mutual confidence in each other, though it has been tempered somewhat. It is not so demanding. I have never seen at Kalamazoo any of the factions that I have found splitting colleges I visited for the North Central Association over a span of twenty years. I've never seen here the politics
for promotions, programs or budget I watched when I taught in one of our
great land grant universities, nor the gossip and slander I saw when I taught
in the East. I've never seen among you the distortion of personal conviction
into intolerant zeal that I have likewise seen that elsewhere.

Instead, I have recently watched the College welcome a new president
with warm affection and the highest expectations and unreserved confidence.
And that response has been unanimous as far as I know. I can't imagine a
more supportive environment for anyone assuming so tough a job. And when he
went out and found a Provost who we had good reason to believe was the kind
of man who would get things done, the response was again unanimously suppor­
tive. Everyone felt he is just the kind of a Provost we need. He truly is
going things done -- more of them and faster than is easy to keep up with,
if not as many or as fast as he himself might like. And if there is some
grumbling, it is the grumbling of an overworked crew who still think their
skipper in the best on deep water. And when on the way to Humphrey 204 I
pass Con Hilberry's office or Scott Friesner's, I see students in there,
being told they can write.

But there are reasons why it is much harder now, reasons why, if we are
not careful, we can drift away from stretching each other with our demanding
expectations. And we must not let that happen, for our living in the presence
of the compelling expectation of others is our saving difference. If we
forget it, we will become only a little sister to the big universities,
offering fewer courses at higher cost.

Architecture has something to do with it, for architecture can divide a
community. When there wasn't enough space, I taught English Classes in
Frances Diebold's biology building -- Emily Dickinson taught to the smell of
pickled frogs. But that's why Frances and I could be so frank with each other. Faculty offices were all mixed up together, and the frankness was pretty general. There was no Dewing with its departments walled off from each other like so many duchies and every floor and stairwell demonically different from all the others.

Of course, no architect deliberately designs a building to be divisive, and I am the last who should throw stones. For when we designed the Kalamazoo Plan, I never anticipated how divisive that could be. We wanted the richest variety of learning experiences offered by any college in America, arranged in the most maturing pattern. We achieved that, and I am damned proud of it. I did not foresee, however, how great would be the price of dividing the students into groups of people who could know well only others on the same track. Or of presenting the student, each quarter, with new faces he or she cannot hope to get to know -- quite the contrary of Aristotle's ideal city. I didn't apprehend the cost of taking a student away, out of a group in which he or she has been defining a role and a place, just at the moment the definition is taking shape. I didn't fully foresee what it would mean never to have the faculty together as a whole.

More important than architecture and the Kalamazoo Plan, perhaps, we are not so close to the old church-related college now with its contagious and compelling ethos of service. We don't have Marion Dunsmore and L.J. Hemmes and Tom Walton and Frances Diebold, as we did then, setting an example of mutual support so strong that it soaked into us without our ever thinking about it.

Now we really must think about it. Where once we acted almost instinctively, we now must give serious thought to our moral responsibility to make
the most of everyone around us. And, to be frank, I don't think we really do
give it thought. I have been watching long term planning here, and I see a
lot about endowment and buildings and personnel and curriculum, but all too
little about what kind of a community we have been, and are now, and want to
be.

Not that these other things aren't important -- curriculum especially.

If this compelling mutual expectation I have been talking about were all
there is to it, a college would be no different from a navy ship in the
Normandy invasion. Except that the ship has a war to fight. Without some
equivalent of a war to fight, all this mutual support is just a lot of nice
people sitting around together in a warm jacuzzi.

I think that in a college our equivalent of a war to fight is the curric-
ulum. It has to be tough enough to scare you a bit, and it must provide
enough of the solid sense of growth so that you don't mind being scared. I
grow reactionary about curriculum. Ever since the sixties, it seems to me,
we have been offering courses in whatever liberal enthusiasm sweeps across
academia, like wind in the buffalo grass. I have no objection to such
courses per se, but I do not want them to be an alternative to reading
Theucidides and Dante and Goethe. I do not want them to be an alternative to
knowing Socrates well and personally -- which means knowing him in the Greek
-- which means learning irregular Greek verbs. And if you've ever tried to
learn Greek verbs, you've had a war to fight.

And it's not just the architecture and the Kalamazoo Plan and the curri-
culum that make this hard. Really believing in each other in a community
such as I have been talking about demands living with the most sophisticated
of ambiguities and paradoxes.
We must, for example, live, to a degree, in pretense. Let me explain why. Our belief in others must be expressed, if it is to be compelling, not by words but by what we do. Words, even when they come from someone we love, are less compelling than acts. Baron Von Hugel says, "I kiss my son not because I love him, but because I so desperately want to". Up to a point, I must act as if I believed, even when I do not. In every freshman section I ever taught there were a few whom I simply could not strain my imagination to believe in. As writers, at least, they had been born crippled. But I had no alternative to going over their papers with them with every bit as much care and concern as those of the most promising writer in the class. For going over papers is my only way of telling a student I believe she can write -- even when I don't.

And, paradox upon paradox, even when it is a pretense it can be compelling. Some morning when I am going over a paper with such a student, there is a paragraph that leaps up out of the page, breathing and alive, and I say, "That paragraph's a gem. I wish I'd written it." And she looks a bit embarrassed and says, "Do you really like it? I kinda liked it myself." And I think, "Great God! She really can write." And from then on there is no pretense about it. I truly believe.

So there's no escaping acting on blind faith when it comes to making the most of people -- assuming a student can do well and acting on the assumption in spite of nagging doubts, expecting the highest of colleagues and administrators or, if we are students, of the faculty who teach us even if the evidence doesn't always support the expectation -- still acting as if it did.

Finally, a contrary ambiguity, another paradox. You can pretend only so
long. If we are to be a community of mutually supportive people and enact confidence in each other even when it is based on more faith than fact, we must still expect to be held accountable if we fall short. And, much harder, we must still hold others accountable, eventually, when they do not meet our expectations. Courage in war may be only the expectation of others, but the coward is shot. When Bowen Hall stood above the railroad tracks, grades in courses humped on C. About 12% of the grades in the College would be A’s, and there might be 8% or 10% F’s.

At this point in the history of the College, this matter of accountability is the toughest question of all. It is also the most urgent. We can’t go back to those Draconian grading practices, because all higher education has left them behind. And when it comes to the accountability of faculty, we probably can’t abandon the tenure system, though, as most of my colleagues know, I heartily wish we could. Most difficult of all, when do you stop kissing your son? How long after we have been disappointed do we continue the gestures of support? And if we continue them too long, or simply withdraw support, is it really because we want to give one more chance, or is it because we so much dread bringing our colleagues to judgment or playing the harsh master with students it hurts us so much to have to hurt?

I don’t want to sound like Savonarola or condemn myself to the hemlock, but I will tell you frankly that I think we have grown soft about this over the years. We don’t make our expectations clear enough. We tolerate too much.

I have been learning Greek, as you may already have guessed, and there is nothing like the long labor of word-by-word translation to make you reject what you read in revulsion or — it is sure to be one or the other — to make
it bone of your bone. For me, it has been the latter. I am convinced that the Greeks were right when they said that the business of life, for each of us, is to become most fully what he or she was meant to be. I'd be a fool if at my age I didn't know nobody ever fully does, but I'd be a greater fool if I didn't think it was worth the fight. I do know that it's not a fight that any one of us can fight alone. That has been my entire point this morning. It requires the expectation of others. It requires people around us who believe in us more than we believe in ourselves, and, if the magic is to work, it requires people in whom we believe in turn.

I think a college is a place where that happens, for everyone in it -- not just for students -- but especially for students.

I think that's what Kalamazoo College has been as long as I have known it, and what I hope it is going to be for a long, long time... And I wish I could sit in Humphrey 204 and watch you, forever.

Larry Barrett
Humphrey 204