Thank you, and good afternoon to the Board of Trustees, President Phifer, and all members of the Coe College and Cedar Rapids communities.

I am profoundly privileged to be with you today under these extraordinary circumstances, as we look forward to the next chapter in the story of one of America’s most accomplished colleges. And when I refer to Coe College as one of our nation’s finest, I am relying not only on my own impressions, but also on the conclusions of the college rating guides, the accreditation commission, and the higher education community around the country—where it is generally recognized that a Coe education is among the most transformative that America has to offer.

This is an inspiring day for me and for my wife Janice, although it’s important to remember that it is just one more event in the rich history of the Coe and Cedar Rapids communities. In keeping with that idea, and since I have a monopoly on the microphone for the moment, I would like to ask you to grant me a favor.

We are standing in the Coe Alumni House, a testament in bricks and mortar to the generations of Coe students, faculty, staff, and alumni who built this college, stone by stone, class by class, experience by experience. So the favor I ask is a simple one. Please turn your gaze from the podium to the walls, and reflect on this amazing collection of photos that capture the essence of Coe College and its more than 160 years of service to the region and nation. If I may borrow the words of New Zealand songwriter Neil Finn: “These walls have eyes—[and] who do we become without knowing where we started from?”

These pictures have a compelling narrative. They tell us that we should enjoy significant moments in Coe’s history, including this one—but that we should also acknowledge that we are part of a long legacy of talented students and educators. These walls remind us of our responsibility to honor that legacy with the best that we have to offer, so that future generations can stand in this very spot and look back fondly on this period in Coe’s distinguished history.
And what a period it has been. At a time when the average tenure for a college president is a little more than eight years, Coe has beaten the odds again and again thanks to the extraordinary leadership of President James Phifer, who has served this College with the greatest distinction for 27 years, the last 17 as President. Whether it came to guiding the College through economic turmoil, educational reform, or recovery from the great flood, President Phifer and his wife Linnie have given their all to Coe, and have put the College on a steeply-trending upward trajectory by increasing enrollment, restoring financial stability, expanding the campus, and launching the ground-breaking Coe Plan. Few colleges have been fortunate enough to have leadership that is so remarkably stable and at the same time truly visionary. I can only be humbled by the prospect of sitting in his chair—although from what I have heard, he does not spend much time sitting around in it anyway.

We will all have the opportunity to thank President Phifer for his service over the coming year, although I suspect that we will find it difficult to find words powerful enough to convey the depth of our feeling. As for me, I intend to squeeze every bit of experience and knowledge that I can out of him, because as the book of Proverbs says: “how much better is it to get wisdom than gold.”

And now, as we contemplate Coe’s future, I would like to share a thought from Don Randel of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, which has funded educational innovation across the country for generations. In a recent address to the Association of American Colleges and Universities, he said: “There is no disruptive technology that will take the place of a grownup asking a young person to write about something of substance and then sitting with that young person, challenging him or her to observe more acutely and to frame a stronger argument in support of an original idea. This is an activity that must be undertaken thousands of times every day all across the country if we are to develop the minds that will ensure the nation’s welfare in every sense.”
Guess what? That exact activity took place at Coe today. It happens at Coe every day. That is why our nation needs Coe College, and why our primary challenge for the future is to be sure that Coe’s educational excellence—which is well known to every person in this room—is also familiar across the United States and around the world. We are a humble place, but we are justifiably proud of our record of serving students and of their achievements as graduates. I intend to do some bragging about Coe and I will be inviting you to join me.

Now I leave you with a personal reflection. When Janice and I visited Cedar Rapids two weeks ago we were overwhelmed with the natural beauty, the vitality of the City and the College, and the generous welcome from sincere, friendly people. Our feelings were even more powerful when we returned yesterday, because we now know that each time we fly into Cedar Rapids, we are coming home. We are deeply moved that you invited us to join this wonderful, thoughtful, faithful, beautiful community, and I pledge to give you all that I have in pursuit of an ever-brighter future for Coe College. Thank you.

*Quote from Randel, Don M. Liberal Education. Summer 2012, page 10.*