Acceptance/Opening/Welcome

Thank you Mr. Rice for the honor the Board of Directors has shown me by asking that I serve as the Interim President here at our College.

For those of us who answer the calling of teacher, “born with chalk dust on the sleeves of our soul,” to quote John Updike, the beginning of the school year is a very special time. When I was a small child, the first day of school was more important than Christmas, my birthday, Thanksgiving, or the Fourth of July. And nothing has changed, and here I awoke one day in late June and found that I had been appointed the Interim President here at Sweet Briar, where my wife spent four blissful years in this august setting, where we met when we were only nineteen. And we are now sixty-seven. Do the math. So at this final assignment, I welcome all of you, faculty, staff, students, board members, to the Convocation marking the beginning of this academic year.

Charge

Convocations have their own beginnings in Western civilization in the early decades of the thirteenth century at the cathedral schools at Oxford, Paris, and Bologna. The presiding bishop would call all the faculty together to welcome the newest students to the academic community. The faculty, basically all monks, would process into the cathedral, High Mass would be said, Gregorian chants would emanate from the choir, and at the end, the bishop would bless the academic congregation, and the fall term would commence.

However, each student had already had to face a serious question, asked by the monk doorkeeper. A prospective student would arrive at the school doors, which were always kept locked from the inside. A monk would answer the knock, open the door a bit, and then ask, “Quid petis?”, what do you seek? It has seemed to me all these decades, in the scores of convocation addresses I have been privileged to give, that none of us in the postmodern world could best that one simple question. And it is one that each of you in the student body here at Sweet Briar might ask yourself. Walk around this incredibly beautiful campus alone, perhaps up to Monument Hill. Go sit on the grass on the Dell. Or perhaps just sit quietly in the Chapel as this school year begins. And ask yourself the same question the monk doorkeeper always asked of those seeking admission to the cathedral schools of the medieval age: “Quid petis?”, What do YOU seek? If you take advantage of every opportunity that Sweet Briar will put before you, your life will be as transformed in this place, doors will open at every turn, just as was the case of the young woman from Philadelphia who got off the train at the Sweet Briar station that fall day in 1965. I wish for all the students here nothing more.