

Inaugural address of Amy Novak

“Ephphatha: Be Opened”

Dakota Wesleyan University, Mitchell, S.D.

Friday, Sept. 27, 2013

Chairman Brad Pratt, members of the board of trustees, past presidents, distinguished guests, university alumni, friends of the wider university community, members of the Mitchell community, faculty, staff and students – thank you for your inspiring welcome and for your moving greetings. I want to extend my sincere appreciation to the members of the search committee and our Board of Trustees whose enthusiasm for the future of this institution inspired my candidacy.

I want to extend my sincere words of gratitude to our church community. It was the Methodist vision to “give ever increasing power for generations to come” that inspires our continued commitment to developing leaders rooted in service and committed to justice.

To the community of Mitchell whose vision, alongside our early Methodist pioneers, provided invaluable resources for our founding and invaluable partnerships for our future.

To our alumni, your stories are our collective story and your continued support of our institution ensures a vibrant future.

To the past presidents of DWU, I am grateful for your leadership and inspired by your resiliency. I often tell people, my first exposure to DWU came in the basement of the president’s home as a young teenager. For some that may conjure up images of illicit teenage behavior, but I can assure you I was actually deeply engaged in developing debate cases on everything from African American farmers to mineral rights in Antarctica with then President Jim Beddow’s son, Jay. During my times in the Beddow’s home, I came to appreciate the mission of DWU and the rich legacy of community partnership that Dr. Beddow fostered with the building of the L.B. Williams Elementary school directly connected to our campus.

My first acquaintance with Dr. Don Messer came much later. Shortly after being hired at DWU, Dr. Messer stopped in our admissions office to inquire about progress at the institution. We soon discovered that having both spent time in India, we shared a common aspiration to use education as a means of addressing the severity of global poverty and instability. Your leadership, Dr. Messer, left a lasting legacy on the institution.

Dr. Robert Duffett mentored me for the past 10 years. His leadership led to the largest expansion of the physical footprint of the campus in the university’s history. His commitment to mentorship honed my leadership and fundraising skills and our vibrant discussions on the social issues of our faith affirmed for me the importance of education as a means for elevating the human condition.

My sincere thanks to each of you.

To our faculty and staff whose entrepreneurial spirit and relentless pursuit of excellence fostered unprecedented growth and a renewed commitment to living out our values of learning, leadership, faith and service.

To our students whose intellectual curiosity and passion for serving others gives me great hope for the future of our communities and our world. Thank you.

As well, this morning, I want to extend a special word of appreciation to my executive assistant, Emily George. She is brilliantly good at what she does and Emily makes much of what we do here at DWU possible.

To my executive team and the planning committee, many thanks for your efforts in planning the events of this week.

As well this morning, I would like to extend a sincere word of thanks to my family. My parents, Wayne and Mary, were entrepreneurs and when I was only 9 years old they brought home large refrigerator boxes for me, my two sisters and our neighbors to build our own pretend businesses. We ran a neighborhood newspaper, including a gossip column, which was quickly squelched, also a bank, hospital, hotel, and our own stock market – which may have been a better predictor of the market than we have today. Their embrace of my creativity and entrepreneurial spirit still shapes my commitment to academic innovation.

I also want to recognize my mother-in-law, Linda Novak, who is here with us today. One of Linda's first introductions to me came when I put in an emergency medical call from Kilkenny, Ireland, where I tried to communicate to her that no one had killed her son, Kenny, in Kilkenny, but that he was in the hospital with severe food poisoning. This was long before cell phones and Skype, so international calls had about a 10-second delay in communicating. Well, let's just say that wasn't my best first impression. I'm sure she thought, "Who is this woman?" Nonetheless, I have appreciated being a part of a loving and supportive Novak family for the past 20 years.

Finally, I want to express my sincere gratitude to my husband Ken and our eight children, Peter, Isaac, Luke, Mark, Seemela, Marianna, Elijah and Zechariah, whose endless energy, creativity and unconditional love inspire me daily.

When it was first announced that I was going to be president, our son, Elijah, gave me a big high-five and said, "Mom, that's cool that we are going to have a president in our house, but here is my big question, what do we call dad?" Luke quickly replied, "Dad is the first man," to which Elijah remarked, "Luke, the first man is Adam, you know, Adam and Eve, not Dad!"

Regardless of what we call Dad – Ken is a best friend, a deeply engaged father, a sincere confidant, an inspiring intellectual, a passionate teacher, and spiritual role model. I love you.

It is a distinct privilege to be invested as the 20th president of Dakota Wesleyan University. While we gather today for this inauguration, we are truly here to celebrate our past and renew our commitment to the future of this institution. I am honored by your selection, strengthened by your support, and humbled by the history upon which we, together, stand.

Preparing an inaugural address allows one to review closely the work of past predecessors. In that process, I quickly learned what not to do as a president. For example, I can assure you that my first move as your president will not be to ban dancing. President Sweetland did that in 1937 and he experienced one of the shortest tenures of any DWU president. A student revolt eventually led to his dismissal. And while dancing remained banned until the new president arrived, the students initiated the "stroll" – where they told the administration, they would "stroll" to the music, not dance. Right!

I also will avoid the precarious mistakes of our first president, William Brush, who was lamented for never being on campus and always fundraising. Tragically, when our board released him from duties, he took his resources and connections to become president of Morningside College.

Nor will I engage you with a 54-page inaugural address as Thomas Nicholson did in 1904.

But I will take the time to remind you briefly of the academic innovation, resiliency and unrelenting commitment to developing transformational servant leaders that have been the heart of this institution. Friends, it was before South Dakota was even a state that a pioneer band of Methodist circuit riders “dared everything and were deterred by nothing” as they ventured into the rugged undeveloped landscape of central South Dakota with a commitment to bring Christian education to “those who might otherwise be unable” to afford an education. For the early Methodists, nothing garnered higher priority than the development of schools, since education “opened” minds and souls. Through this “awakening,” lives would be changed, communities strengthened, economies revived, and our world transformed to something greater.

In the Gospel, Saint Mark tells a powerful story of a deaf man brought to Jesus near the Sea of Galilee. The deaf man had a severe speech impediment and his friends begged Jesus to lay his hand on him. Jesus took the man aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears. Then, Jesus spat and touched his tongue. Looking up to Heaven, Jesus prayed and said to the deaf man, “Ephphatha” – that is “Be opened.” Immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released and he spoke plainly. Ephphatha – be opened.

The power and spirit of Ephphatha inspired our early Methodists who recognized the powerful transformation possible through education. With boldness, they opened this university on the prairie to women, to American Indians, to the poor, the downtrodden, and arguably the deaf, not just those deaf in a sensory way, but those whose hearts were deaf to God’s call.

By taking the dirt of the earth and building a school of stone, these founders believed the ears, eyes and minds could be opened to Christ’s call for each of them. Through education, these future leaders could become Christ’s voice of love, Christ’s hands of compassion, and Christ’s feet of mercy to a wounded world.

“Be Opened” describes our aspiration for a DWU education today. At the intersection of our Christ-centered, entrepreneurial university lays a passion for clarifying the relevancy and richness of the humanities, a discovery of the beauty and complexity of the sciences with an intentional integration of our Christian obligation to service and justice. A 21st-century education at DWU goes beyond skills training and book learning. DWU is moving boldly forward to educate and develop bold, innovative, principle-centered, Christian leaders.

In the first letter of John, verse 38, the Lord asks, “What are you looking for?”

This is the fundamental question our students wrestle with in our Core humanities program and in our Center for Talent Development. Allow me to me share with you what our students have found in pondering this important question.

Stephen, a young Latino father of two, spent virtually his entire life in foster care before arriving at Dakota Wesleyan University. In his senior interview he shared the “opening” he experienced as a result of his DWU education. As a human services major, he talked about the conversion of heart that led him to move *from the streets to serving the streets* of Los Angeles, Calif. He is hoping to return to work with a nonprofit committed to helping young, Hispanic and black men find their way out of crime.

Sarah, an American Indian student, shared her “opening” experience as she learned about God through weekly worship and her service immersion experiences. From agnostic to active ministry leader, Sarah shares her vision for leading others in lives of service through service.

Brent came to DWU originally as a biochemistry major but soon became involved in our Kelley Center for Entrepreneurship. Brent became interested in how the university could serve the community and initiated a partnership with Mitchell's Weekend Snack Pack program to serve more than 350 local students with food security issues. And by the way, Mitchell's Weekend Snack Pack program was launched and sustained with great vitality by a DWU graduate and Mitchell citizen, Cindy Novachich. Brent partnered with Cindy and her efforts. Through his "opening" experience, Brent became aware of growing rates of local childhood poverty. He wrote grants and consulted with the university administration to redo a lab in Hughes Hall for managing the food collection and distribution of the Snack Pack program and this fall we opened a center on campus designed to expand the outreach of the program in partnership with our community.

These are but a few examples of how our commitment to the spirit of Ephphatha has opened the world to our students.

Our institutional values of learning, leadership, faith and service represent more than a slogan. Those values recognize that "an education of the heart is the heart of education." We know that we can get to the heart in many ways: intellectual engagement, robust dialogue, and service immersion experiences. But DWU is now asking bigger, bolder questions – how do we as leaders in undergraduate and graduate education prepare the next generation of leaders to teach, preach and heal a wounded world?

We have become highly intentional about creating experiences that immerse students into the heart of justice, compassion and service. Our goal is to intentionally foster experiences that help students develop a relationship with Christ (whether it is in the classroom, at chapel, on a mission trip, or in a small group) – because in the end – being in a relationship with Christ means we are prepared to listen to God's call to set the world ablaze with Christ's love.

The history of Dakota Wesleyan University is chock-full of stories of romance, fires, death, mystery and danger; of marvelously funny moments like students tying up a cow on the fifth floor of College Hall to seemingly impenetrable obstacles, like enrollment under 100 students. From majors fires that killed students and burned down entire buildings, to a Great Depression business plan that allowed students to pay professors in wheat, chicken, eggs and lumber. Despite these challenges, Dakota Wesleyan's commitment to education never wavered.

Our nearly 20,000 alumni represent world peace prizewinners, presidential candidates, scientific patent holders, inventors of the X-ray, Fortune 100 business leaders, renowned poets, and inspired ministers. Their legacy shapes our renewed commitment to learning, leadership, faith and service in the 21st century.

Cicero once said, "To those who have no destination or direction, the winds are always ill." As we launch our new strategic planning process, we know our destination. We have our purpose. We must now "be opened" to how we bring our bold and transformative mission to a new relevance in a digital age. Like our predecessors, we must be open to change, demonstrate a commitment to agility and innovation, while preserving our commitment to our institutional values.

DWU will become "America's University" for the development of bold, innovative Christian (Spirit) leaders.

Our commitment to innovation dates back to our founding. In 1904, President Nicholson reminded the university community that "change must find itself a comfortable dwelling in the mind." In the 1939 inaugural comments to President Edge, the board of trustees directed the institution to "depart from

orthodox standards and beaten educational paths, and even to throw out moth-eaten and moss-covered curricular traditions.” President Edge responded, “One of the chief functions of a college must be to help the student develop the capacity for, and technique of creative thinking.” He continued, “Tomorrow’s problems or today’s are not going to be successfully solved simply on the basis of familiarity.” More recently, President Smith led the development of an adult education program that would meet once a week to in his words “continue to meet the demands of our region” while President Duffet led efforts to create a degree completion program for nurses seeking to earn a bachelor’s degree.

Today, with that same pioneering spirit and innovation of our founding, we begin our boldest efforts yet to foster innovation at DWU.

At the forefront of innovation lies the significant expansion of collaborations and partnerships between the university, Mitchell and the region. This is our community and this is our community’s university and together we can strengthen the economic vitality of this region for generations to come.

Our innovative community partnerships will further link our faculty with industry through employment relationships and consulting agreements while students immerse themselves in businesses to apply their textbook knowledge to industry and the non-profit community. Our business partners and nonprofit leaders will provide invaluable advice and opportunities for our students to apply their knowledge in the workplace.

In response to business and industry, we built an M.B.A. program focused on small and medium enterprises, the heart of our economy. In the fall 2014, we will launch a degree completion program in strategic leadership designed for the myriad of individuals who have completed some credits toward a degree. At the heart of each of these programs is an awareness of the necessity of helping students apply their knowledge to their professional environment.

We will build upon partnerships like the one at our local elementary school that connects directly to our department of education where students immerse themselves as freshmen in a lab school setting. We are exploring the viability of a business incubation center connected with our Kelley Center for Entrepreneurship and the South Dakota Small Business Development Center.

Our strategic planning taskforce is examining the infusion of essential leadership and life skills into a robust exploration of the humanities.

Our service immersion experiences will become even more integrated into the academic experience with the goal to inspire a life-long commitment to compassion and justice.

Our core curriculum’s focus on cultivating curiosity through interdisciplinary learning and problem solving drives at the workplace demand for developing globally-minded thinkers – students who can link the relevance of history with economics, of politics with religion, of ethics and business.

Our Center for Talent Development’s focus on cultivating a student’s strengths recognizes the importance of helping one discern what the best version of each of us can look like. By learning to work from a position of strength, our students are able to become passionate about their futures.

Finally, DWU will remain on the forefront of designing and developing new programs for the adult learner that infuse digital technology into programs that respond to emerging demands for leadership development, workplace agility, strategic thinking, and other relevant industry skills.

These are just a few of many examples of how the DWU experience represents innovation, relevancy and application in a world clamoring for a more defined return on investment.

In closing, I want this address not to just be informational, but more importantly, invitational.

If you perceive that I am excited about DWU, about our potential, about our future, then you perceive correctly. There is an energy here on this campus, students, administration, coaches, faculty, staff, visitors, community members – you can feel it.

Our past is rich; our gratitude is deep, but now, now is the time for us to go forward with a tide of renewal, of purpose, of blessing, of vision.

I ask each of you today to harness this energy in your hearts and convert it into action. The fruits it bears and the seed it scatters are in the lives touched by Stephen in East L.A., Sara serving in Omaha, Cindy and Brett and our hungry children in Mitchell, S.D. There are thousands of stories connected to this place, which is more than brick and mortar, but the very building up, one life at a time, of the kingdom of God.

Our students return with stories from Tanzania and Peru. They share the joy of actors finishing their final night of a musical in the Sherman Center, to changing shifts in hospital wards staffed by our nurses. They hold each other up in teamwork on the fields and courts of competition, and find a time to reflect quietly on the library ledge of a snow blanketed campus.

Please understand that I, on behalf of the entire university, invite you today to become a part of this dynamic spirit and potential for good. I pray that we share a stirring of the soul, to be opened to awakening others to the potential of a world transformed by leaders whose hearts and minds have been shaped by those who long for a better tomorrow.

May God bless Dakota Wesleyan and all who love her and serve her. May she be a university aligned with God's most holy will, that we may we continue to scatter the seeds of God's love across the prairies and around our world. Amen.

Thank you.

References:

Corsey, O. W. (1935). A History of Dakota Wesleyan University for Fifty Years. Mitchell, SD.
1904, Inaugural records, President Nicholson
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