An Experiment in Trust

By John W. Kuykendall
Davidson College Class of ‘59
President of the College 1984-1997

Presented at Convocation, 24 October 2009

Please permit me a moment of personal privilege to say inadequate but sincere thanks to all who have had a hand in making today so special for me. Except for the blessing of being born into a wonderful family, and being Missy’s husband, and being father to Tim and Jamie, I have to say that, in terms of this world’s associations, my relationship with Davidson College—and by that I mean the people here: students, faculty, staff, trustees, alumni, all friends—has afforded the most treasured relationships of my life. Thus an honor such as I receive today [an honorary doctorate of letters] is sheer grace—unexpected, undeserved, but profoundly appreciated—and I am genuinely grateful to the faculty and board of trustees for being acknowledged in this way.

That being said, I must make true confession that I have lived in unusual trepidation in facing the prospect of this day. I really can’t explain my feelings. I’d like to claim that it’s modesty, or maybe even that vaunted Davidson virtue of humility; but, alas, that’s just not so. More likely it’s because I am a certified Myers-Briggs introvert and a widely-acknowledged klutz (the best Mother’s Day card I ever gave simply said, “To Mumsy from Clumsy”).

Whatever the reason, the prospect of this day has made me very anxious. Indeed, as I began to cast about for a title to these remarks, the first idea that came to mind was one with which most of you would readily concur. Why not call my speech “Can’t We Just Get This Over With?” But I knew that wouldn’t work. For one thing, it’s a sentence that ends with a preposition; and for another it does nothing at all to express my gratitude, not only for my second Davidson degree, but also for the privilege of addressing this convocation on a subject that matters.

So I shall give you a better title for these remarks…in due time.

I.

I have a suspicion concerning the real reason I have been asked to speak to you today. It’s because I am an artifact; a relic; a living (for now) specimen; maybe even a fossil or a missing link. I am a tie to Davidson College “back in the day,” kindly invited to offer my memories and perspective on an aspect of this school which is basic to its identity.

Here’s the story: About 51 years ago next month, when I was a soon-to-graduate senior, Class of ’59, the Student Body of this college made a decision to make a major change in a treasured tradition: the Honor System. Since at least 50 years before that,
the student community here had been committed to living under a code of honor administered by students themselves.

I suppose we can only speculate about the way in which the system came into being in or about 1909. Perhaps the students were persuaded that they had better access and insight into the honesty of their fellows than did the faculty; or perhaps the faculty, who at that time had constitutional responsibility for the oversight of student deportment had grown weary in well-doing and were more than willing to share the responsibility. It is hard to say exactly what was on their minds; but whatever the reason, the oversight of the personal integrity of Davidson students in academic matters and other vital aspects of community life has for the past 100 years been the province of their fellow students.

From any number of perspectives, that century-old decision initiated what has become for Davidson “an experiment in trust.” (That, incidentally, is the title of this little talk: “An Experiment in Trust.”) The trust that was necessary for the establishment of the experiment was complex and multilateral: faculty trusting students; students trusting students; students trusting faculty and administration; parents, trustees, alumni, and other concerned stakeholders trusting—and the college—in the fair and proper exercise of the Honor System.

And I call it an “experiment,” quite frankly, because every generation of Davidson students is called upon to certify anew that it intends to continue the tradition. Thus I suppose every generation at Davidson is at least potentially the last one to live under the honor system. So: it was—and is and will be—an experiment in trust.

The original code stipulated that each student resolved to commit himself (they were only “himselves” in those days), to honesty in matters academic and personal, and to live in submission to the judgment of his peers in case of any perceived violation of the code. When I came to Davidson in the mid-1950s, the “peers” who were obliged to sit in judgment were the members of what we today call the SGA. That meant, in terms of governance, that the legislative body also exercised judicial authority, which from time to time became complicated and challenging, if not constitutionally problematic.

So the SGA in which I served in 1958-59 developed and proposed a thoroughgoing revision of the student constitution, establishing a separate council to oversee the maintenance and application of the Honor Code. Students who are familiar with the current Honor Council and its work might well be dismayed or even disappointed by our original Honor Court configuration. By today’s standards, it seems in retrospect to have been something of a blunt instrument

Members of the council were elected by popular vote, as they are today, but they were nominated by a joint student-faculty committee. Each one of them was elected for the remainder of his stay at Davidson—two sophomores, four juniors, six seniors—and all of them sat on every case which was presented. There were no solicitors or defense counsels, and all deliberations of the court were conducted in privacy… indeed, if memory serves, even secrecy.
More significantly, though, decisions by the Honor Court in that day were permanent and irreversible, even those with truly life-changing consequences. A person dismissed from Davidson for an honor code violation, for example, could never return here to school. No such thing as redemption, reconciliation and/or restoration, at least not within the bounds of this college community; and that increasingly threatened the student’s ability to gain admission anywhere else. In that respect, I’d have to say that it seemed to many of us that such high ideals of honor somewhat eclipsed the strong theological convictions concerning mercy and compassion which were said to undergird this school.

But “New occasions teach new duties;”¹ and happily times change, and with them the ways in which a venerated core value is applied to the continuing life of this community. So, in sum, the current generation at Davidson has inherited a student-directed honor system—not as old as some, we are told, but older than most—and with some rather singular characteristics which exemplify the particular nature of this place.

II.

Well, so much for the history lesson. It’s far more important to focus upon the present and the future. First, the present: You surely know that this community is just now in the midst of a year-long “Celebration of Honor and Integrity,” among other things acknowledging the centennial of that “experiment in trust.” Although that seems to be a worthy and worthwhile undertaking, we need to be clear about the realities inherent in such a celebration.

There are some who believe, in all good faith, that an honor system is not the adequate or best way to deal with matters of academic or personal discipline. And there are perhaps others for whom the word “honor” itself conjures problematic images of other times and places in which the word was used or misused to conceal a multitude of unworthy passions and prejudices, as in calling a duel to the death “an affair of honor.” And again, truth to tell, it is always possible for any time-honored custom to become shop-worn or obsolete; or “an essence by designation;”² a construct of the mind and heart like Falstaff’s ironic “mere scutcheon;”³ a symbol with no reality to give it life.

First-year students in the Class of ’13 and others here have recently read Tobias Wolff’s novel entitled Old School, and few of us who read it failed to note the comments of Mr. Ramsey, the young English master by way of Oxford, to the protagonist who has been expelled from school for plagiarism as they drive to the railway station in the act of rustication: “Strange word, honor,” said Mr. Ramsey. “—can’t be spoken aloud, turns immediately to bilge…. Honor code? Pretentious nonsense.”⁴

¹A line from James Russell Lowell’s poem/hymn “Once to Every Man and Nation.”
²This is an illuminating turn of phrase I borrow from a lecture by my friend and colleague, Professor Hun Lye, of the Davidson Department of Religion.
³William Shakespeare, Henry IV, Part I, V. i. 140.
⁴Tobias Wolff, Old School, 149.
When you peel away the layers of the onion there is always the danger that there may not be much “there there” after all. Thus celebrating honor and integrity, we should be warned, might be a chancy thing. You’d better not do it unless you mean it. And let’s be honest: beyond this little community’s obvious interest in such concerns, what, after all, is the currency of words like “honor” and “integrity” in the world in which we live. There seems to be a very clear and insistent message abroad that modern society does not put much stock n academic honesty or maybe some of the other stipulations included in Davidson’s code. Looks like we might well be swimming against the tide, doesn’t it?

Dean Shandley has shared an article with me which summarizes results of recent studies on the issue of cheating in American high schools. The results I find nothing short of scandalous: Duke University study (2005): “75 percent of high school students admit to cheating, and if you include copying another person’s homework, that number climbs to 90%.” Further finding: Whereas it used to be the weaker students who cheated to “get by,” trend now seems to be that the cheaters are the better students, those who are under pressure to keep their grades up, so that they can get accepted to “the college of their choice.”

So: do you know what that means? What it means is that (present company excepted, of course) if I were addressing myself to some other Class of 2010 in a select liberal arts college, and asked each student to look at the person on your left and the person on your right, odds would be 9 to 1 (or charitably 3 out of 4) that all three of you are—or were in a former life—cheaters. Well, maybe all of us are, in one way or another; and surely “confession is good for the soul.” But it looks like the deck is stacked against us.

But then, here comes Davidson, proposing to prepare its students “for lives of leadership and service,” and here comes Davidson, saying, “We’re going to have this experiment in trust.” Here comes Davidson, saying “Your word is your bond.” Here comes Davidson, saying, “Your work is/must be your own.” Here comes Davidson, saying, “You will respect the proprietary rights of others.” Here comes Davidson, saying “You will tell the truth; indeed, you will seek to discover and discern the truth, to represent and do the truth as far as in you lies.” In fine, here comes Davidson saying you will seek to live with integrity in all areas of your life in this place.

So welcome to the bubble! This is a different place, and it means to be different. And practical prudence might seem to say, if you mean to stay here for four years, you’d better learn to live by the rules.

But that’s not the point! Nobody is trying to scare anybody. Athan Makansi, current Chair of the Honor Council, in his very fine speech a few weeks ago to the members of the Class of 2013, reminded them that the Honor Code is built upon trust

---

5 “Everybody Does It,” *San Francisco Chronicle* (September 9, 2007), 18
6 Ibid.
rather than fear. Athan said, “It’s not about what you can’t do, it’s about what you can do.” That’s the point!

So…welcome to the bubble. But then you discover—at least I hope you do, given the experimental nature of this whole enterprise, that it’s not a bubble after all. Then you discover that it’s really a crucible—one of those special environments in life in which critical growth and organic change can occur? Your schoolmate, Jenner Gibson, recently wrote in The Davidson Reader, that honor is, after all, “nature’s highest task for us.” And it’s not a task to be completed in a hurry.

So what if these four years at Davidson are not an end in themselves, but primarily a means to a much larger end—the end of preparation for that life “of leadership and service which has come to be expected of Davidson men and women wherever they go after they leave this place? Speaking only for myself, I guess I’d have to say that if Davidson’s honor code were intended to be applicable only to the four years you spend in this place—and thereafter you may do as you please—then it ain’t worth the effort!

And, by the way, I honestly don’t buy the well-intended fiction that this place is not “the real world” after all, and everything outside is really real. As far as I know, the Garden of Eden is closed for the season, and Camelot no longer exists (if it ever did), and anyone here who has taken Humes knows that “utopia” means “no-place.” Davidson can be a fairly rigorous testing-ground for “morals and manners;” indeed, I am convinced that’s why we’re here.

So here’s the point: learning to live with integrity in this place is intended to carry over into all those other places to which life will take you. The honor system at Davidson is intended to induce “a habit of being.” The honor system at Davidson is intended to convince each person who submits to its discipline that she or he will be the one person most responsible for the conduct of the rest of her/his life. And in that “rest of life,” never forget, “the experiment in trust” continues, most likely for as long as you live.

**********

Recently, with the help of my friend Kelly Sink in the library, I rediscovered a poem, lost to hand but not to memory for almost 40 years. It’s a funny/serious poem about an American named Pyestock, who went to England on a quick trip in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the British people. Upon arrival, he was taken to a pub for an evening, looked around briefly, and concluded that nothing was happening; so he gave up his experiment in Anglo-analysis.

The poet concluded that
“…Pyestock was like a master of arts at midday Demanding to be made a certified plumber By three in the afternoon.”

---

7 Athan Makansi, typescript, 3.
8 Vol. III, Issue 1, 7.
And then he writes (and these are the lines that have stuck in my mind),
“You can be dubbed a knight in half a second, Or become a hero, a coward, or a corpse in
three or four, But to become a plumber takes time.”9

Forgive this shameless paraphrase (I promise it’s the last thing I have to say):
You can become a Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science in half a second—admittedly
after four long years!—or become a lawyer, or a teacher, or a priest, or an investment
banker or a pediatrician in however long that may take, but to become a person of
integrity is the work of a lifetime.

In this “experiment in trust” Davidson hopes and intends that the effort to become
that sort of person will start or continue here, but not by any means completed.

You see, it takes time—all the time you’ve got.

* * *

Biographical note by Molly P. Gillespie, "John Wells Kuykendall " Davidson
Encyclopedia 1998, online at http://library.davidson.edu/archives/ency/kuykendalljw.asp:

“(b. 1938) Dr. John Wells Kuykendall, Ph.D., D.D., a native of Charlotte, North Carolina,
graduated from Davidson College in 1959. He received a Bachelor of Divinity from
Union Theological Seminary, a Master of Sacred Theology from Yale Divinity School,
and an M.A. and Ph.D. from Princeton University. Prior to accepting the presidency of
Davidson College, Kuykendall served as the Presbyterian campus pastor for Princeton
University. He also served as professor of religion and campus pastor for Auburn
University. In 1982 he was awarded the Algernon Sydney Sullivan Award and was
selected as the Outstanding Teacher in the School of Arts of Sciences for Auburn
University.

“During his tenure as president, Davidson College completed a $160 million capital
campaign, the largest financial campaign ever mounted by a liberal arts college at the
time. Davidson also witnessed the construction of Baker Sports Complex and the Visual
Arts Center, and six upperclassmen apartment buildings. Two programs receiving
national attention were also added to the college curriculum: the Dean Rusk Program in
International Studies and the Medical Humanities Program.”