Lester M. Wolfson

Quotes from Major Speeches

1964

"An old saying has it that 'all beginnings are difficult.' That my beginning at the South Bend Campus was not difficult at all can be attributed only to the cordiality with which I have been received."

"Our single purpose as a staff working together, whether as senior professors or the most recently hired clerks, is to invest every detail of our appointed tasks with the thoroughness, the care, and the excellence that is presented by Indiana University as a whole."

1966

"Yet when we really communicate with our students there is a pure floating of mind to mind. But how very hard it is not to tyrannize, or dogmatize, or traumatize, how hard to keep a difficult balance so that the miracle of learning can occur.

1967

"We must find better ways than we have found before to let our students know that they are wanted, that we respect their human worth, that we expect performance from them not because we are bored and institutionalized taskmasters but because we know the joy of knowing and want them to know it

too. In a sense, the best teachers live always at that pitch which is near madness."

1968

"God Himself countenances many falls from grace but most colleges allow only one fall from grades. It is amazing that so few have seen the implications of the successes achieved with 'high risk' (academically marginal and sub-marginal) students through compensatory training and some willingness to modify the respect rather arbitrarily given to upper middle-class standards of 'literacy.'"

1970

"But there is a beast that lurks in the jungle, and it is not the subtly rarefied beast of quivering sensibility which marks the characters of Henry James's fiction. This animal is far more gross, and unless contained could well devour not only all the hopes we have for better teaching, learning, and service at IUSB in the 70's, but could quell the great civilizing force which nearly all colleges and universities have exerted on so much that is predatory in society at large."

1973

"To read or hear Shakespeare is to have an experience with language that resounds in the very way one breathes. To begin to understand even vaguely the binary system of mathematics that makes computer science possible and intelligible; to see the structure of matter pictured in the mobiles that might double as futuristic art; to know something of DNA and what it

portends for our understanding of genetic mysteries; to feel the clean inevitability of a syllogism in logic; to appreciate the rhetorical elegance of 'We hold these truths to be self-evident'; to understand the religious fervor and literary grace of 'Thou has made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds rest again in Thee'--to know all these things is to be enlarged and enriched beyond speakable measure. The prime reason for our institutional existence is to serve these good ends for our students and ourselves. After basic material needs have been provided for, surely all significant utility flows from such informed awareness."

1978

"The danger is that we become complacent, that we too cheaply assume our educational system needs little bettering, that our manifold social and personal problems have little connection with current defects in our schools at all levels. Somehow we must discover ways of stretching more minds to meet the furthest dimensions of man's most perceptive thoughts, and we must discover ways of irradiating our hearts with more generous impulses than have characterized us heretofore."

1979

"The Pieta, the Basilica, the Sistine Chapel, the sense of a holy day coming, being robbed, looking out the window through which Keats last looked--what a compression of world, fate, and time into something akin for me to Blake's having seen eternity in a grain of sand!"

"The staggering ruins of the Colosseum prompted me to write Jerry Harriman and the gang on the second floor-front asking if we really wanted a 'multi-purpose recreational facility.'

1981

"Olga Perschbacher--Pertschie as we daringly called her when she was out of earshot, is a prime reason I am here this afternoon, for it was her commentary on Wordsworth's 'Intimations' Ode one fine April day that diverted me from an earlier intention to study law. Among many good instructors, she is one of the handful of truly great ones I have had--luminously intelligent, deeply compassionate, vitally sensitive."

1982

"Amidst all the necessary talk about priorities, I think we who deeply care about it will be called upon to state and restate again and again the one a priori priority: that a university is first and foremost a house of full intellect, where reason, imagination, and humane concern are honored, where the arts and sciences, from a to z, alpha to omega, in themselves and in their applications to the learned professions are preserved, refined, conveyed, and enlarged through our teaching and scholarship. No other agency or entity in our society is formed so uniquely to do this mortal work."

1985

"Maybe our individual destiny is, as Wordsworth has it, to come trailing clouds of glory from God who is our home; and to end, as Dante has it in the

Paradiso, with the beautific vision. Maybe that destiny is more accurately depicted in the Old English image which likens the human soul to a bird that comes in from the dark and pitiless storm, lingers a while in the warm and lighted hall of life, and then flies out once again into the storm.

Whichever of these poetic insights may be nearer ultimate truth, we do what we do here in our own warm and lighted hall, observing the ancient maxim that if it is not given to any one of us to complete the human task to which we are called, neither are we free to exempt ourselves from it."