

## Contemplations on Spring Onions

Presented by Richard Robinson to the Wofford College Board of Trustees and their guests, October 3, 1988.

My wife and I appreciate your invitation to be here tonight. This is just the style to which we would like to become accustomed.

These elegant surroundings remind me of my childhood in a little community a few miles north of here on the South Carolina-North Carolina state line. Even in the 1940's before my hometown had become the cosmopolitan center it is today, we had a club somewhat like the Carolina Country Club. I admit it was not as nice, and it was not called a country club. It was in fact called State Line Bar and Grill, but it was not altogether different from this place. Like this place they had a dress code you would be refused admission if you were wearing a coat and tie, and if for reasons I cannot imagine you were not carrying a weapon, they would lend you one at the door. State Line Bar and Grill was not surrounded by a beautiful golf course like this place, but it was not without charm and distinction. It was surrounded by what was at least advertised to be the world's largest mound of empty beer cans. I used to walk out there and gawk. It was an impressive sight, and except for the pink funeral parlor it was the only attraction in town.

So you see State Line Bar and Grill was not totally unlike this place. There is one significant difference, however. There you would not stand up in front of the audience to give a speech, not even a short one. That would be the authoritative definition of "dumb." I'm glad Mr. Chapman chose this place rather than State Line.

President Lesesne gave me some instructions in his customary kind and considerate way. Rather than dictate what I should say, he just hinted at it. He told me to give a speech that was brief and light but with a pungent point. Those were his words as several of you can testify. I knew it was a code, but what~ was it he was, telling me to talk about? Brief-- not too much. Light — not too heavy. Pungent —not too mild. Finally it hit me. The president wanted me to talk to you about... spring onions. Although I was exhilarated to have broken the code, I found the choice of topics frankly a little peculiar. But I figured that was just one more reason why he is president and I'm not.

At any rate, as instructed, I will say a few words about spring onions. I try to grow them in my garden. You plant spring onions in the dead of winter. You go out in February, try to dig frozen ground, plant little old shriveled things that look dead to begin with. Then you have to hoe them regularly because the ground around here will turn to concrete otherwise. You have to fertilize them a lot because this old red clay doesn't provide much for those onions to grow on. But if you do all that and the weather is good and the varmints aren't too bad, those shriveled onions you planted actually flourish and produce. With a lot of attention and nurture those little old onions actually become what it was possible for them to be.

As a metaphor that's not too bad, is it? Wofford was planted nearly 140 years ago, and ever since a lot of faithful gardeners have been tending us. They have kept us alive in an environment that has

not always been so friendly. But the truth of the matter is the ground here is very hard and very poor, and it never has really been dug deeply enough nor fertilized generously enough to permit full development. The crop has been pretty good, probably better than it should have been, but not as good as it could have been.

In the last couple of years Wofford has dreamed a bold dream. We have dreamed that like those spring onions we will actually become what it is our potential to be, a first-rate undergraduate, liberal arts, Christian college. Like those shriveled onions put in the ground in February, Wofford has the potential to flourish and produce bountifully. But unnurtured potential, like an unnurtured onion, eventually decays. The full development of Wofford's great potential is going to require a lot of nurture, a lot of cultivation, a lot of fertilizer, a warm and friendly climate, and a bit of luck with the bugs. But if we can somehow generate that nurture, I know full well that this college can, as well as any college, engage bright, curious students and dedicated, competent, excited teachers in the pursuit of that delicate balance between knowledge and appreciation of the past and a fresh, new look toward the future that we call liberal learning.

We have dreamed the dream now. Will it come true? Walt Disney had a sign in his studio that said, "If you can dream it, you can do it." I wish that were true; it's not. It is possible to dream, to commit oneself to that dream, and yet never see it fulfilled. With every dream there is the risk of failure, and the bigger the dream, the bigger the risk. I have a friend who, having reached middle age, realized that his life was in a bit of a rut. He decided to do something about it. He decided at age 50 to risk doing something he had always wanted to do; he took up skydiving. He bought a book, Skydiving in One Fell Swoop, he got a parachute, rented a plane, and jumped. I guess it was about a week later when I visited him in the hospital. Everything that could break did. I said, "What went wrong?" He said, "I'm not sure, but I have thought on it, and I think there is a mistake in that book. There on page 8 where it says 'full zip code', I think it should have said 'pull rip cord'."

There is a chance that we will commit to this grand dream to be the best only to end up in a heap with our parachute tangled around us. Is our dream worth the effort and the risk? You bet it is! This place has the most wonderful potential for good, and it is worth almost any effort and almost any risk to see that potential realized. I believe it's time for all of us who are so fond of this great college to say boldly, if not originally, "Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead. "