

Inaugural Address
By David Rees Evans
Ninth President of Southern Vermont College.
December 4, 2015

Thank you, Ira. It is a real pleasure to work with you as Chair of the Board of Trustees. Your loyalty to Southern Vermont College is unparalleled, and everyone at the college thanks you for your leadership and support.

I want to extend my special acknowledgement and thanks to my assistant, Robin Yearwood, who did most of the planning for this week's events, and helped us create a celebration we can all enjoy. I hope you can now take a little break, Robin!

State Senator Campion...

Chair Wagner and Members of the Southern Vermont College Board of Trustees...

Presidents Barbara Sirvis and Karen Gross...

Distinguished Delegates...

Colleagues on the Faculty and Staff at SVC...

Family, Friends, and Guests, and...

Most especially, SVC students and alumni, for whom we are really here;

Thank you. It is an honor to serve this wonderful college!

Tom Redden, as so often at SVC's important public events, your invocation has set the tone of thoughtfulness, inclusion, and integrity for our celebration.

Jamal Gaynor, you bring light and distinction to the role of SGA president at SVC, and I am proud that you are our student.

Sarah Sanfillipo, the library, and the SVC community, are grateful for your wonderful leadership and the spirit and humor you bring to campus.

Mary Botter, Jennifer Burg, Tammy Kenny, Jennifer Nelson, and Scott Stein---you are the leaders of our academic programs, and are vital to helping the college deliver on its mission. It is thus most appropriate that you remind us of that mission today.

Thank you.

And Eric Despard, our masterful Music Director, thank you for all you do.

Sydney Lea, thank you for reading your wonderful poem, "I Was Thinking of Beauty." It sets exactly the right tone and reminds us both that there is more to life than study, and that sometimes academics don't actually have the answer.

Dr. Sarah Bolton, thank you for your kind and generous remarks, and congratulations on your new position as president of The College of Wooster. That great institution is fortunate that you will be its next president.

I want to single out three more guests who are serving as delegates today:

My college classmate, Dr. Thomas Minar, is the new president of Franklin College in Indiana—congratulations, Tom, and thank you for being here today. May we both be truly successful!

Dr. Bernie Patterson, Chancellor at the University of Wisconsin—Stevens Point, hired me at two different times to work at two different institutions. Bernie is a model leader, an administrator of unquestionable integrity, a true colleague, and a great friend. I am unendingly grateful for his support and mentorship. Thank you, Bernie.

I also want to thank the members of our family who are here—Ursula’s sister Dr. Terri McCarty, who is herself a model academic, a supportive sister, a kind and generous host, and a good friend.

We are proud of our niece Tess McCarty-Glenn, who has consistently been involved with our lives in ways that bring us tremendous joy and pleasure. At another time I might tell you about how she and I loaded a giant U-Haul truck in the Iowa summer heat as Ursula and I got ready to make the first move of my administrative career, and then drove all night to Georgia with five unhappy cats. Her partner Thomas Franich has been a member of the enormous McCarty family for many years, and he’s a heck of a Christmas baker with whom we love spending time!

I am honored and touched that my much-loved and much-missed former brother-in-law Dr. Joseph Williams is here with us today. I hope, Joseph, that we can make a barbeque run sometime soon.

Finally, I want to recognize and thank my wife Ursula McCarty, who is truly the main reason I am here. Her support, love, and rigorous attention to keeping me in line over the past 21 years, not to mention our rigorous discussions about many issues, have been the foundation of all that I have done.

Again, thank all of you for being here.

In my teaching days, one of my favorite courses was an upper-division seminar on John Milton, which focused mainly on his most famous work, the epic poem *Paradise Lost*. *Paradise Lost* is one of those cultural artifacts that stands like a giant, grim, sharp-edged obstacle on the road to education, admired and avoided as a daunting, indisputably great yet perhaps passé text that is more often honored on the bookshelf than in the reading.

The pleasure in the class thus came as students inevitably discovered that Milton’s elaborate retelling of one of Western civilization’s central founding stories is astonishingly compelling and even, for some—among them atheists, agnostics, skeptics, and non-Christians—deeply moving. Milton’s poem notoriously sets out to “justify the ways of God to Man,” to uncover the reasons for the Fall, explain the existence of evil in a universe created by an ostensibly benevolent and omnipotent God, and account thereby for human suffering that often seems arbitrary and pointless, or even intentionally cruel.

For Milton as a 17th-century Christian, this accounting was critical to maintain belief, but even now, in a much more skeptical and diverse religious climate, the questions he poses about evil and human suffering remain salient as we consider the world’s troubles and the struggles and suffering of many of our neighbors near and far.

Theologically Milton was in most ways essentially an orthodox Puritan, with one significant exception. That exception was his fervent and absolute belief in free will and human agency, while most Puritans had adopted some form of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination or special election, which essentially suggests that individual humans are saved or damned from conception regardless of what they do. One of *Paradise Lost*’s key thematic strands arises from Milton’s thorough rejection of this position: **the poem argues that humans’ ability to choose is, in fact, the fundamental quality that imbues their lives with meaning.** The “fruit of that forbidden tree” sits in the middle of the Garden of Eden because, were it not

there, Adam and Eve's obedience to God would mean nothing, as it would not be possible for them to disobey. Similarly, after the Fall, they may choose to continue in revolt, as Satan and the other fallen angels have done, or to repent and seek forgiveness; the wholly free ability to remain in revolt is what gives their decision to repent its meaning and effect, as Satan and his minions' steadfast refusal to repent cements and emphasizes their perversity and self-destructiveness. In fact, Adam and Eve's potential future decisions to obey will be much more significant than their prelapsarian adherence to God's wishes, as that obedience will demonstrate human will, now corrupted by sin, choosing to do the right thing against its now-inherent inclination towards evil.

At the end of the poem, upon their expulsion from the Garden, as the archangel Michael takes Adam and Eve out of Paradise and into their new lives in exile, the poet remarks, "The World was all before them, where to **choose** / Their place of rest." In almost the final lines, Milton again emphasizes Adam and Eve's power of choice—in this case, to select a "place of rest," an important phrase emphasizing that even in the fallen world, rest, with all its implications of peace and renewal, is still available to them **so long as they choose correctly**.

Again, Milton points towards their agency in determining the course of their lives and, consequently, the course of all of the humanity that will follow them through history.

I appreciate your indulgence of my nostalgic trip through one of my favorite teaching texts; despite the fact that I do not share Milton's religious convictions, I have found *Paradise Lost* to be an endless source of provocative ideas, complex and evocative language and imagery, and deep insight into the human condition. Since we at SVC selected "**The Power of Choice**" as the theme of this academic year, and more specifically for this week's events, I have repeatedly returned to Milton's argument as a root of my conviction in the central power and value of choice for human dignity and meaning, and I want to share with you why I think an emphasis on providing and enabling students to choose is the core of Southern Vermont College's identity, and the key to its future.

Since my first encounter with SVC as a candidate for the presidency, and even more so in the months since Ursula and I arrived in Bennington, I have found great joy in our community's distinctively cohesive and consensual sense of the college's purpose and goals. **Our collective pride in the work we do together is animated, in the words of our new mission statement, by our affirmation of our "deep belief in the potential of every individual."** We are wholly committed to working with students from a wide range of backgrounds and preparation to help them find, and then set out confidently, on the path to success in whatever endeavor they might choose. This sense of mission and pride was what initially drove excitement about SVC and it is what impels my call to the college as its president.

Years ago, as an undergraduate, I walked almost daily past the gates that at one time had marked the main exit from my alma mater's campus. These gates were inscribed with a quotation from an early president, James A. Blaisdell, which has consequently found a permanent home in my mind.

The inscription reads, "***They only are loyal to this college who, departing, bear their added riches in trust for mankind.***" Colleges and universities scatter this sort

of quotation across their campuses for a variety of reasons, the most educationally pure of which, I suppose, is to encourage students and others to reflect on their words and ideas and, perhaps, inspire them to take action. President Blaisdell was surely trying to nudge the college's students to reflect on the opportunities they had been given, and to think about how to move into the world with a commitment to making it better, whether through research, service, teaching, building a business, providing health care, or some other approach that built on the "added riches" of their undergraduate educations.

It's certainly easy to be cynical about the strategy of inscribing inspirational or hortatory words across college campuses, but—perhaps because I'm a closet sentimentalist—in the last thirty years I have instead thought often about what it means to "bear my added riches in trust" for humanity. This is a question of *vocation*, a calling to serve in whatever way seems best to do honor to the benefit of my education and express my loyalty to the place where I received it. The phrase "in trust" is important because to have something "in trust" is not to **own** it, but rather to **hold** it and **use** it to the benefit of another.

In much the same way that Adam and Eve's obedience to God only has real meaning in the context of their possible disobedience, the "added riches" President Blaisdell refers to only have real value when they are put to work in the service of humanity. Without action, a positive choice to serve that trust, they are worth nothing.

In this context, I also want to talk about my evolving understanding of privilege, which is related to those "added riches," and how this understanding has led me to stand before you now. These days *privilege* is, rightly, a loaded word—the conflicts tearing at many colleges and universities, notably Yale and Princeton as well as the Universities of Missouri and Kansas, Amherst College and many other institutions, around their racial climate and their links to difficult history, are just one example among many of how issues of privilege are shaping our most important cultural conversations.

Similar challenges haunt every discussion of gender equity, LGBT issues, sexual violence, religion, social and economic class, national and regional origin and immigration, international politics, and many other urgent topics such as the terrible plight of Syrian refugees trying to flee the catastrophe in their homeland.

I believe that the fundamental challenge in any consideration of privilege is that its key characteristic is often its invisibility or illegibility to its possessors.

Alternatively, if such privilege is visible and legible to those who hold it, in many cases they try to believe, or assert in arguments, that it does not exist as a real social and cultural phenomenon.

The French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu—with whose works I have spent considerable time in my scholarly life—has argued that "Every established order tends to reproduce (to very different degrees and with very different means) the naturalization of its own arbitrariness" (*Outline* 164).

In other words, holders of significant privilege, what Bourdieu calls social or cultural capital, see whatever circumstances, advantages and benefits flowing from it simply as "the way things are," a natural arrangement somehow detached from human agency, rather than a happenstance concatenation of arbitrary social or economic conditions that, conveniently enough, benefits them.

Similarly, those who for whatever reason do not possess that particular privilege can be seen and represented as somehow inherently lacking, rather than as individuals who simply do not happen to be in a position to take advantage of whatever circumstances they confront. Put slightly differently, social and economic advantages and disadvantages are characterized purely as consequences of individual or group virtues and shortcomings within some kind of unchanging natural order, rather than as constructed social arrangements that over time have evolved with varying degrees of intentionality to benefit certain types of people at the expense of others.

Yet Bourdieu's metaphor of "capital," versions of which are shared by many other social and cultural critics, also reveals something critically important—**privilege, "social capital," functions very similarly to money, financial capital, in facilitating its holders' ability to do what they please.** Possession of either kind of capital is a means of widening the scope of choices available to the holder. Social capital and its functioning are critically important to understanding what we do at Southern Vermont College, and why our role in American higher education is both profoundly important and subject to great challenges. Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz has argued that the economic, social and political forces at play in the United States are **"ultimately undermin[ing] the American Dream, the belief that if you work hard and play by the rules you will succeed. Today, the life prospects of young Americans are determined largely by the income and education of their parents.**

We once stood out as a country that provided the greatest opportunity to succeed; now we stand out as one of the advanced countries that provide the least mobility, with a child's income more dependent on the education and income of his parents than in almost all other advanced countries" (*Rewriting the Rules* 15-16). We have apparently, and ironically, slipped back into exactly the kind of society that the founders of this country sought to escape, one in which birth is for many people the primary determinant of social and economic position, and the foundational source of social or cultural capital for those who come from prosperous, educated families.

This circumstance oddly recapitulates the idea of predestination against which Milton argues in *Paradise Lost*—a determinism that deprives individuals of responsibility, agency, freedom, and therefore meaning.

Southern Vermont College chafes against this way of distributing society's benefits, choosing instead a model that is both radical and conservative in the best sense.

We are radical because we believe the social arrangement Stiglitz describes is not right and should not be taken for granted; We are conservative in that we look back to the idea that all people are created equal and have natural rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and that it is the college's role to facilitate that pursuit. It is important here to note that in drafting the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson borrowed most of that famous clause from John Locke, who, in turn, was a direct intellectual descendent of Milton. In the *Second Treatise of Government*, Locke asserts the rights of "life, liberty, and property," while, critically, Jefferson and the signatories of the Declaration instead emphasize the "pursuit of

happiness,” **arguing that the power of choice—as Milton says, “where to choose their place of rest”—is the definitional characteristic of a free citizen.** The technical term for this philosophy is *classical liberalism*, which in turn is related to the *liberal arts*, the disciplines and ways of knowing that are designed to prepare people to be free and effective citizens who can choose to pursue whatever goal they believe is worthy of their efforts.

My mother was a professor and my father was a lawyer, and thus I am among those who have been greatly advantaged by the family into which I happened to be born. My subsequent personal and professional life has led me to believe that for me, the only proper use of those advantages is work to make them available to those who were not so fortunate.

My individual history is a clear example of what privilege looks like, and I confess that, early on, I did not really grasp the scope of the advantages I had been given nor how different, and more challenging, others’ educational or life experiences were. Nor was it clear to me how various social and economic forces at play in the world conspired to provide those advantages and differences, or that they had granted me freedom of choice not available to many others. My privilege was not yet, that is to say, visible or legible to me, despite President Blaisdell’s exhortation to bear my added riches “in trust for mankind.”

However, in one of those decisions that retrospectively, and perhaps ironically, makes a great deal of sense in a life narrative, I wrote my doctoral dissertation and several subsequent publications about social privilege in 17th-century England. In those writings, I thought at length about how the members of the aristocracy and gentility of that period scrambled mightily to preserve their inherited privileges and advantages in a culture that was increasingly questioning their bases and, from time to time, violently disputing them.

For many reasons, traditional, hierarchical social arrangements were being called into question. As usual, those who benefited from those arrangements sought urgently to protect their privileges by, as Bourdieu says, naturalizing their arbitrariness, manipulating the mechanisms through which they accrued and enhanced the value of their social capital.

One of the most important outcomes of the process that was challenging those privileges was, of course, the American Revolution and the founding of this country, which, despite our manifold failings at realizing the ideal, hearkened back to Miltonic and Lockean conceptions of individual liberty as the bedrock of human dignity.

The year I finished my dissertation, I also married Ursula McCarty, who was a first-generation college student from an Iowa family of ten siblings. It is impossible to overstate how much I have learned from Ursula and her family about the challenges of growing up without the economic advantages I had, and of going to college without the family background and the confidence flowing from it that enabled me to take access and success for granted.

She has taught me to see at close quarters how many of the things that I was simply able to assume can be opaque to those who have not had the same kinds of opportunities. Moreover, her sharp feminist sensitivity to power dynamics has helped me become attuned to how personal and institutional

interactions are shaped by sometimes very small differentials in the way individuals are treated, their access to benefits bestowed by those in positions of authority, and the presumptions and assumptions to which individuals are subjected based on their personal characteristics including ethnicity, gender, apparent social class or sexual orientation, and so on.

In short, my family background and the “added riches” of a rewarding college experience combined to give me a wide range of possible personal and professional choices. My scholarly life, characterized by a fortuitous choice of discipline and topic, and my private life, characterized by an even more fortunate marriage, have sensitized me greatly to the dynamics of privilege and how they play out in contemporary society. **My concern has been that our society allocates social capital to certain groups and individuals in a way that has little or nothing to do with their native talents or moral virtues**, and then mystifies that allocation as something akin to a natural law, building and supporting structures that **hinder tremendously talented and hard-working people from achieving the kind of success and security they should.**

SVC is special in its singular devotion to redressing differentials in privilege by providing our students with the tools to be successful not only academically, but in other contexts that might otherwise be alien to them. Collectively, the faculty, staff and administration choose to be part of our community because we see the profound value of our mission and the contributions the college makes towards improving our students’ lives and the place we inhabit. We seek to help students become the best versions of themselves, and as we enter this new era at SVC, **my core aspiration is that the college likewise become the best version of itself**, enhancing and expanding our strengths and limiting our weaknesses and challenges as much as possible.

To that end, I want to lay out several broad goals for SVC’s future that build on the good work of my predecessors, the skills and dedication of all the college’s citizens, and the important role the college plays locally, regionally and nationally.

First, and most generally, we need to empower the college financially. In common with most small private colleges in the United States, we face significant fiscal challenges that limit our range of options to do the many things we believe we ought to do to optimize the education and student experiences we offer. We need to manage our finances prudently to ensure a sustainable future. From a solid foundation, we can build programs and services that will help us to be a leader in helping students to realize their full potential.

We must draw more attention locally, regionally and nationally to our success in order to attract transformative philanthropy that supports the strategies that we know work, as we prove every day in myriad ways. We need to increase enrollment strategically to create critical mass for projects, enhanced curricula, and more extensive engagement with other organizations and institutions, and to enable economies of scale by spreading fixed costs over a larger base.

We must reconnect with our alumni base, who are the history of the college and who therefore also have a critical stake in its future.

We certainly need more robust programming that invites them back to campus, seeks their advice and support about issues currently confronting the college, and,

probably most importantly, makes it easy for them to share their wisdom and experience with our current students. **Alumni loyalty is also a kind of capital, and it is one we must invest wisely so that our graduates know that SVC wants to remain a part of their lives, and wants them to remain a part of ours.**

SVC is a bastion of diversity in a part of the country that struggles with diversity. I am proud that the college has the most diverse undergraduate student body of any private college in Vermont, and we must ensure that we continue to seek students from many backgrounds and beliefs to contribute to the educational and social atmosphere at the college. We must also diligently recruit diverse faculty and staff to bring a broad array of perspectives and life experiences to campus. If we are going to fulfill our promise of believing in the potential of every individual, we must foster an institutional community that demonstrates that belief in all ways, especially by honoring and including people of many backgrounds in everything we do.

We need to enhance our relationship with the town of Bennington and surrounding areas to our mutual betterment in many arenas, as it is clear that our fortunes, good and bad, are closely intertwined. When I meet with people locally, I am always greatly pleased by the compliments I hear about our students who intern, work, or engage in service projects around the area. (The most common compliment I hear is a version of “we love your students.”) **Our students are our best ambassadors,** and I am proud of them and their roles beyond campus and **grateful that they make the college look good.** We must continue to find ways to support them in this work and expand their options for pursuing it by maintaining and enhancing our relationships with all kinds of area businesses and organizations, and ensure that they go out prepared, professional, and enthusiastic.

The college enjoys excellent, mutually supportive and beneficial relationships with the Bennington Museum and Southwestern Vermont Medical Center, and I thank Robert Wolterstorff, director of the museum, and Tom Dee, CEO of SVMC, for being here today. We will continue to seek new ways to collaborate with them to strengthen our corner of Bennington and the entire community.

This year, we have nine student-athletes from Bennington College participating in our varsity athletics program; this is a wonderful collaboration and a model for how we can work with other higher education institutions to share resources and create opportunities that we could not provide alone. I look forward to continuing to work with Bennington President Mariko Silver on other potential areas where we can collaborate to make both of our very different colleges better, and to exploring similar opportunities with other colleges nearby, as we are currently doing with Landmark College, represented today by President Peter Eden. We are actively seeking ways to collaborate with the other wonderful organizations in the area, including our venue today, the Bennington Center for the Arts, the Oldcastle Theatre, and many of the non-profit social agencies that serve our community.

The recently announced Good Neighbor Scholarship program, I hope, demonstrates to our external constituencies that SVC is committed to helping local students pursue higher education affordably and conveniently; moreover, such students are often especially committed to the area and will stay after

graduation, providing much-needed skill, dedication and economic opportunity to southern Vermont and the border areas of New York and Massachusetts.

The college is also collaborating with several local organizations to revive and expand the campus's superb network of recreational trails, which in turn link to trails across Bennington and will be open to all for appropriate use. **As we ask the town to share with us in providing opportunities for our students and financial and moral support for the college, we in turn will intentionally and actively share our wonderful resources with our neighbors to improve Bennington's quality of life for all.**

We must ensure that our academics are rigorous, engaging, and helpful to our students as they pursue their goals. We must continually evaluate our portfolio of programs, both academic and co-curricular, to ensure that they serve our students efficiently and effectively, and thoughtfully build new programs that can help us be better and stronger. We will remain cognizant of the larger social, economic and business forces shaping the markets into which our students graduate, and develop programs that maximize our graduates' opportunities to pursue careers or further education. **We will keep our eyes open for ideas that make sense for SVC to pursue, and we will pursue them with vigor.**

We must continue to pursue excellence in athletics as well as academics. Our recent successes in several sports, notably cross country (back-to-back conference championships for the men's team!), both men's and women's basketball, and women's soccer, and our markedly successful inaugural season in women's lacrosse last year, have brought pride and excitement to campus and have forged new, strong links between local fans and the college. While pursuing improved success in all sports, we will remain true to the NCAA Division III philosophy of the scholar-athlete and expect the highest levels of integrity and sportsmanship from all involved in our athletic programs.

We will remember always that we are stewards of a precious legacy in our beautiful mountainside campus and the historic Everett Mansion. We hold our grounds and our physical plant in trust for the next generation, and must pass them on in better shape than we found them. We certainly need to expand and improve our facilities to meet student, faculty and staff needs and desires, and our current strategic-planning process involves carefully collecting information on these needs and desires so we can properly prioritize them and seek the support to meet them.

We must remember that we are located in Vermont, and take advantage of the unique qualities of our location. We will follow the Vermont ethos of pursuing environmental responsibility and sustainability, honoring local traditions, valuing and fostering the arts, and enjoying the unparalleled natural beauty and cultural resources that surround us. We must, wherever possible, support local businesses and buy local products; we must be a responsible and committed community member. We must be a Vermont institution that invites students, faculty and staff from around the country and the world to join us in this very special place.

It is a great honor to speak to you today as the president of Southern Vermont College. This is a special, unusually dedicated and supportive small college; we are doing honorable work and doing it well. We will do it better. We have all chosen to be here; we know deep in our hearts that we hold the education of our students in

trust for them and for the society of which they are a part, and our highest goal is to do full justice to that trust.
Thank you very much.