GOOD TO GREAT

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You might say it all started with a letter. Dated May 14, 2006, it opens as follows: “Dear President Andreasen: I am extremely interested in being considered for the position of Provost of Andrews University.”

A dozen resumes crossed the desks of the Provost Search Committee members, but only a couple of cover letters. This one was four pages long, single-spaced, succinctly presenting to President Andreasen the candidate’s desire to serve at Andrews and the unique background and skills that would enable her to do so. It was fitting that our new provost, an English major and an English professor in previous life stages, should first come to the notice of Andrews University through the written word.

Nowadays Dr. Heather Knight is frequently seen and heard around campus: at convocation; leading faculty meetings; attending a “Meet the Provost” luncheon with leaders in the wider community; offering prayer and putting in a good word for Andrews on Pastor Doug Batchelor’s “The Most Amazing Prophecies” series (hosted at Pioneer Memorial Church); gathering campus leaders for an administrative retreat; and explaining her strategic objectives to the Board of Trustees. Her enthusiasm, personal warmth, and rapidly growing command of campus issues have already made a strong impression.

Change is in the air—and that’s nothing new for Knight. “I really remember the experience of being an immigrant,” Knight says, “coming to a new country, seeking the American dream—which for our family meant access to education; and of course there were going to be streets of gold and you could work very hard and buy your own home.” Born in Jamaica, Knight moved with her parents to New York at age nine. She remembers her first day of going to fifth grade, unaware that she had an accent. The teacher asked for someone to read so she raised her hand, and when her first words came out her classmates started laughing, “falling on the floor laughing at me.” That was the moment of recognition, she recalls—of “you’re different; you’re an outsider; you don’t fit in.” And so, like many immigrants, she began the process of assimilation, a process she has repeated many times while seeking out new challenges in new places.

Her educational journey has taken her from Howard University to Oakwood College (BA in English, 1982), Loma Linda University (MA in English, 1984), and Stanford University (PhD in English, 1991), across the country and halfway back, a rich and diverse experience. At each stop she learned valuable lessons. At Howard she learned to love writing and became an English major while working with Professor Claudia Tate. It was also from Tate, a pioneering scholar in Black American writers, that Knight learned to appreciate authors such as Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison.

At Oakwood, she got “a tremendous grounding in Seventh-day Adventism and the life of the church,” while taking classes from a veritable honor roll of Adventist theologians and preachers, such as E. E. Cleveland, Benjamin Reaves, Henry Wright, Clifford Pitt, and C. T. Richards. She also had the opportunity to exercise her faith and develop “holy boldness” with some summers in colporteur and evangelistic work.

Loma Linda University, by means of a special scholarship, gave Knight the opportunity to pursue graduate studies, and to learn more about complexity and ambiguity from venerable professors like Frank Knittel, Robert Dunn, Cordell Briggs and Dorothy Minchin-Comm.

When Knight arrived at Stanford, she was at first advised to study Shakespeare, to operate as a Black student in the mainstream. Knight loved reading Shakespeare, but she also felt drawn to study American writers of color. She discussed the choice with one of her professors, Herbie Lindenberger, who told her “Heather, do what’s in your heart.” The result was a dissertation which examined how the Black religious tradition manifested itself in the novels of four African-American writers. It gave Knight a wonderful opportunity to draw together the strands of her religious and literary heritage, laid the groundwork for her early teaching career, and gave her a richer context for administrative work in diversity issues.

After graduating from Stanford, Knight accepted a job as an English professor at University of the Pacific, in Stockton, California. After nine years of teaching,
she transitioned to nine years in the Provost’s office, as an Assistant and later an Associate Provost. Knight appears to have ideal training for her current position as Andrews University’s new provost.

“She has a big job ahead of her,” one chair remarked, “but I think she can do it.” “She’s articulate, thinks well on her feet, has a warm and open way about her—refreshing,” another chair told me. “Exciting,” “encouraging,” “energetic,” “affirming,” “consistent,” “easy to talk to,” “delightful,” say other faculty members. “She has a strong ability to hear what faculty and staff are saying, and appears to have a desire to incorporate that into the university’s plan,” says another chair; “I think she can unite the campus.”

The mission of uniting the university was evident in a recent administrative retreat. One attendee told me he was impressed that Knight “didn’t simply gather the usual fifteen or twenty cabinet and academic deans’ council-based suspects, but a group of nearly fifty people from across campus, all part of an ambition to not only dream big, but bring the university meaningfully along together. She has the ability to inspire and gather a truly collaborative group around her,” he remarked. Another teacher observed that Knight seems to be gathering as much information as she can from almost every group on campus, which suggests to him that “she intends to solve problems by synthesizing information, rather than by fiat.”

Other observers have been impressed with Knight’s thoroughness, including better knowledge of the current strategic plan than many of us. She is, a colleague remarked, “a thorough student of who we are.” Another noted that “the most fantastic thing I have heard from her is that we will start putting the budgeting and strate-
A "provost" is not a cheese, a new sportscar, a French breakfast pastry, or an improvement on an amateur vost. Provost was not the winner of the 2004 Kentucky Derby—although Smarty Jones, the actual winner, presumably had the benefit of higher education.

Rather, a provost is the lead academic officer of an institution of higher learning, and, in the case of Andrews (models for provosts vary), the chief operating officer of the university, running day-to-day operations. Dr. Knight sees her role as making sure that all the divisions of the university are running well and at top efficiency, helping all the "players" operationalize the academic and spiritual vision of the institution.

Handy hints on provosting:
- Wear a business suit 9–5;
- Read The Chronicle of Higher Education every week;
- Memorize your school’s mission statement; maintain dignity and composure appropriate to the office at all times, avoiding, for instance, such informalities as "no way, pencil neck!" in deans’ council; don’t carry your copy of Provosting for Dummies to meetings.

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By the way, one of Knight’s objectives is to get the budgeting timeline on track. She plans to have a draft of next year’s budget ready by December 15. The first snowflakes of the season fell on October 12, so perhaps even Mother Nature has gotten on Knight’s timeline.

Several faculty members have cited Knight’s diligence in getting acquainted with the Andrews workforce. One teacher, who hadn’t yet met Knight, was quite surprised and impressed when he showed up for a committee meeting and she addressed him by name. Another colleague mentioned that “After only being on the job five weeks, she’s great at remembering names and giving public credit and acknowledgement of individuals’ work and contributions to Andrews.”

Another faculty member shared this story. “I arrived back on campus late this fall due to my mother’s passing. The first day back, I was walking from the parking lot to Bell Hall when I heard my name called. It didn’t really register—I ignored it and kept going. But again my name was called. So I turned around and looked—there was Dr. Knight—in her little sporty black car with the window rolled down and motioning for me to come. I quickly went over to her car—she wanted to know how I was doing. Wow! That was really special and gave me just the lift I needed to be glad I was back at AU!”

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There is a phrase that, early on, people have come to associate with Knight: “good to great,” from the title of Jim Collins’s 2001 business best seller. After the administrative merry-go-round of this past March, one of my colleagues suggested a more modest motto: from “good grief! to good.” Knight says she doesn’t see “good to great” as a magic mantra, but rather as a useful framework for the goal of building excellence, her real goal.

Assuming the role of naysayer, I ask her why “good” isn’t good enough, why we should aspire to be a great institution. She says partly it’s just her nature: that when she gets into a new situation she likes to see what the best is and start heading in that direction. But beyond that, she puts things in a spiritual context, with passages such as Ecclesiastes 9:10 and Deuteronomy 28:12-14. The latter passage includes God’s promise to Israel that, providing it is faithful, it will be “the head and not the tail,” and that it can “lend to many nations.” Knight has parallel desires for Andrews University: that it deliver the best in Seventh-day Adventist education and service to its worldwide constituency.

For this year, Knight’s objectives include budget reform, as mentioned above; completing the hiring process to fill top administrative positions; beginning to prepare for the university’s next accreditation visit (2009); and completing a new strategic plan for 2007-2012. She also has specific actions planned to improve internal and external public relations, increase enrollment, foster faculty and staff development, and enhance and celebrate the university’s diversity.

To say Knight has a full plate would be an understatement, but talking with her, seeing her organizational and people skills, and witnessing her energy are inspiring. For her own part, Knight is inspired by the privilege of working with President Andreasen, the opportunity she has as a new provost to collaborate with a wise and experienced president and mentor.

The team concept is very important to Knight, basic to her working method. She seems to be particularly skilled at taking a lofty goal, such as increasing freshmen enrollment by seventy-five students for next fall, and breaking it down into a series of strategic initiatives. In this case, that means forming an ad hoc committee with VP for Enrollment Management Stephen Payne, studying enrollment demographics, picking the brains of all the relevant parties in a series of meetings, synthesizing the information and coming up with action steps. Nobody said being a provost was going to be easy.

Additionally, Knight is also a mother and the wife of Dr. Norman Knight, pastor of the Berean Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Bend, Ind. But Knight says she gives thanks every day for her new job. “Joy,” she points out, “is my middle name.” When she first visited campus this past summer to check it out, she felt immediately at home. She saw the John Nevins Andrews statue between Pioneer Memorial Church and the James White Library and loved the symbolism, the integration of faith and learning. She looked at Andrews’ outstretched hand and seemed to hear him saying “come to Andrews.” By the time Andrews University was ready to offer her the job, however, she already had a provost job offer in hand from another school. She explained her situation over the phone to President Andreasen, who was vacationing in Europe. “Where is your heart, Heather?” he asked, in words that must have recalled to her the advice of Professor Lindenberger many years before. They prayed together long distance—a Dane in Greece and a Jamaican-born administrator in California—and she decided to take the job in southwest Michigan. It was a quintessential Andrews moment and may prove to be an important step in the path from good to great.

Scott Moncrieff, professor of English, has taught at Andrews since 1988.