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“Find Your Sugar Shack”

College of Saint Benedict Convocation Address

August 27, 2008

Good morning and let me add my warmest welcome to the beginning of a new academic year. I especially want to welcome the new members of our community, including transfer students and first-year students in the class of 2012. Since, for so many of you, this will be the first faculty presentation of your college career, I hope I can live up to the high expectations that you must have for your upcoming academic experience at St. Ben's. Right up front, I'll tell you that my main goal this morning is to encourage you to become deeply involved in some aspect of the academic, spiritual, or social life of the College. Because once you do, you will find the true magic of this place. I speak from experience because it happened to me. It happened when I found my sugar shack. And I sincerely hope that you will find your sugar shack, too.

Some of you may be wondering what a sugar shack is. If you are like my wife Linda who loves to listen to the oldies on the radio, you may have thought about the cheesy song, “Sugar Shack” by Jimmy Gilmer and the Fireballs, that hit the pop charts in 1963. Believe me; I am not referring to “*that*” kind of sugar shack. I'm sure that anyone who knows me will quickly conclude that the sugar shack I'm talking about is the building in which the sap of the sugar maple tree is boiled down to make one of nature's greatest gifts, maple syrup.

You may not realize this, but making maple syrup has been a springtime tradition on our campuses since 1942 when Fr. Wendelin Leutmer tapped 150 trees, collected 1440 gallons of sap, and cooked it down in what was then the candle shop to make 45 gallons of syrup. That modest effort initiated a Benedictine tradition that has continued to this day. In 2002, the Abbey asked me to join Brother Walter Kieffer as one of the campus sugar makers. As a consequence, every spring I now spend countless hours in the woods and sugar shack. If I didn't come home so sticky, and smelling like pancakes and wood smoke, Linda might wonder if I was actually spending my time in the place that Jimmy Gilmer sings about, “on the other side of the tracks.”

Let me tell you a little about how we make syrup. In early March, using a 7/16th inch drill-bit mounted on the body of a chain saw, we drill holes, each approximately 2 inches deep, into nearly one-thousand sugar maple trees. A short tube called a spile

is hammered into the hole and a bucket or plastic bag is hung on the spile to collect the sap that drips out of the tree. When the day and night temperatures fluctuate above and below freezing, the trees produce sap by a process that is still somewhat of a botanical mystery. Once full, we then head into the woods to empty the buckets and bags. The sap is eventually returned to the sugar shack, which is perhaps more appropriately called the sugar house, where our wood-fired evaporator cooks it down to syrup. We have a large evaporator; it's 4 feet wide by 16 feet long. When it is running at peak efficiency, each hour the evaporator can boil off about 200 gallons of water and produce about 5 gallons of syrup. Nevertheless, it still means many long hours in the shack.

So, why I am telling you this? There are three reasons. First, I want to invite you to stop by next spring for a visit. You will be welcomed with Benedictine hospitality. We'll be happy to show you around. We're especially proud of the addition to the sugar shack that we are now completing. It will provide well-needed space for the pre-school through college classes that tour the operation, and which last year included about 600 students. When you're at the shack, we'll explain how the process works and show you how to test the syrup to see if it is ready to bottle. We can even cook a pancake for you directly on the evaporator that you can top with the freshest maple syrup that you'll ever eat. You can try your hand at tapping a tree or you can don the face shield and welding gloves to load wood into the fire box. During your visit, you'll likely hear us brag that we are the only college or university in Minnesota with a maple syrup operation.

My second reason for mentioning the sugar shack is somewhat selfish; I hope to recruit some of you to volunteer to join us this coming spring. We rely heavily on volunteers to help with all aspects of the operation, from tapping the trees to cooking the syrup to participating at one of our weekend festivals. Making maple syrup, especially the traditional way as we do it, is a very labor-intensive process — a classic labor of love. Every year, about 120 volunteers donate more than 600 hours of service. Or, in other words, there is more than five hours of volunteer time in each gallon of syrup that we produce. And that doesn't even include the time that the leaders of the operation, like Br. Walter and I, were there.

However, the third and most important reason to tell you about the sugar shack and maple syrup operation is that my work there taught me about the nature of our Benedictine heritage. Looking at my extreme blond hair you might conclude that I've been at St. Ben's quite awhile and that long ago I would have learned what it means to be a part of this Benedictine community. But you'd be only partially correct. I didn't fully understand the significance of our Benedictine sponsorship until I started working at the sugar shack. Oh sure, I read the *Rule of St. Benedict* soon after I arrived on campus

more than a quarter century ago. I could recite the Benedictine values — hospitality, stewardship, reverence for all persons, and the importance of community — but at some internal level, I just didn't get it. Until, that is, I became involved in making syrup. Until, I found my sugar shack.

Working at the sugar shack, side-by-side with monastic members, other faculty, students, staff, and friends, the Benedictine values came alive. For example, I quickly learned about reverence and community. From my co-leaders, Gary Gillitzer, a professor in the nursing department and Bill Mock, a retired foreman for the Donlar Company, to the preschoolers who visit during classes taught by Sarah Gainey in the Arboretum, making syrup is a communal effort. And no matter how large or small a role, whether washing out buckets or monitoring the evaporator, each person is a valued and revered member of the team.

At some point during my involvement with the maple syrup operation I realized that my experience had changed me as a person and my perspective of St. Ben's. I no longer consider myself simply an employee of the college. Now I feel as though I am a vital part of these institutions; that I am connected to its core and linked directly to our Benedictine heritage. And it is a great feeling. And it's one I hope that you discover during your time at St. Ben's. So that's my real message this morning — find whatever it is that turns you on and connects you to the heart of our institutions. In other words, find your sugar shack.

You are certainly welcome to make the maple syrup operation your personal sugar shack, like it is for me. But, that is just a tiny part of what St. Ben's and St. John's have to offer. Explore the various options and see what is right for you.

Perhaps your sugar shack is in Campus Ministry where you can participate in liturgical events or an alternative spring break trip. For others, your sugar shack may involve raising bees or growing produce in the Common Ground Garden with Sister Phyllis Plantenberg and her colleagues.

For many, your sugar shack may lie in the areas of research, scholarship, and creativity. If so, you will want to contact Dr. Marcus Webster, who organizes these activities on campus, or Dr. Richard White who runs our terrific Honors Program.

Perhaps your sugar shack will be in the arts. Dr. Kaarin Johnston will help you develop your dramatic potential while our outstanding music faculty, like Drs. Ed Turley or Dale White who helped us march in this morning, will help you create beautiful music, either alone or as a member of the choir, orchestra, or band. Or maybe you prefer the visual arts. For example, Sam Johnson and Richard Bresnahan, our amazing potters, will teach you techniques for creating beautiful ceramics. And if you have the opportunity, the firing of the kiln at St. John's, named in honor of Sister Johanna Becker, is an unbelievable experience that is not to be missed.

Or perhaps your sugar shack is in my area, science. Study space physics with Dr. Jim Crumley or join Dr. Ed McIntee in the chemistry department to design and synthesize potential drugs or learn about the diversity of invertebrates with Sister Jeanne Marie Lust, my dear colleague in the biology department.

If you are interested in athletics, you may find your sugar shack on the softball diamond with Coach Denny Johnson or on the basketball court with Coach Mike Durbin. Or, maybe you'll prefer a club sport like Ultimate Frisbee. For others like our previous speaker, Rachel, you may find your sugar shack in the St. Ben's Senate, or one of our other numerous campus organizations and clubs.

As I mentioned, to make maple syrup requires many people. Like Fr. Fintan Bro-menshenkel, a 90-year-old who cuts wood for us nearly every day, or Dan Vogel who helps maintain trails through the sugar bush, or Chris Pflueger who provides security. If I hadn't been involved in the sugar shack, I would never have had the opportunity to meet these people, and my life is all the richer as a result. On your St. Ben's journey to discover your sugar shack, there are many people who can offer you guidance. For example, you will surely want to talk to Mary Harlander-Locke in Career Services, or Michelle Sauer and Jackie Hampton in Academic Advising.

In closing, I encourage you to find your St. Ben's sugar shack, just like I found mine. There are an incredible number of opportunities available to you at St. Ben's. Don't be a sap. Find something that you love and get involved. Because once you do, you will find the true spirit of this place and that's what makes St. Ben's so sweet.

Steve Saupe is Professor of Biology. He delivered the opening convocation address as 2008 winner of the Sister Mary Grell Teacher of Distinction Award at the College of Saint Benedict.