

Citation Speech for Karl Mattson  
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Words seem such a poor medium to give shape to such an eloquent life as that lived (so far anyway) by Karl Mattson. Yet words are all we have, and they will have to suffice.

Karl has done many remarkable things in his lifetime, as we shall note in a moment, but when I think of Karl I think less of his many accomplishments than of the kind of person he is. By his “being,” every bit as much as by his “doing,” he inspires us, he befriends us, he reminds us of the fundamental values of life.

Karl’s “being” began in East Orange, New Jersey, the product of solid Scandinavian (Swedish and Finnish) stock. He lived in New England for several years before settling in Rock Island, Illinois, as a teenager, when his father became President of Augustana Lutheran Seminary in that community. He stayed close to home for college, graduating from Augustana College in 1955 and later Augustana Seminary—now transformed into the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago—in 1959. But he had an ulterior motive in staying in Rock Island—or maybe this was a higher power at work—since his tenure at Augustana also brought him to a fateful high school debating tournament, at which he ended up paying more attention to an attractive young woman named Margaret, who was timing the debate, than he did to the high school participants.

Not satisfied with the winters in Chicago, in the true Lutheran spirit of seeking opportunities for greater suffering, Karl and Marge moved to Buffalo, where they started a mission congregation. From there Karl and Marge moved to Yale, where Karl earned a Masters in Sacred Theology and then to Brooklyn, where his attentions focused on forging a ministry that bridged the traditional Swedish congregation and the neighboring Hispanic community. Karl’s ministry was in the forefront of transitioning urban churches, providing neighborhood outreach to the largely Puerto Rican community in which his church was located. Tutoring programs, street theater, after school activities for kids—all of these and more filled his days (and a good many nights as well).

Karl is a person who continually reexamines himself and his purpose. For a time, that reexamination led him to put the ministry aside, during a three year stint working jackhammer construction in New York City, studying anthropology and cinema at NYU before moving back to Chicago’s South Side, plunging again into the life of the inner city ministry. This move represented a return to his true vocation, which Frederick Buechner defined, as “the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

Fortunately for all of us in Gettysburg, Karl found both personal gladness and institutional hunger in 1979 when he accepted the position as Gettysburg College Chaplain. We have been blessed with his presence ever since.

To detail Karl's impact on this place, on all of us, and on many generations of students would require far longer than these few minutes. He graced us with week after week of thoughtful sermons and inspiring prayers. He introduced countless people to the joy of service learning and to the centrality of social justice. He put a human face onto issues of civil rights and intercultural understanding. He was instrumental in bringing Habitat for Humanity to Gettysburg and in initiating an annual celebration of Martin Luther King's birthday. He was the founding spirit behind Project Gettysburg/León, a sister city project which has taken many of us to Nicaragua. He founded the Center for Public Service in 1992, leaving a legacy of projects and relationships that will continue to mold and enhance the college experience for students and faculty alike.

Karl comes by his commitment to faith and justice honestly. His father and grandfather were Lutheran ministers. His uncle A.D. Mattson, whom Karl admired greatly, was one of the leaders of the farmer labor movement in Iowa and Illinois. In many ways, Karl has modeled himself on these family figures.

Karl's "being" has many facets. He is a deeply hospitable and generous person, always opening himself to the issues and needs of his community. He always does so with compassion and conscience.

He is a person of great faith—in his values, in his church, in his college, in his community. His faith is never blind, however, and is always questioning, always pondering, always measured with a healthy dose of self doubt, self deprecation, and unfailing good humor. Recently, Karl was laughing while he recalled his first public prayer at Gettysburg College, after which he was booed by students. He is a person of humility.

He is a person of empathy. His creative imagination never emerges in the abstract, but always with an eye to the impact it will have on the lives of others. In that way, he reminds us constantly that we live in community, tied to others by the undeniable bonds of common humanity.

He is a person of passion. One of Karl's great passions is the Boston Red Sox, whom he visits in Florida every spring training, a tradition he has maintained virtually all his life, since traveling to Florida to visit his grandfather as a very young child. Karl can quote batting averages and pitching records with a facility which even Ted Williams and Carl Yastrzemski would find impressive.

But his passions go even further. For a time when I was first really getting to know Karl, there were frequent references to the Swedish National Bikini Team, which I am sure was a reflection of nationalistic passion for his ancestral homeland!

Karl also has a passion for well-crafted words, inspiring images, metaphors and stories with the power to enlarge and break open the human heart.

And then there is his passion for orchids. In full bloom, Karl's greenhouse of orchids rivals a section of the Amazon rain forest. Orchids must indeed be a metaphor for the work he has wrought among us, first in the Chaplaincy and later in the Center for Public Service. Think of the hours of loving and patient devotion and care showered upon these finicky plants, which go for long periods of time without showing any inclination to grow or change at all, let alone bloom—and every now and then, for no apparent reason, burst forth into a fragile, breathtakingly beautiful display. Karl is a lover of nature in all forms. He loves to hike and backpack, runs regularly with his dog, and has been known to stand for hours casting a thin string with a hook on the end into a rushing stream.

Fortunately for us, Karl's passions have included Gettysburg College, expressed in the ineffable quality of his care and devotion to us over these 24 years. In that time, he has not only expanded his own range of living in continuous fashion; he has offered each of us the opportunity to expand our range of empathy and scope of care for the world. He has invited us to go places where few middle class academics venture—into soup kitchens and homeless shelters, to kivas on Native American reservations, and into coffee cooperatives in Central America. To Karl, these were always places of the heart. They have become such to us too.

Karl's life has in large part been a search for identity, a search which I expect he will continue for all his days, a search for what it means to be a person worth being.

Karl, one of your favorite biblical stories is the story of the Good Samaritan. You are fond of reminding us that the Good Samaritan was just another ordinary traveler until he stopped—to respond in love and compassion—to the wounded man by the side of the road. In many ways, Gettysburg College has been like the wounded man; and although you were never ordinary, you have been our Good Samaritan. We are deeply grateful, that for a time, you stopped by the side of the road, to minister to us. In doing so, you have expanded our capacity to receive grace and return justice to the larger world around us. Through your presence among us, you ennobled this college by putting us in touch with the deeper—and better—part of ourselves.

Karl's stature reminds me of a poem by Wendell Berry, a poem I first encountered in one of Karl's little experiments in grace, a Wednesday communion group of faculty and staff that met for many years in Christ Chapel.

The poem is called "The Sycamore" and contains the following lines:

There is a old tree growing, a great sycamore that is a wondrous healer of itself...  
Over all its scars has come the seamless white of the bark.  
It bears the gnarls of its history healed over.  
It has risen to a strange perfection in the warp and bending of its long growth.  
It has gathered all accidents into its purpose.  
It has become the intention and radiance of its dark fate.  
It is a fact, sublime, mystical and unassailable.

In all the country, there is no other like it.”