

**REMARKS AT GAUDINO COMMEMORATIVE DINNER
SEPTEMBER 17, 1999
BY JEFFREY A. THALER '74**

**"Uncomfortable Learning and Williams-at-Home:
Robert Gaudino at Williams College"**

If Robert Gaudino were alive tonight, what would he say about this Commemorative Weekend, and the Memorial Fund active in his honor? He certainly would ask, "Why?"

I submit that we are all here not just because of one individual, now deceased 25 years. Rather, and more importantly, we are here because his approaches to teaching worked -- literally and in the sense of lifelong success demonstrated in the lives of hundreds of people. Moreover, his teaching techniques were very successful in genuinely achieving the core goals of liberal arts education at Williams.

So, to reflect upon Williams-at-Home and this evening, we need to put on our Gaudino hats. Just as he had students read long-deceased political philosophers line-by-line, to see how their insights were not limited to their time and place, so we too can best assess Gaudino-at-Williams and Williams-at-Home by looking at Gaudino the man, through his words and deeds.

A. Who was Robert L. "Mr." Gaudino?

We start with the educational and occupational history of Bob Gaudino. He was born June 12, 1925 in Long Beach, California. He graduated from Los Angeles High School in 1943, but enlisted in the Army Air Corps on March 25, 1943 at the age of 17. From then until December 1944, he was at the Army Air Forces Navigation School in Texas, and the Radar School in Arizona. From December 1944 through September 1946, he was on active duty in the Army.

Gaudino worked as a "Radar Observer Bombardment", and arrived in the Asiatic Theatre on August 6, 1945 -- amazingly, the very day the Enola Gay dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Gaudino once told us during Williams-at-Home that he had bombed the wrong island during World War II, but there is no evidence that he was on the Enola Gay! He remained on active duty in the Asiatic Theatre until August 1946.

From November 1946 to the summer of 1947, he did a jeep tour with a friend through Mexico, the United States and Canada. He attended Los Angeles Community College in the fall of 1947, before enrolling in UCLA in January 1948. Gaudino was a Clinical Psychology major, but apparently politics was in his blood because he ran in two elections at UCLA. He won the first, to head the Independent (non-fraternity) Students group, but then lost the election for Student Council president. Interestingly, Gaudino told us during Williams-at-Home that he had lost the election to a "cheerleader"; only years after his death did we learn that the winner of that election was none other than Richard Nixon's former Chief of Staff, H.R. Haldeman! One wonders whether Gaudino used the term "cheerleader" literally or with tongue-in-cheek.

After graduating from UCLA in June 1950, Gaudino studied in Europe for a year. He enrolled in the Stockholm, Sweden graduate school where he took no psychology courses, but instead courses in sociology, political science, and 14 credits of Swedish language (a linguistic talent that he did not exercise at Williams). Interestingly, while in Sweden, he wrote a letter to Allard Lowenstein (the future Congressman). The letter is very revealing of the early Gaudino, particularly themes that echo later in his writings:

I cannot force myself into a decision between absolutes. . . . By realizing the complexities of the problems involved, I seek a channel which recognizes moderation in approach.

. . .

I'm not looking for simplicity. I am looking for a solution. I am looking for men who have the perceptiveness to see inconsistencies in themselves first. I am looking for men who refuse to resolve a problem in terms of its extremes. I am looking for men who refuse to use economically and politically determined generalizations as the source of their rational capabilities.

I think, Ladies and Gentlemen, Gaudino was looking for Williams College!

Also in 1951, Gaudino spent six weeks at the Scottish Universities' summer school in Edinburgh. A 1960 reference letter from one of his Scottish instructors also is revealing about the young Gaudino; he said that while Gaudino's written work was good,

. . . his best work was not written; he took a very keen part in all discussions following on lectures and seminars and displayed a keen and critical intellect.

. . . Perhaps his worst fault is that he errs on the side of over-sincerity!

Also, the reference letter suggests that even in 1951, Gaudino had a keen interest in India.

Following his European scholastic tour, Gaudino returned to the United States and, after four years at the University of Chicago, received his Master's and Doctorate degrees in political science. He came in July 1955 to Williams College, where he taught up until his death in November 1974. He did receive a Fulbright Award that allowed him to work in New Delhi for two years, starting in July 1960.

What qualities of Bob Gaudino's character impacted his teaching approach? He had a keen sense of and love for discussion, dialogue, complexity, inconsistencies, contrast, irony, and moderation. He also had a keen appreciation of people, and a deep love of life and humanity.

This all led to a quietly provocative style of teaching by active listening -- he did not impose his personal emotions or dogma upon others, but rather acted as a mirror, a sounding board.

Gaudino took everyone's opinions seriously -- and I mean everyone. From Ph.D.'s to Freshmen, from union executives to assembly line workers, from farmers to sharecroppers, he made everyone feel that she had an important opinion which he genuinely wanted to hear. He also made each person feel that he cared about what she thought. Gaudino took to heart, I believe, the observation made by Joseph Lyford in The Talk in Vandalia (a required reading for Williams-at-Home): "People are interested in what other people are up to, not in what they think." Gaudino demanded of his students, and himself, that they be very aware of and interested in the thoughts, opinions, and values of others.

Gaudino made everything and everyone a teaching opportunity. His house on campus was always open, and his constant supply of donuts and Breyer's peach ice cream allowed people to feel comfortable, while being deftly cross-examined by Gaudino. He was always willing to ask the next question that no one else would ask, because he had the courage, the Socratic boldness, to move from simple experience or opinion to higher and higher levels of reflection and understanding.

For example, I think back to my very first contact with Mr. Gaudino, which was when I went to his office to be interviewed concerning my application to participate in the Williams-at-Home program. I jokingly mentioned that my grandmother had doubts about my missing a semester of school; he immediately pounced on my remark, and peppered me with numerous

questions -- who was my grandmother, what was her background, why did she have these doubts, how did I feel about her concerns, what would I do "at-school".

Gaudino often went against the flow, acting as the Gadfly -- sometimes provocatively, sometimes gently, but always with humor, a twinkle in his eye, and empathy. He also seemed to revel in the ironic contrasting of seemingly unrelated matters or opinions. If he were here tonight, he might ask us what Plato would think about Y2K. In his syllabus for the public authority course taught at Williams College in 1971 before we went off-campus for Williams-at-Home, he began with the following quotation from Chicago's Leo Strauss: "The meaning of the common good is essentially controversial." That seems to be a middle-of-the-road academic observation. By contrast, Gaudino ended the syllabus with the following quote, from the honorable George Washington "Boss" Plunkitt of Tammany Hall:

To learn real human nature, you have to go among the people, see them and be seen. You can't study human nature in books. Books is a hindrance more than anything else. If you have been to college, so much the worse for you. You'll have to unlearn all that you learned.

Who else but Gaudino would combine Strauss with Plunkitt, and end up with Socrates going to the marketplace?

B. Why did Gaudino develop William-at-Home?

Now knowing some of the background about Bob Gaudino, why in 1971 did he fight for a Williams-in-India to be undertaken "at home" here in America?

We must return to the original text. Gaudino recognized the following problem:

The ordinary Williams student has been raised in a suburban community which has not made possible encounters with people of contrasting backgrounds, opinions, sensibilities. This background can restrict his understanding of the complexity of public life, of the significance of various kinds of work, of the character of local

institutions, of the meaning of different life situations, of the ambiguity in so many decisions. Much of public controversy and private concern is unknown to him. Many claims and institutions are unexamined by him. This program is intended to correct this restricted quality of his upbringing, to encourage him to get beyond himself to the families, institutions, communities and issues he has encountered in the winter and spring.

For example, in a more concrete situation, after I wrote my initial paper during the summer of 1971 about how public authority had impacted my life up to that point, Gaudino's pithy comment was: "Public authority has been indifferent to you. It has not been a pressure on you."

Given the problem described above, Gaudino then elaborated upon the core goals for experiential education in general and Williams-at-Home in particular as follows:

Our purpose is not just to have experience. It is to use it. It is to reflect upon it, to let it enhance or inhibit our sense of self . . . If experience is growth, then it is an uncomfortable, limiting, bumpy kind of growth . . . Practically, it connects with people and situations that the student does not ordinarily meet at home or in college, and would not seek out on his own. It is not what he would set up for a profitable summer. It is not so pleasant, for it involves testing on grounds which the student does not originate or create . . . The aim is education, an education which uses experience for its own ends . . . It is to use experience for reflection, reflection on persons, on their family situation, on their work, on their existence in a real world. . . .

Williams-at-Home, then, is not an innocent or haphazard title. It suggests a contrast . . . Williams is the place for reflection, putting a distance between self and subject matter in order to objectify reality. Home is the place for direct experience, the expression of the whole self, the reduction of reality to locality. It is with this basic distinction that Williams-at-Home begins . . . its purpose is wider personal observation. The aim is to prepare students to be both perceptive about and sensitive to meanings in life. It is to encourage them to look closely at people and situations.

To use experience, not just to have an experience, was and remains critical to Gaudino-esque educational initiatives.

There were two other, more precise, goals articulated by Gaudino for Williams-at-Home that focused upon individual responsibility for learning inside and outside Williams' classrooms.

Gaudino described these objectives as being:

To provide an environment in which the student takes responsibility for his own learning and for testing his personal strength of patience, insight, and reflection under difficult external demands; . . . To help the student move by and through this experience of private and public life in America to the more systematic analyses of the traditional disciplines at Williams College.

Thus, evaluating the achievement of these two goals is critical to evaluating the success of Gaudino's initiatives. We will make that evaluation in a moment.

C. How Did Gaudino Try to Accomplish These Goals Though Williams-at-Home?

Briefly, in the Spring of 1971 Gaudino selected 18 freshmen and sophomores to participate in Williams-at-Home. At a May 1971 meeting, Gaudino passed out a 40-book summer reading list that covered a variety of topics on society and public institutions such as educational, healthcare, and law enforcement. Each of us was also required to write an essay that summer focusing upon two topics: (1) the meaning of public authority as reflected in one's own life and (2) how (not what) each of us had learned about life and public authority up to that point.

In the Fall semester 1971, we took the course from Mr. Gaudino entitled "Public Authority in America". Assignments included a community experience involving a local public institution; for example, I focused upon the police in North Adams, walked a beat with a policeman, and interviewed other policemen.

Most interestingly, during the Fall Gaudino arranged for the showing of a series of documentary films by Frederick Wiseman (a Williams Alum). Three of the films -- High

School, Hospital, and Police -- were shown not only to the public at large on campus, but also to invited non-Williams community members who worked in the particular public institution that was the subject of the film being shown. Then, after the showing of each film on a weeknight, we broke up into about 6-8 groups gathered in separate faculty homes; Williams-at-Home students then facilitated discussions involving other Williams students, faculty, and community members about lessons to be learned from the documentary shown that evening.

Another classic Gaudino move was to schedule a weekend for the parents of Williams-at-Home students to come to campus, view the Wisemen documentary Basic Training about the military, and then again to have discussions involving students and parents about not only the film, but also the WAH program itself.

With the New Year 1972, 17 Williams sophomores and juniors headed South; one junior dropped out of the program prior to the home stays. The remaining WAH students spent five weeks living and working with small businesses in towns primarily scattered around Georgia. Again, each student was required to keep a journal, and to pick a particular public institution (such as schools, police, or hospitals) to study in their "home" community. There were no more than three WAH students in any town. During my home stay, I lived with the family of a black cabinetmaker, and worked for the black funeral home in town. This provoked threats from some of the white leaders in town; a second WAH student in the same community spent a night in jail because the police could not figure out what a white Massachusetts college student was doing walking through a black section of town at night.

After the Georgia home stay, all 17 of us gathered with Gaudino for a 3-day debriefing at Morehouse College in Atlanta. We were also required to use the time to write a detailed paper,

based upon our journals and other observations, concerning what we had learned during the previous five weeks about public authority and ourselves.

From Atlanta we split into two groups; one group went to Tennessee, the other to Kentucky to try to find home stays with poor farming families. We had a difficult time in Kentucky, and eventually the fact that we were paying \$5 a day for room and board for our home stay helped us find places to live. We thus spent about four weeks, mid-February to mid-March in Appalachia. I lived with a disabled coal miner and his wife deep in the hills of Southeastern Kentucky, not far from where the Buffalo Creek, West Virginia dam disaster occurred during my home stay.

From Appalachia we then spent five weeks with moderately well-off farming families in Iowa. Again, we were scattered among a number of communities in Iowa, still writing our journals, our papers, and still trying to keep up with Mr. Gaudino. Gaudino usually visited each student once or twice during each home stay; incredibly, he was driving himself around the country while barely able to walk with a cane. His neurological disease was progressing, but he still drove 10,000 miles to help find us home stays, find us a wide range of public and private officials to meet, and to kick our collective WAH rear-ends when we were not being sufficiently rigorous in our “studies”.

For example, in Georgia Gaudino chastised me for not questioning my “family” about what it was like being black in Southern Georgia, how they had been treated, and how racism in the South compared to that in the North. In Kentucky, where the bleak winter weather and the ever-present strip mines led to malaise and some despair on my part, Gaudino turned it all in to a

lesson. He told me how my “freedom” had shrunk: from poverty, racism, hunger, rural isolation, and from multiple types and levels of discrimination.

After Iowa we spent six weeks in Detroit, from April to the end of May. Each of us worked “under cover” in Chrysler auto factories. Again, none of us worked with other WAH students, and our co-workers had no idea that we were students “on assignment”. Each of us worked a full 40-hour week on the assembly line or in a stamping plant; the latter, where I worked, meant running a huge machine that stamped nuts onto a piece of metal. It also meant doing this 600 or more times an hour, with a foreman checking every hour to see whether I had “met quota”. On the weekends Gaudino arranged for us to interview top executives of Chrysler and the United Auto Workers Union. Again, we were writing our journals and papers about how what we were experiencing during the program tied back to our studies and readings the previous year.

After Detroit, we scattered for the summer. However, Gaudino required that each of us write a long paper that summer about our present opinions of public authority, and how those opinions had changed. We were also required to judge the educational aims and methods of the program, and how the program had affected us. This approach was critical for Gaudino’s goal of having each of us learn about not only America, but our own education and learning.

All of us returned to Williams in the Fall 1972, enthusiastic about where we had been during the program and the opportunities presented to us upon our return to Williams. Indeed, as usual, Gaudino said it best in an after-the-program text he called “Reckoning”:

We returned to Williams to affirm its methods of knowing, analyzing, distinguishing, taking distance. We return with a richer expanded content of experience. We return with revised purposes for the Williams education. It is not for profession or discipline or academic major that we study, talk, read, write, contest. It is for

discovery of an personal orientation in the world. It is to see the work in its ambiguities, contracts, dislocations, paradoxes, confusions, ideals, hypocrisies, and whatever else.

I provide you with the full Gaudino quote, because everything he wrote there was true for me.

In 1973-74 Gaudino developed a second Williams-at-Home proposal; this provoked sharp debate on campus about experiential education. Gaudino defended his views in a series of debates with other faculty; WAH students were challenged as well to articulate the educational goals and benefits of the program we had just experienced.

Even though I did not take any courses from Mr. Gaudino my junior and senior years, I continued to learn a great deal from him, at his home. I can still recall sitting in his living room, with my long hair and beard, saying how I thought I had greatly “changed” due to WAH; he smiled his impish smile, and said, “Mr. Thaler, none of you have changed. You have just become more of what you truly were before Williams-at-Home!” For days and weeks I thought he was wrong; however, I knew well before graduation that he had been correct.

Being a glutton for punishment, I asked him to be my senior thesis advisor. He responded by chopping my first proposal to bits, ending with the warning: “Mr. Thaler, you have no thesis!” He kept after me for weeks, making my clarify my aims and methods, constantly asking me questions like “why?”, “what does this mean?”, “tell me more!”. Although by the end my 100-plus page paper, focusing upon my four years of study at Williams, was liberally covered with comments and questions from Gaudino, both my paper and I were far better because of his efforts.

All of which lead us to the present here at Williams, 25 years later. We come to the final question:

D. Where Go Williams and Gaudino into the 21st Century?

I'm one of the millions who has read the best-selling book, Tuesdays with Morrie; I may be one of the few who was struck by similarities between Morrie and Gaudino. Both men attended graduate school at the University of Chicago in the 1950s. Both men made illness and death a teaching device. Indeed, what Morrie said on the same subject well applies to Gaudino: death ends a life, not a relationship.

For hundreds of Williams students, over three different decades, the relationship with Gaudino has had transformative, life-long impacts. Indeed, even my involvement in the Gaudino Memorial Fund from 1975-1996 was very educational; I discovered how Gaudino's interactions with students during the 1950s and 1960s in the classroom, although dramatically different in locale from Williams-in-India and Williams-at-Home, still had very similar impacts.

So we are here tonight to honor the man. But I am also here for another reason: because Gaudino's relationship was not just with hundreds of individual alumni, teachers, and families, but also with the institution known as Williams College.

For Gaudino, Williams was home. Indeed, he is buried on campus. It is for those students and faculty who never knew Gaudino, but who can benefit from his ideas, that we continue to discuss what he did. That is why we continue to discuss uncomfortable learning as a core pedagogy at Williams. That is why we continue to support liberal arts learning both at Williams and in our lives away from Williams.

That is why I believe that if Gaudino was here this weekend, he would remind us that his goals and programs truly were in the mainstream of Williams College tradition. In fact, you only

need to turn to the front of the College catalog to discover how dramatically similar were Gaudino's goals and sensibility to those of two prominent, former Williams College Presidents.

Back in his 1836 Induction Address, President Mark Hopkins urged that we regard the mind "as a flame that is to be fed, as an active being that must be strengthened to think and to feel -- and to dare, to do, and to suffer." That is why Professor Kurt Tauber was on the mark this morning when he described Gaudino as our 20th Century Mark Hopkins.

But again, in words that I rediscovered while I was working in the Detroit stamping plant and on the assembly line, words which together with Gaudino prompted my decision to return to the classroom, President John E. Sawyer described in his 1961 Induction Address goals for Williams students who would be "carrying responsibilities well into the 21st Century" -- exactly the doorstep upon which we now find ourselves! Looking 40 years ahead, with the same foresight of Gaudino, John Sawyer said,

This much we do know: that no training and fixed techniques, no finite knowledge now at hand, no rigid formula they might be given can solve problems whose shape we cannot yet define. Nor have they time to waste in pursuit of transitory expedients, the ephemeral, the shallow or the merely popular.

The most versatile, the most durable, in an ultimate sense the most practical knowledge and intellectual resources which they can now be offered are those impractical arts and sciences around which the liberal arts education has long centered: the capacity to see and feel, to grasp, respond and act over a widening arc of experiences; the disposition and ability to think, to question, to use knowledge to order an ever-extending range of reality; the elasticity to grow, to perceive more widely and more deeply, and perhaps to create; the understanding to decide where to stand and the will and tenacity to do so; the wit and wisdom, the humanity and the humor to try to see oneself, one's society, and one's world with open eyes, to live a life usefully, to help think in which one believes on their way. This is not the whole of a liberal arts education, but as I understand it, this range of goals is close to its core.

CONCLUSION

We -- you all -- are living proof as we quickly head into the 21st Century that the words of Hopkins, Sawyer, and Gaudino are the true measure of success in life, a life well worth living. I am thankful for Gaudino and thankful for Williams.

By the way, I had promised you earlier a Gaudino-esque cartoon, which he allowed me to use in my final WAH paper and my Senior Thesis. It reflects Gaudino-as-Charlie Brown: humor, sensitivity, empathy, iconoclasim, and thought-provoking, in just six short words!

