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A Restlessness for Renewal

A year of examination has made me eager to begin an era of exploration.

BY ELIZABETH DAVIS

There's a quote often attributed to a 19th-century French politician who sees a crowd running by him and says to a bystander: "There go my people. Tell me where they are going so I might lead them."

The sentiment is, of course, humorous—a tongue-in-cheek satire of leaders who prefer safe choices and predetermined paths before taking initiative. Still, it has a cautionary point that guides me: Leaders who wish to be shown the way rather than forge trails are not likely to alight anywhere meaningful. It has always been my view that those fortunate enough to be asked to lead should have a passion, and bravery, for uncharted territory.

As this edition of Furman emerges, we are just beyond the one-year mark of my presidency. It seems timely to tell you something I've learned about Furman in that time: There is here, at this moment, an unusual frontier spirit. I say "unusual" because higher education is often perceived as a field that has more in common with 19th-century French politicians than starry-eyed explorers. However, in traversing the country to hear from you—at social gatherings, athletic events, strategy meetings, serendipitous intersections—I'm sensing among Furman-ites what I have begun to call "a restlessness for renewal." What do I mean by that? It seems to me that Furman possesses that double-edged quality common to the best types of greatness: humility. There is in our DNA a deep reverence for ambition that is only equalled by a broad mandate to be of service. The profound commitment Furman graduates make toward achieving a successful life is only made profound if that successful life is also a conscientious one. As they say, these are "good problems." Because what we need is not an overhaul of our core values or our culture—something not every institution can say. Rather, what we seek is an "antidote" to our humility that does not cure us of it. In other words, we need to reframe what distinguishes Furman and then engage others in that proposition. Through that engagement, we enrich the values and enlarge the culture beyond Furman.

The good news is that there is so much that distinguishes Furman. Not just those dualities of ambition and service, but also those of success and conscience, but the kind of kind that enfolds a rigorous intellectual inquiry, and an emphasis on individual striving inside a familial and lifelong connectivity.

In his featured essay this issue, Professor of Education Scott Henderson quotes art historian Esther Pasztor who argues that "we make things visible so we can understand them." Based on what I've heard from you these last 15 months, you are advocating the same thing: We must make Furman—and its many distinctions—visible, so the university can be understood and appreciated outside its walls.

As part of this past year's self-examination, we commissioned the largest-scale research study in Furman's history to identify those distinctions. In the coming months, you'll hear more about this as we sift through the results, but what I already believe the study will show is that these qualities of Furman's are more necessary than ever to the society we all share. Not only that, but we do a disservice to that society and ourselves if we hide those qualities with modesty.

Along these lines, I— with the board, faculty, and staff—are advancing several strategic priorities for the year that will soon have Furman departing from those harbors that have kept us tethered and toward exploration. These include strengthening our institutional positioning and our narrative; embarking on a bold reinvention of engaged learning; reasserting our public engagement mission (a topic I wrote about in the spring issue); initiating new efforts to energize you, our alumni and friends; and paying greater attention to cohering the Furman family internally.

Truth be told, I believe it is your restlessness for renewal that is the very thing that will ensure Furman's future. Which is why I feel invigorated by Furman's eagerness to make itself visible, so the virtues it brings to our world can captivate those who will inherit it.

Really, I am heartened that this university wants to lead—and not in the way of 19th-century politicians—because Furman is one of those rare institutions that actually models the solid and sound characteristics for leadership.

While it's true that breaking from the pack can be lonely for a time, it is also true that such breaks are what make that pack run toward you in order to catch up.

Warmly,
Elizabeth Davis