Welcome. My name is Barry Hirsch, and I have the privilege of being the master of ceremonies for the evening. Let me begin by acknowledging a handful of people.

I first want to provide a special acknowledgement to Ann Bonin, Bill’s secretary, without whom Bill would not function nearly so well. Ann has brought Bill’s technological skills well into the 1980s. Ann is a pleasure for us to have as a coworker in Economics. Thank you Ann.

Also here tonight is Rita Miller. Rita was Bill’s secretary prior to Ann’s arrival. We are delighted that you could join us.

Amy Kluttz and Susie DuBose of the Economics Department helped with every aspect and detail of the planning for this dinner. I want to give them a special thanks for their efforts. We very much appreciate their work.

As most of you know, Bill is from San Antonio, and we want to welcome to Trinity the members of Bill’s family who have joined us tonight.

Finally, I want to acknowledge Ron and Genie Calgaard. Ron had to be out of town, but we’re delighted Genie could be here tonight. Were it not for President Calgaard, Bill would not be here today, no doubt residing on the lawn at UVa, ruminating with students and faculty about his days spent in the company of Thomas Jefferson and Edgar Allen Poe. President Calgaard identified Bill, rightly so, as the person he wanted here to do something special in economics and for the University, and he would not take no for an answer. Once Bill came, Ron provided the financial support for Bill’s outrageous idea to start a Nobel lecture series and helped make it a success. The Nobel series has had 17 Nobel laureates to campus, each of whom has given a talk on his evolution as an economist. These talks, most of which are assembled in the MIT Press volume *Lives of the Laureates*, make not only for fun reading; they make a substantial contribution to the history of modern economic thought. The Nobel series has been the one thing that most makes Trinity University visible in the economics profession. Bill vision for the Nobel series was imaginative and, as it turned out, exactly on target. It was something that could not have been done without Ron Calgaard’s encouragement and support.

Moreover, no one was more supportive of the Nobel series than Genie Calgaard, who graciously hosted each laureate to a dinner and reception with the president and, I’m told, charmed virtually all of them, no small feat given that she was dealing with Nobel economists.

President Calgaard also provided the financial support for a half-time Vernon Taylor chair, again supporting Bill’s vision of bringing outstanding U.S. economists to Trinity, in this case on a longer-term basis. Vernon Taylor professors have included Ken Elzinga, Paul Samuelson, Kenneth Boulding, Martin Bronfenbrenner, Richard Leftwich, and until recently, Walter Adams. Once Bill steps down from the Taylor chair, we are fortunate to have hired the distinguished scholar, Robert Ekelund, who will be here next spring. None of these substantial contributions to the intellectual life of Trinity could have happened without Bill’s vision, without the support of Ron and Genie Calgaard, and without the continuing support from President Brazil, all
of which we are highly appreciative.

Our plan for the evening is as follows:

First, I want to make some remarks about Bill and his work. We will then recreate the presentation that Ken Elzinga gave last November in Tampa. We will follow that with a presentation of a few presents to Bill, and then we will open up the floor to some of you who I know want to say a few words about Bill. And if Bill behaves himself tonight, we may allow him to defend himself at the end of the evening.

Let me begin on a personal note. I came to Trinity because Bill was here. I have never had a colleague who I have liked more or, equally important, from whom I have learned more, and in an entertaining fashion at that.

Bill is an intellectual sponge, absorbing ideas from all directions and having an appreciation of different approaches within and outside of economics, all at a deep level. There is an old Jewish joke that I recall hearing years ago that applies perfectly to Bill (indeed, he tells this story in his presidential address to the SEA in 1986). The story is about a rabbi who must settle a dispute. The first party tells his side of the story, at which point the rabbi responds, “I agree, you are correct.” The other party then tells his side of the story, at which point the rabbi responds, “I agree, you are correct.” A puzzled observer then declares, “The two parties said opposite things, they cannot both be right.” The rabbi pauses a second and then responds, “I agree, you also are correct.”

When I first heard this joke I did not understand it, thinking it was a story about a rather dumb rabbi about whom, like a former dean of mine, you could know what he was currently thinking by asking with whom he spoke last. Only later did I realize that this is a story of a very wise rabbi, one who appreciates the truth in seemingly conflicting views coming from different perspectives. I think of Bill as being that wise rabbi.

Bill tells the rabbi story, but gives it a different spin. I want to read from his SEA presidential address, the main theme of which is that there is an important role for biography in scientific study. Just prior to this passage, Bill has quoted Nobel laureate Robert Solow, who laments how he has tended to jump from one tradition to another and recalls his reaction listening to the orthogonal views of Milton Friedman and John Kenneth Galbraith. Bill then states:

“My thoughts turned to my own character defects which were more shameful even than those admitted by Solow. Whereas Solow could not always choose between Friedman and Galbraith, I was incapable of choosing between any of the established traditions in economics. I had been attracted in my day, not only to Friedman and Galbraith, but also to Marx, Veblen, Ayres, Lerner and Buchanan. Moreover, as I sat there, no longer listening to Solow, I knew that I had never totally shaken off any influences. Economics seemed like a gigantic and exotic smorgasbord: everything looked good and tasted good. ... This hopelessly eclectic attitude had been a source of concern to some of my professors in graduate school. Indeed, one of their letters of recommendation almost cost me my first academic post when it suggested that my inability to choose among various schools of thought might be a form of “schizophrenia.”

Following Bill’s telling of the rabbi story and his identification with the rabbi, he states:

Perhaps it is an instinct I picked up from some mad Talmudic ancestor, but somehow early in my career I became convinced that the elegance of an argument was more important than its ability to bear prediction or to conform to “reality”; that truth was somehow trivial compared to style; and that personality and
circumstance, not the reality of a world described by a theory, ultimately determined the success or failure of a theorist in gaining adherents. It was only with the publication of Thomas Kuhn’s The Structure of Scientific Revolutions that this viewpoint could be articulated in a way that might not be considered utterly eccentric. For to Kuhn, scientific truth is nothing but consensus, what he called “a shared paradigm.”

Whether we think of Bill as an intellectual sponge, as a wise Rabbi, or as an economic schizophrenic, the bottom line is the same. These are tags to wear with pride. As significant as are Bill’s contributions to the economics literature in the history of economic thought and antitrust economics, among other areas, I cannot help but think that Bill’s major contribution to the profession comes from his role as the creative master chef of an irresistible economic smorgasbord.

I mentioned earlier that there was a session honoring Bill at this past year’s SEA, organized by David Zorn, a former Trinity student who not only had Bill as a teacher, but also Ken Elzinga during the semester that Ken was the Vernon Taylor Professor. The SEA session, aptly titled the “Worlds of William Breit,” highlighted Bill’s varied contributions to so many areas of economics.

The highlight of that session was a presentation given by Ken Elzinga. With a few minor changes, I will repeat that presentation.

But first a few observations about Ken. Ken is the recently named Robert Taylor Professor of Economics at the University of Virginia. Indeed, for a regrettably brief period of time, both Ken and Bill will be Taylor professors of economics. Ken is a distinguished scholar in industrial organization and antitrust economics, a renowned teacher at UVa whose large principles classes are legend in the University (more on that), and Ken is also Bill’s coauthor on the three economics murder mysteries written under the pseudonym Marshall Jevons.

Let me again thank Ken Elzinga for sharing his talk about Bill. Although I cannot do justice to Ken’s presentation, I know you will enjoy it.


I will pass along to Ken our deep appreciation for his role in making tonight’s dinner a success.

[Presentation of gifts to Bill]

Let me say, again, how very much you mean to us and to Trinity University. Speaking for all of us, we feel privileged to have you as a friend and colleague, and hope to see more rather than less of you in the years to come.