

"Liberal Education at the Millenium: A Personal Reflection"
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Let me extend my congratulations to our new members. Your election to Phi Beta Kappa is an important recognition of your hard work, intellectual curiosity, and commitment to excellence. You are a very talented group, but your achievements are not yours alone. Each of you has been encouraged and supported by parents, grandparents, friends, family members, and teachers -- some of whom are here today. This is their moment, too, and I hope all of you will savor it.

Phi Beta Kappa recognizes high academic achievement, but there is more to it than that. The Society represents achievement in the liberal arts and sciences: those elected have excelled in a curriculum that includes serious work in the sciences, mathematics, languages, social sciences, arts, and humanities. Breadth of education and integration of the perspectives of different ways of knowing -- what I refer to as the liberal arts tradition -- are the core values that Phi Beta Kappa recognizes and promotes. This afternoon I'd like to take a few moments to reflect on the importance and vitality of this tradition as we enter a new millennium and our new members move on to graduate and professional education and the world of work. In doing so, I'm reminded of the story of a high school student who was asked by her teacher what she could recall about Socrates. Well, she replied, he was old, he gave really long lectures, and they poisoned him. While there is nothing I can do about my age, I certainly want to avoid such a violent end, so I'll be brief.

It's appropriate that Phi Beta Kappa was formed in 1776 -- which was not only the year America declared its Independence but the height of Enlightenment. For the Enlightenment nurtured the ideals of intellectual breadth and liberal learning that Phi Beta Kappa has championed. Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke, Rousseau, Montesquieu, and Jefferson believed that human beings have unlimited potential. Through rational inquiry and discourse, they asserted, we can discover the laws that govern the natural world and human society. Thus individuals could master nature, create a just political and social order, unlock economic and artistic creativity, and achieve human happiness. For Europeans and Americans of the late 18th century, Philadelphia's Benjamin Franklin was the embodiment of the Enlightenment -- a scientist, philosopher, writer, and statesman. The ideal that Franklin represented -- broad learning in the arts and sciences -- forms the basis for the kind of liberal education Phi Beta Kappa represents. In the face of a knowledge explosion that has encouraged hyper-specialization and challenges to the legitimacy of empirical inquiry, that tradition remains as vibrant and vital today as it was when Phi Beta Kappa was founded.

That is not to say that the value of liberal education has gone unchallenged. Indeed, in the thirty years since I was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa as a senior at Drake University, the value and relevance of the liberal arts have been sharply contested, first in the 1970s by powerful economic forces, and then in the 1980s and 1990s by a searing political critique. I'd like to discuss both of these briefly and reflect a bit on how the liberal arts tradition not only survived both challenges but also emerged stronger than before.

As I began my teaching career in 1974, an economic crisis propelled by a mystifying combination of recession and high inflation that pundits dubbed "stagflation" gripped the United States. As unemployment rates climbed, undergraduates scrambled for safe majors that promised to deliver practical skills that would lead to a job. On many campuses, this led to a dramatic decline in traditional liberal arts majors. Those who persisted were met with an inevitable question from parents and friends: "So, what are

you going to do with a History major?" Of course, the presumption was that this was a question to which there was no answer.

Yet as we enter a new century, that question is posed far less often and there are powerful answers to it. A liberal education helps students develop the critical thinking and communication skills that are the key to success in the professions, business, government, and education. A liberal education, it turns out, is also highly relevant to the brave new world of an information-based economy and society because it develops skills in collecting, evaluating, and synthesizing information and making reasoned, principled judgments about it. Indeed, given the frequency with which today's college students will change careers during their work lives, the skills, habits of mind, and breadth of knowledge that are hallmarks of a liberal education are especially valuable. Moreover, at a time of rapid globalization and growing concern about citizenship and civic engagement, liberal education is critical. It fosters a curiosity about and knowledge of our own and other cultures, helps us understand the problems and prospects of democratic societies, and offers a model of reasoned discourse that is very timely. And at a time when we know that technical expertise alone is insufficient to address the complex problems we must solve, the liberal arts tradition and its emphasis on values is more important than ever. It reminds us that means are as important as ends and that what we do with what we know is as important what we know.

If the challenge of the 1970s and early 1980s was economic, that of the late 1980s and 1990s was political and moral. Many critics charged that liberal arts education was hopelessly Andro- and Eurocentric and celebrated the accomplishments of white men, many of whom had spoken eloquently of liberty but had subordinated women and people of color. This celebration, the critics insisted, affected our view of the present as well as the past by privileging the creativity of white European and American men and the questions they deemed important. Of course, there were also conservative critics, such as Alan Bloom, George Will, and William Bennett who charged that liberal education was threatened, but from another direction. Much as feminists and advocates of multiculturalism attacked academia, conservatives insisted, the cultural radicals had, in fact, transformed higher education, in the process undermining liberal education. Political correctness, they insisted, had triumphed. Conservatives charged that the enduring works of Western Civilization -- a canon that represented the best of what human beings had thought and created -- were increasingly neglected in favor of ephemeral works by women and minorities. In addition, conservatives lamented their opponents' undue emphasis on Western racism, sexism, and imperialism and their failure to appreciate the contributions of the Western tradition to individual liberty, artistic creativity, and material wellbeing. This increasingly heated conflict -- what pundits came to call the culture wars--most clearly manifest itself at Stanford in the late 1980s, as embattled conservatives defended the school's Western Civilization requirement in the face of an attack by advocates of multiculturalism. Hey, hey, ho, ho, Western Civ has got to go," chanted protesters.

Yet as we begin a new century and the culture wars appear (mercifully) to be at an end, it is clear that liberal education has weathered the crisis and emerged more vibrant than ever. Despite the fears of traditionalists, staples of the arts and humanities continue to receive serious attention on university campuses and even to enjoy an infusion of insight and energy from those who have insisted on using the perspectives of gender, race, and popular culture to better understand them. Perhaps this is most evident in the recent burst of interest -- on college campuses and in the broader culture -- in the work of a white man who embodies the canon -- William Shakespeare.

Indeed, thanks to those who have insisted on broadening the canon and on the centrality of gender and race to understanding the human condition, scholarship and teaching in the arts, humanities, and social sciences is richer and our understanding of the world is fuller and far more inclusive. Let me cite just two examples. During the past quarter century, scholars in history, psychology, political science, sociology, and women's studies have

revealed ways in which socially constructed definitions of gender have shaped the lives of men and women as well as social and political institutions.□ This impressive body of scholarship has fundamentally altered and deeply enriched the understanding of culture and society that I developed as an undergraduate and even as a graduate student.□ To cite a more discrete example, scholars of literature, theater, art, and history quite belatedly discovered the genius of the Harlem Renaissance, a literary and artistic movement that flowered in New York City and spread throughout Black America in the 1920s and 30s.□ The result is an infusion of the magnificent work of Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Jacob Lawrence -- to name a few -- into the mainstream of American literature and art.□ This has not only brought to our attention -- and to the attention of our students -- exciting work that was too long neglected, but it has also helped us better understand twentieth century American culture.

□ As the old saying goes, "The more things change, the more they stay the same."□ Liberal education has changed. I would argue for the better -- during the three decades since I became a member of Phi Beta Kappa.□ But its power and relevance has not.□ The liberal arts education I received as a member of the class of 1970, while not as rich as yours, completely changed my life.□ As a first generation college student, it opened up worlds that a few years before I could not have imagined.□ By requiring attendance at plays -- including Samuel Beckett's then mystifying *Waiting for Godot* -- a sophomore theater course helped me appreciate the beauty, power, and insight of live performance.□ A music appreciation course taught by a faculty member who insisted that jazz was America's classical music and deserved serious attention introduced me to both European classical music and American jazz.□ Like theater, these musical forms have become passions that I have pursued for thirty years and that have enriched my life.□ But the most valuable and enduring things I derived from a liberal education are a sense of curiosity, a thirst for ideas and books, an understanding of the power and joy of language, and comfort with the ambiguity of truth.

□ I vividly recall sitting in my advisor's office during my first day at Drake University.□ His name was Henry Borzo, and he was as unconventional as anyone that an eighteen year-old who had grown up in Boone, Iowa had ever met.□ He had a long white beard, and his shirt, jacket, and slacks were rumpled and had seen better days.□ He did not own a car, preferring to bicycle the two miles to campus -- summer and winter.□ But he did own two large Victorian houses -- one of which he used exclusively as a library.□ On that September day, I remember at the end of our advising session, when my schedule for the fall semester was complete, Professor Borzo saying to me, "The mark of a successful education is not so much what a student has learned or read, but what is on his reading list -- the things he can't wait to get to."□ At the time, I didn't understand.□ But by the time I graduated, I did.□ I knew how much I didn't know, the important things I didn't understand, some of the places I could look to find out, and that those would lead me to yet other questions and books.□ That has led to an extraordinarily rich life and a career that makes me excited about coming to work every day.

□ You are headed in many different directions, and I hope you will find careers and create lives that will give you satisfaction and joy.□ Your work ethic, intellectual acuity, and academic achievement bode well for your success in whatever careers you choose to pursue.□ But there is more to life than a career, and I would urge you to build on the liberal education you have earned at Bowling Green to grow intellectually and personally and to create a life that is fulfilling to you and of service to your community.□ Once again, congratulations.□ Good luck.□ And be sure to keep us informed of your successes in the years to come.

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