

Berkeley Phi Beta Kappa Talk May 2017

I would like to congratulate each of you on your election to Phi Beta Kappa. You have distinguished yourself in your academic achievements at Berkeley; we are all proud of what you have done.

We think of Phi Beta Kappa as an academic honor – as indeed it is – something to put on your resume that shows how well you did in your academic work in as an undergraduate, but Phi Beta Kappa meant much more to its founders than this.

It was founded the same year as our Declaration of Independence – 1776 – and was intimately connected with the establishment of our republic.

First a word about colleges in America in the late 18th century. Unlike universities in Europe, which were designed to educate an elite, colleges established in what became the United States – Harvard, Yale, King’s College, which became Columbia--educated their students for professions in the expanding colonies – the clergy, teaching, the law.

Phi Beta Kappa was founded at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg in 1776. Williamsburg was at that time the capital of Virginia, and a hub of political activity. George Washington lived there and Thomas Jefferson. It was a cradle of the revolution.

William and Mary was a particularly progressive institution. Under the leadership of Thomas Jefferson, it had made a number of innovations in its curriculum. Students were admitted at the age of 15 after being tested for their proficiency in Latin and Greek. They were enrolled in the Philosophy School, where debating was a central part of their education. Six professors lectured to about 60 students. A historian of the college observes that “The professors at William and Mary were not only great scholars; they were great men,

interested not merely in teaching but in life itself. They were not merely in touch with the problems of the day; they were busily engaged in trying to solve them." The College, and the education it provided, was at the center of the philosophical and political ferment preceding the American Revolution.

On a Thursday evening, December 5, 1776, Phi Beta Kappa was founded by a group of five of the college's students (it was a student organization). They were having dinner in the Apollo Room at the Raleigh Tavern, where many of Williamsburg's politicians and diplomats went to dine and talk. All five of the founding students were members of literary societies at William and Mary, but they were unhappy with these societies, which, in their view had "lost all reputation for letters and were noted only for the dissipation and conviviality of their members." (Some of the names of these societies reflected their "conviviality: the Flat Hat Club, the Please Don't Ask Society.)

They wanted something different, a secret society founded on more idealistic principles--principles they identified as fraternity, morality, and literature. Their motto was "love of wisdom is the guide of life." Phi Beta Kappa was essentially a philosophical club, whose meetings were devoted to debating some specified topic. Topics included not only the wide range of what was then called philosophy but consideration of political questions: the causes and origins of society, whether a wise state has any interest nearer to heart than the education of its youth, whether theatrical exhibitions are advantageous to the state of vice versa, whether there is anything more dangerous to civil liberties in a free state than a standing army in time of peace.

I'm sure most of you have heard about the musical Hamilton, with its revolutionary portrayal of the founders of our country as young bloods, eager to make their impact on a world they perceived as unjust. Phi Beta Kappa came out of that same ferment.

It's useful to think about the history of Phi Beta Kappa, because we now see it exclusively as an honorary society, rewarding scholastic achievement. I think that history reminds us of the broader purposes of a liberal education – leading a wise and just life, the continuing capacity to enjoy and appreciate literature and ideas, the responsibility to use what we have learned from our education to think about the political and ethical issues of our day, becoming active citizens of our country.

Perhaps the most famous Phi Beta Kappa address of all times was Ralph Waldo Emerson's "The American Scholar." Delivered at Harvard in 1837, it was a kind of American declaration of intellectual independence from Europe. In his speech, Emerson argues that three elements go into the education of the scholar: books, nature, and action. Books, he says, are the least important of the three. More important is nature, and most important of all is action. Think about this for a moment. When I graduated from college, I certainly believed that the most significant part of my education came from books. But in nineteenth century American Ralph Waldo Emerson was only one of prominent thinkers and activists who believed in the profound teaching power of nature. Just six years before Berkeley's Phi Beta Kappa chapter was founded, John Muir founded the Sierra Club with a professor from Berkeley. Now I think we would understand what we learn from the earth differently – perhaps more in keeping with Al Gore's Inconvenient Truth of the devastating effects of modern civilization on climate.

However, Emerson believed that the most important factor in the education of a scholar was action – what we learn by what we do in the world, how we make it better. In making this argument, he was very much in the spirit of the founders of Phi Beta Kappa.

In the spirit of those founders, let me share what I hope you will take from your education at Berkeley.

I hope you take a commitment to learning and teaching, whatever your professional path, to discovery and creativity.

I hope you take the curiosity that means that you will never stop learning.

I hope you take a desire to understand the complexity of human history. George Santayana famously said that those who do not know history are doomed to repeat it. We do not understand where we are until we understand how we've arrived there.

I hope you take a desire to understand the variety of the world's cultures in all their dimensions.

I hope you take the capacity for empathy, for understanding perspectives different from your own, valuing tolerance and appreciating diversity. We all need the humility that helps us realize that things may look different from the perspective of a different experience and the willingness to learn from that difference.

I hope you take the capacity for moral reasoning, the ethical judgment that you will need to exercise in many areas of your life.

I hope you take the ability to state your point of view, especially when you know others may not share it, without wedding disagreement to disrespect, on your own part or that of others.

I hope you take a sense of confidence in your own abilities and powers. In whatever sphere you choose to work, you have much to contribute to making the world better.

I hope you take the determination to fulfill your responsibilities to the local, national, and global communities in which you live and to steward the resources that sustain you.

I hope you continue to value friendship and that you find the ability to balance your life, making time for family and friends, for relaxation and pleasure, for health of body and soul.

I urge you to take your election to Phi Beta Kappa not only as a tribute to your accomplishment in academic study but as a symbol of all the ways in which we learn – through books, through the teaching power of the earth, through action and through friendship. The second motto of Phi Beta Kappa, “Societas Philosophiae,” means the community of lovers of wisdom. I hope that you will take much joy from such communities in the years ahead. Congratulations.