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Phi Beta Kappa lecture, June 10, 2004*

“To greet my Creator in his native tongue”: Seeking wisdom, becoming American

Thank you for inviting me here today. Let me begin by unraveling what might seem to be the mystery of my title, the text, as it were, of my remarks.

About a century ago, an elderly New England lady named Sarah Hammond Palfrey, the daughter of a renowned historian of colonial New England, traveled alone to Europe for what she termed a last look round. When she returned, now nearly 90 years old, she took up the study of Hebrew. When asked why she undertook this task she replied that she had always meant to do so—and besides, she said, **“I wish to be able to greet my Creator in his native tongue.”**

When I encountered this story some years ago, while preparing some lectures for a course on the history of New England, it struck not one but a whole range of chords. They still reverberate for me today, and I want to share some of them with you for they furnish and exemplify not only the method but also (as a NE Puritan preacher might say) the **application** of my brief sermon here tonight.

One of these chords resonated with what I do for a living, for it inspired the teaching historian’s instinctive delight in finding a sliver of the past that was so usable, so applicable, one that could be parsed in so many different ways, and led in so many directions. It conjured up for me—as I hope it does for you—a picture of a life—and planned afterlife—given over to the pursuit of rational discourse and enquiry.

So, God, now that I’m here, let’s talk things out. Here are my suggestions...

And a discussion in a spirit of what would seem to be mutual respect. Not quite in the later and more combative spirit of Winston Churchill when he remarked that **“I am prepared to meet my Maker--whether my Maker is prepared for the great ordeal of meeting ME is another matter.”**

And a discussion, too, embodying a sensibility that we might now call humane and multicultural, willing to reach out beyond inbred assumptions.

For Miss Palfrey plainly accepts that God is likely to be Jewish, if not one of those Eastern European ones that had been flooding into Boston and helping the Irish to take over City Hall. She has moved well beyond the assumption forthrightly stated by one of her Puritan forbears some centuries before, when he took as his sermon text, that “God is an Englishman” (though, to judge by a popular recent film, we may now be back in an era that envisages a suffering Jesus Christ, at least, as distinctly Caucasian).

So far, I have approached the story as an historian, for what it tells us about the legacy of the past, and I want to come back to that.

But a second chord that Mrs. Palfrey’s determination struck in me was more personal, for it resonated with my own links to a similar historical tradition that brought me here as a student and teacher of American history. For, as a boy (and I once was a boy), I attended one of the English grammar schools founded during the Protestant reformation in the 16th century—founded, indeed, in an abandoned, or rather forcibly evacuated, Catholic monastery within the City of London. It was and remains a school for children of families living in humble circumstances, mostly within London. The boys (and now girls) who go there are still given clothes to wear as a uniform – Edwardian dress, but of the reign of Edward VI, who died 450 years ago—long black gowns, clergyman’s bands, black breeches, orange stockings, and black gowns lined with yellow in the belief that that particular color kept out the vermin—and I must say we boys never had any trouble in that respect (so I still plant marigolds around my flower beds). It’s a good school, with a passionate belief in the value of education—and when the boys leave, in a ceremony in the school chapel, they are charged with upholding that mission, in words taken from the King James Bible’s fourth chapter of the Epistle to the Philippians: “Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report. If there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.”

Through the years, a surprising number—several hundred—of the school’s boys came over to the American colonies, usually as indentured clerks: one of them

became a North Carolina planter and reputedly founded the first public library in the American south.

In that tradition, I can see myself as one of the latest in a long line of indentured servants, *bound* as it were for America, charged with becoming American.

So these two chords come together here in America, and in what becoming American can mean—and both, to my mind, tie in to our presence here today and what we are celebrating and committing to with your initiation into Phi Beta Kappa.

Now, this is not the first time that someone originally from England has felt called upon to participate. My study of American history tells me that this association goes right back almost to the Society's founding when in the early months of 1781 General Lord Charles Cornwallis arrived uninvited at the College of William and Mary at the head of an English army and forced the members of the society founded some five years before to flee from Williamsburg. Eight months later, some of them took their revenge by following Cornwallis back down to Yorktown, and, equally uninvited, forcing him to surrender. So there's some precedent for my visit here today although not one, I hope, that we will be following too closely.

Yet these somewhat unfortunate events do serve to take us back to the time that was the founding moment of the United States and Phi Beta Kappa, both born in 1776, and to what each were seeking to achieve. For, from the first, part of the rebel colonists' purpose in believing that they could create "a new order of the ages" (the classical Vergilian phrase you will find, among other places, on your dollar bill) was to form new cultural institutions, to set an independent intellectual example of excellence to the rest of the world. This would be central to what poets hymned as "the rising glory of America." As Ralph Waldo Emerson would put it in a famous address to Phi Beta Kappa in 1837, we can hope that "our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands draws to a close".

A mastery of humane learning, moreover, was a civic, indeed patriotic duty, part of what it meant to be a citizen of the republic—and we know from surviving records that many of the questions debated by the first gatherings of the society took up such issues as the ties between church and state, the values of republican government, and the justice of African slavery.

PBK—Philosophia Biou Kybernetes—the love of learning should be the guide to life.

And with learning forged in friendship came moral purpose --the three qualities symbolized in the three stars in the Society’s first medal-- moral purpose best realized through the fostering of civic virtue, a commitment to the welfare of society, in a state that was a res publica, a republic, a common trust.

Such virtue was much on the minds of America’s founding parents:

Educate our children to virtue and knowledge, wrote John to Abigail Adams

It was John Adams, too, who wanted a representation of the Choice of Hercules on the seal of the US, one that depicted the classical hero, Brad Pitt on steroids, in the process of choosing between the paths proffered by two beckoning ladies, one more severe in dress and manner indicating the high road of virtue and industry and the other, more alluring, gesturing companionably towards a couch potato life of vice and sloth. This scene also was the one favored by a number of the fraternal societies such as PBK that sprang up in American colleges during these years.

And that Phi Beta Kappa in particular developed in that direction was due in large part, I think, to its upbringing in Adams’ New England rather than to its birthplace in Virginia. Leaving William and Mary and English occupation behind—it would be seventy years before it was reconstituted there—PBK grew up and spread in the colleges of New England, expanding out to others that New Englanders founded in such places as Ohio and eastern New York.

The society that had once met in the rather liquid environment of the Apollo Room at the Raleigh Tavern in Williamsburg now moved to more formal and desiccated academic surroundings

This is not to say that there was consensus on how this goal of fostering a moral and cultivated citizenry could best be achieved.

Americans were agreed on the value of pursuing what they termed “useful knowledge”. But what should be its components and methods—the arts, the sciences, agriculture, theology, the classics? Book learning or the school of hard knocks and experience?

In the years that followed the American Revolution Americans debated this issue. Many local societies were founded with “useful learning” as part of their names—it’s a goal still emblazoned on the front of the New York Public Library. But did this mean learning that could be turned to immediate use and personal profit?

Benjamin Franklin, famous for pursuing scientific projects that had utilitarian application—the lightning rod, bifocal spectacles, more efficient fireplaces—doubted the value of the old classical curriculum and its focus on “dead learning”: better, he said, to bring back from Italy a good recipe for Parmesan cheese than a knowledge of ancient inscriptions.

Benjamin Rush, for his part, charged that scholars used Latin and Greek as the scuttlefish emit their ink, on purpose to conceal themselves from an intercourse with the common people.

Emerson’s nationalism would emphasize the value of learning drawn from nature rather than the antique.

Others wanted education shaped to the dictates of a dominant Protestant Christianity—Kenyon College students declared that they would only read pagan authors where they were subservient to the truths of the gospel. Rendering to Ceasar the things that were Ceasar’s did not require that he be read—and a protest against precisely that task—reading Ceasar—set off a religious revival at Marietta College in 1834.

You will notice the parts played by students, and in fact, throughout this debate, the colleges’ student societies played an important, even determinative, role.

At a time when college libraries were both small and often open just three or four hours a week with students limited to borrowing but one or two books at a time, the libraries of college societies were often larger and much more used.

And societies themselves often served as colleges within colleges, constructing and teaching their own courses, developing and enforcing their own codes of conduct, and granting their own diplomas (just as you have your own little commencement here). These were days when students shaped colleges as much or more as they were shaped by them.

And they prepared the way for the growth of a American tradition of what we would now call the pursuit of lifelong learning, whereby graduates returning to their communities continued to seek further education, by setting up debating and discussion societies, and by hiring lecturers who came round on what became known as the Lyceum and later the Chautauqua circuits—writers and thinkers as various as Emerson, Thoreau, Bronson Alcott, Wendell Phillips, Mark Twain and even Abraham Lincoln: nowadays we might call them a kind of freeway faculty. At the movement's height, in the early 20th C, as many as 10,000 communities a year hosted such visits. And when learning and enquiry did not come to small-town Americans, they would travel to find them in summer camps.

What we see, then, is a thirst for knowledge and its practical application—the American 19th-century passion for improving society, reforming the community, gaining a healthier mind and body. Sarah Palfrey, for one, before she turned to study Hebrew, also embraced the new mode of exercise and transportation, the bicycle or in her case the tricycle. Yet progress could only come with propriety, and when riding the machine threatened to expose her ankle and indeed part of her lower leg, she arranged to have a fringe of brown silk installed on a frame around the machine, outside the pedals, and so moved in stately, decorous fashion through the streets of Cambridge, looking, said a contemporary, as though she were putting her feet in and out of a too hot bath tub.

I have moved some way beyond the founding and spread of PBK, and it would be wrong to leave the impression that the Society took the lead in all these endeavors. But I would suggest that it has made—and continues to make—a special and particular contribution to defining this American goal of advancing useful knowledge. For the Society preserved its mission of cultivating and celebrating excellence in learning and literature even as, by mid-century, other Greek letter groups had turned to center their membership and activities around social comradeship. While, for these groups, Hercules now took the path leading to Fraternity Row, Phi Beta Kappa kept its focus on intellectual performance and distinction.

Later in the century, too, PBK would also hold itself apart from the other honor societies that grew up within, and limited membership to, particular scientific and vocational disciplines, be they architecture, engineering, or medicine.

It was this emphasis on pure quality of mind and academic attainment in liberal studies that helped it to be among the first to extend membership beyond white males, admitting women and non-white students in the 1870s—by the early 20th C, indeed there was some concern that women would soon dominate the Society, this as a time when schools such as the University of Pennsylvania college of liberal arts still did not admit women, [until 1930s].

These standards and qualifications as a basis for the Society continue today, and they bring me back, in conclusion and full circle, to Sarah Palfrey and the chords of memory that I drew from her example.

For, when set in the context of that long-standing American debate over the pursuit of what is truly “useful knowledge”, they point to the need for us to recognize the difference between accumulating knowledge and acquiring wisdom. There is in fact some paradoxical value in the wry remark once made by one president of Harvard, that the reason why his college was such a great storehouse of knowledge is that the students had brought so much in and taken so little out. For if we look beyond knowledge to wisdom, we can see that the truly worthwhile legacy of your years here should be in learning how to live rather than simply make a living.

It is a legacy—an inheritance—that celebrates questioning, enquiring, assessing, and appreciating rather than accumulation, a breadth of mind rather than its constriction and specialization, a perception of the range and achievements of the human spirit and a desire and capacity to explore them further.

It’s the spirit in which the Greek philosopher Socrates, when told he had been named as the wisest man alive, concluded that if it was so it was not because he had mastered all knowledge but that he knew that there was so much that he did NOT know and was determined to gather more

So what you now best carry out with you, I hope, is a curiosity concerning the world around you, built on an appreciation of how others have engaged with the human condition, along with a training in the skills and sensitivities that will enable

you to satisfy your curiosity--for content is nothing without a capacity to assess and understand it.

In this light, graduation is but the commencement of your education

And you have models to emulate--those mature students in the University's Access program, who have been taking courses alongside you, Sarah Palfreys in the making, individuals who have not rested content with becoming doctors and lawyers but still seek to become human beings.

Now I have a particular prejudice here. More such Access students take history courses here than any other discipline and I respect their good judgment.

And while each of you may define that path to wisdom in different ways

I would of course insist that it must have a component of historical study

History is philosophy teaching by example. One can best put the present to the question by looking to the experiences, and hence the teachings, of the past—to do otherwise, to plan for the present without consulting the past, it has been said, is like planting cut flowers.

But whatever your course, seek to maintain that curiosity and that habit of enquiry. Learning must be lifelong: it's the American way, it's your duty to membership in this Society, and it's what Miss Palfrey expects from you.

So, as you move on into the wilderness of this world, into a life without free access to high speed internet—I charge you not to forget the University of Washington or the legacy of your education here.

And consider too, “Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report. If there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.”

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