

Phi Beta Kappa Induction Speech

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Phi Beta Kappa. Wow. I know that's not a particularly articulate way to express my profound appreciation for your many achievements and accomplishments. And still, Wow. I'd like us please to just take a few seconds to savor this moment. Here you are, many of you on the eve of graduation, some of you about to finish your junior year, being recognized for extraordinary success, not only in your academic program, but also in your accomplishments in the campus community and the community beyond the campus. So let's please take a few seconds right now, just to savor this.

You have learned to ask the three most important questions:

What, what is this phenomenon?

So what? What does this phenomenon mean?

So, what now? What should I, what should we *do* about it?

You have been chosen, among many of your peers, for membership in a society founded in the year of the writing of

the Declaration of Independence. That is no random coincidence, because Phi Beta Kappa is a society that cherishes the ideals of free inquiry and it was free inquiry that led the framers of our republic to question the very nature of government by hereditary monarchy. By accepting the invitation to become members of Phi Beta Kappa, you are taking an oath to respect and protect free inquiry both in the society and in our larger culture.

Had I given this talk 15 or 20 years ago, I might not have thought this such a serious promise. However, in our day, I am sorry to say, free inquiry is truly imperiled. Our constitution continues to protect free speech, but our nation seems to have no commitment to protect the right of speech that is not paid for. Our nation's discourse has degraded as the American people have retreated into more and more isolated communities, both physically gated communities and intellectually gated communities. The advent of new technologies has surely accelerated a new kind of segregation. We are of course familiar with the persistent patterns of segregation by race and socio-economic class, both here in New Jersey, and certainly beyond. But a new kind of

segregation, ideological segregation, has become more and more apparent in our society.

In our neighborhoods, workplaces, and houses of worship, we tend to participate only in communities of people who think as we think, listen to the political commentators to whom we listen, and vote as we vote. We are ceasing to listen to one another and losing the possibility of finding common ground to address the issues critical for peace and prosperity in our own country and abroad. Pundits and politicians argue, actually, they don't argue, they shout at one another, and then we are surprised when citizens do the same thing. Public celebrities use language of violence and then we are surprised when a madman shoots at a congresswoman and bystanders are murdered. Rather than relying on sound data, our political leaders make decisions based on sound bytes.

Here on this wonderful campus enclosed by Metzger Drive, we have taught you to look for the data, analyze them, and draw conclusions based on them. You may be analyzing a poem or the wings of a fruit fly, a bill under discussion in the NJ State Assembly or a painting by Jackson Pollack, responses by drunk and sober rats to different kinds of stimuli or harmonies in a

work by Stravinsky: regardless of the text, we have taught you to look at the data, to analyze them, to draw conclusions, and to shape your arguments based on the data. As you go forward from this day on, I hope you will continue to make decisions based on the data and to use your talents to shape a discourse that can help others understand the issues you are studying, whether that would be a question of governmental policy, medical care, a business decision, or any one of a million spheres of activity that awaits each one of you.

I ask each and every one of you to think about the roles you will play, as members of Phi Beta Kappa, in helping people in your communities listen to one another, to consider multiple perspectives, to arrive at solutions that can bring people together to solve problems in a way that builds a brighter future.

As members of Phi Beta Kappa you must be role models of thoughtful citizens open to different perspectives on the issues that challenge our society. When you hear impatience, offer a model of patience. When you hear intolerance, offer a model of tolerance. When you hear disrespect, offer a model of respect. If someone criticizes the President or the Governor –please

note that I'm referring to political leaders of different political parties – rather than the policies that the President or Governor is pursuing, perhaps you can shift the focus of the discourse from the person to the policy. Ask those around you to consider different points of view and look for different points of view in your own life. Move outside the zone of your comfort to talk with people from diverse backgrounds with diverse points of view. If you think of yourself as a liberal, challenge yourself by reading the Wall Street Journal. If you think of yourself as a conservative, challenge yourself by watching Rachel Maddow. By challenging yourself in this way, you will ultimately arrive at sounder conclusions and more compelling arguments and in this way you will be able to shape the future, rather than be shaped by it.

This is of critical importance because – and you may not believe what I'm about to say, but it's true – This is of critical importance because you are America's elite. You are our nation's hope; from among you, in the ranks of Phi Beta Kappa, will come researchers who will cure diseases, business leaders who will employ hundreds, if not thousands, political leaders who will make, we hope, a lasting peace, composers and poets

and artists who will move us, delight us, and fill us with the joy of life. So, today, I issue to you this challenge:

Be present: Be here now, wherever you are, be there and mindful of where you are and who is there with you. Truly see the world around you and don't take it for granted. Don't live your life tethered to an internet-based community while you ignore the very real community in which you truly make your home.

Be mindful of the future, because if you don't, you will be shaped by the future, rather than shaping it yourself.

Live life fully and meaningfully: make a difference in your life and in the lives of others. You have demonstrated here, in this place, in this time, that you are exceptionally talented. You have demonstrated leadership. You have demonstrated moral strength. Don't squander these riches: use them. Use them every day to make the world a better place.

I want to share with you now a little personal story. One of my grandfathers, my Grandpa Menasheh, immigrated to the United States from Poland in the Spring of 1939. One day, when I was

home on spring break from college, he approached me as I sat on our living room couch, reading a novel. He asked me, “Do you think we are similar?” I looked at this old man, an Orthodox Jew with an East European accent who was so kosher he wouldn’t eat off the plates in our house, and I told him I thought we were very different. He disagreed. He told me, “We are the same. We were just born in different places and different times. Had you been born in Poland when I was, you’d be sitting in the same position reading a book. It would just be a different book.” It took me a long time to realize that he was right. I am just like him.

I shared this story with you now for you to reflect, on your life’s journey, how you can be different, and yet, at the same time, similar to the people who have given you roots and wings, roots to keep you grounded, and wings to soar to new heights.

Let us take a moment together now to make this clear: your outstanding achievements, the achievements that led you to this ceremony tonight, were possible only with the help of the people who gave you roots and wings, your families and friends. If you are here tonight as the parent, guardian, step-

parent, grandparent, brother or sister, aunt or uncle, or family friend of a student being inducted into Phi Beta Kappa, please rise if you are able.

Let us all take a moment to recognize the family and friends of our extraordinary honorees tonight. (Applause)

May the roots you have sunk deep keep you grounded; may the wings you have grown here at the College of New Jersey help you soar to the greatest heights. And may you always be mindful of your responsibilities as a member of Phi Beta Kappa.

As dean of the School of Culture and Society, I congratulate each of you on your many achievements and accomplishments and I remind you that much is expected of each of you. Before concluding my remarks tonight, I need to say this on behalf of all the faculty and staff of The College of New Jersey: You make us all very proud. And we know that there are many more achievements in store for each of you, so please keep us posted on your future successes so that we can continue to feel the warmth we are enjoying with you tonight. Congratulations to all the 2011 inductees in the TCNJ chapter of Phi Beta Kappa.

