

“Dream On”

PBK Student Oration – 2021

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Thank you, Doctor Reynolds, Doctor Arbery, and Doctor Doyle, and a hearty congratulations to a new batch of inductees! I am very grateful to have been chosen to deliver some remarks at this year’s Phi Beta Kappa induction ceremony.

Last year, my predecessor started her address by declaring, “I know what we are all really looking forward to is seeing these students be inducted into Phi Beta Kappa, enjoying lunch with our families, friends, and professors, and then hopefully going down to Haskell Avenue and getting a picture with the Leaning Tower of Dallas while we still can—just in case the demolition crews are actually successful in tearing it down after all. So, I will try my best to keep this brief.” A lot has happened since then, yet it is important to maintain our traditions. The annual student oration is a mainstay of the Gamma chapter’s induction ceremony. Exactly one year ago I sat on the opposite side of this lectern, and next year one of you will continue this grand legacy. I, too, will try to keep this brief.

In an opinion piece published in the *New York Times* a few months ago, Indian writer Neelesh Misra grappled with the question of whether children should be learning how to code at an early age. Proponents of teaching code in her country claimed that their programs would make children more competitive in the workforce down the line. The writer, however, argued that instead of equipping children with monotonous skills and knowledge of computer languages that might be out of vogue by the time they become of age to partake in the economy, parents who wish well for their children’s future prospects ought to be cultivating their children’s creativity and developing their children’s imagination. Accordingly, she proposed that parents should steer

their children towards arts and that they should expose their children to as wide a variety of experiences as possible. In essence, Misra sought to reclaim the idea that childhood is a time for playtime—playtime that goes a long way towards equipping children for whatever challenges the future holds. I found one reader’s comment on the article very insightful. The reader added that her relatives grew up inventing their own boardgames and that such strategy-heavy forms of entertainment really honed their critical thinking skills as they grew up.

Now I would like to actually share a passage from Misra’s article that I felt was particularly powerful and important to share. She writes,

I realize that our world is about to change unrecognizably. Robotics, artificial intelligence and virtual and augmented reality shall soon be concepts and a way of living that will be second nature to our children. The future should — and I am sure will — have a place for dreamers and doers, and not just those hunched forever over a computer. I want my little daughter to grow up in a world where her brain can evolve not only if she knows how to code, but because she can still play with Chanda the cow and Rambo the calf, wrestle in mud and soak in rain, and question the sauntering millipede.

So what does this all have to do with me and you? We certainly cannot claim to be children anymore and our childhoods are long past. You might be thinking: “Well, this is good enough advice maybe if or when I decide to have children down the line.” Nevertheless, my point to you is that given such uncertainty concerning the future, the only thing we can take forward is our mind. We live in an unprecedented time of technological advances and a drastic reshaping of society is happening before us. In an increasingly automated and AI driven world, who knows whether future generations will even be familiar with the occupations we are training for. Perhaps they will have to read about those then-extinct jobs in an encyclopedia alongside entries like ‘typist,’ or ‘milkman.’ Again, with the world in so many ways, we must continue to keep active minds and be willing to engage with our imaginations. We have to continue to enrich

our minds. A creative mind is an adaptable one that can react to challenges with poise and succeed in any environment.

As I wrap up my comments, I want to again congratulate all of my peers on their success and I urge you all to reflect on how you were able to make it here. While you all have certainly worked hard and deserve to enjoy this recognition of your academic success, let us not forget to give credit where credit is due. Many supported you on the journey to this destination. The seeds that spouted today were sown and patiently tended since many yesterdays ago. Your parents are a great blessing to you as have been your mentors and professors. They have as much right to this honor as you and please continue to be grateful and respectful to your elders. Without them we are nothing. Finally, it has been a great privilege to speak with you all today and I pray that you all enjoy this achievement in good health.