

“To Be Guided by a Love of Learning: Putting the Humanities into Practice”

2013 Phi Beta Kappa Student Oration

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Phi Beta Kappa's motto is, “The love of learning is the guide of life.” In writing this speech, I've been trying to figure out what that love of learning could mean for us in current times, in this particular country. In college we embark upon campaigns of self-enrichment through education, which at times can feel like success. There is a temptation to simplify the act of “learning” – to quarantine ourselves away in our own worlds of achievement as we learn and, if we're lucky, *remember* little things about the way the world works.

But I think there's a larger message about learning that the founders of Phi Beta Kappa wanted us to grasp. At its heart, it's a social message. Because on the most basic level, learning is a process that trains you in understanding phenomena that are beyond your own personal experience – other things that have happened, other people who lived, other people who are living. The only things that we didn't explicitly learn at some point are those things that occur in our own subjective worlds. It is everything *outside* of us that requires a more deliberate sort of discovery and contemplation. To me, the pursuit of knowledge – in the liberal arts and sciences, in the humanities, and especially in my discipline, anthropology – seeks understanding of that which is “other.” The anthropologists in the room can probably see where I'm going with this. I think the founders of Phi Beta Kappa, perhaps secretly or subconsciously, want us to think anthropologically and historically about our position in the world.

What does that mean? Like all aspiring and actual ethnographers – I'll let you guess which one I am – I have an anecdote to share with you. This summer I used an Engaged Learning grant to go to the desert south of Tucson to study humanitarian aid work. I was researching the nature of empathy in migrant advocacy efforts. I lived in a camp in the desert with a group called No More Deaths, whose goal is to end the deaths of migrants due to dehydration and heat exhaustion in southern Arizona. They provide water, food, and medical aid to anyone they meet, but they don't ask about legal status. One would imagine that most of the people we met were undocumented people entering the United States for work. That seemed to be the case.

Over the two-week period that I stayed at the camp, we put a lot of water out on trails, but only about 12 people total stayed with us in the camp's medical tent. Although we could hear and occasionally see many more people traveling through the area, it was only a minority who ever stopped at camp. (It requires a leap of faith, or extreme desperation, to walk up to the tent camp of strangers when you're traveling at night.) When people came into camp we offered water, food, and a place to rest and heal, usually from blisters. The last group that came through in my stay was four men, two of whom were cousins, who travel every year for six-month periods to Tucson to work. When I asked in broken Spanish what kind of work they do, a couple of the guys mimed a shoveling action – so that's all I know. They arrived around 1 a.m., just when everyone was settling down to sleep, but we all got up, someone made some quesadillas in the makeshift kitchen, and I sat down to talk with them. Soon, the oldest in the group, let's call him Raul, asked what we were doing out here and what our normal lives were like. We explained that we were activists: we're just trying to help, we put out water where we can. I told them I was a university student studying anthropology. They understood and thought that was interesting.

After we explained who we were, they told us things about themselves: about their home town, and their work in Tucson, and their girlfriends. Raul volunteered that he missed his girlfriend already, although he would have to be away for six months, and mimed a tear drop. Over the course of a couple of days, they healed from pretty severe blisters, and we told jokes, sang songs, and talked about what it was like for them to travel through snake-infested areas at night, and to hide from a police force that was hunting them. The most meaningful moment for me happened the night before they left. Raul decided that it would be a good idea for us to take group pictures, so we used my digital camera. Later,

one of the other guys wanted to see the photos, so he and I sat on the edge of the circle while everyone else was talking. He clicked back through all of the pictures we'd just taken of smiling people, and then eventually got to the other pictures that were further back, which were essentially landscape photos of the desert. He just said a few words as we looked at the desert pictures – he probably would have said more but he knew I didn't speak Spanish – he said words like “large,” “beautiful,” “difficult.” I thought about how strange it was that I had these essentially *tourist* photos of this place. I went to sleep that night thinking that in this one moment, our lives had intersected in a meaningful way, and yet it's virtually impossible that our paths will cross ever again.

The day they left, they departed around noon. The camp phone got a call about three hours later from one of the four men. Two had been apprehended by Border Patrol, and the guy who called, along with a friend, had decided just to walk back toward Mexico.

The point is: these were really cool guys. For lack of a better word, we all bonded. In any other circumstance, I would have put them in my car and taken them where they needed to go. That would be the only way to guarantee their safety. But according to the law, all we could do in the desert was give them food, water, and medical care and then let them go. I still worry about whether they made it. But why am **I** here, worrying about **them**? Why don't **they** have to worry about **me**? Why am I here, safe, telling you this story, and they're who knows where? They were just as smart as me, and way funnier – but they were poorer. They're day laborers. Society had invested nothing in them – in fact, my country seeks to criminalize and expel them – and there I was with a \$2000 grant to study the situation. Our paths crossed in an extended moment of stark and ridiculous inequality. I had the most support and security of any volunteer, and much, much more when compared to the people passing through the vast, dry, dangerous desert on foot.

So the question was, “Why am I in the privileged position of studying this situation? Who cares?” The answer, I thought, *should* be everyone. So then what's my role in that project, the project of sharing what's happening here? This produces still more questions, like, when I try to study people, to figure out what's going on in another person's life, am I doing it right? Am I doing it respectfully? What do **they** want **me** to do with the information about their lives?

The truth is, we learn from everyone even when we're not trying. Even when we put down the ethnographer's notebook, and set aside the anthropological gaze, and meet people as we are. Every social interaction changes our personal universe, if only slightly. By telling me about themselves, like every anthropological informant – or friend – those four guys at camp were investing something in me. They didn't expect me to shout their stories from the rooftops, but, like friends do in everyday conversations, just to let their stories change me a little.

Telling stories, in this instance, was synonymous with teaching. Teaching anyone anything is likewise an investment in them. As former and current inductees of Phi Beta Kappa, we have been the recipients of many such investments. But to be the best possible learners, we must recognize even the most unorthodox opportunities to learn. These are the small investments that make up a social life.

From the moment we're born, our character and opportunities are shaped largely by the influences of other people, and just the same, we will rely on other people for future generations to become effective citizens. For 20-odd years, the students in this room have been trained in the knowledge that we simply do not and cannot know everything. That's the purpose of education.

Speaking to the new inductees, there is probably someone in this room who gave you the skills and the desire to work as hard as you have to work to be in this room today. If I asked you to close your eyes and imagine a teacher who changed your life, you probably have a face in mind. My own education would be utterly lacking without the influence of teachers like Professors David Doyle and Kathleen Wellman and Caroline Brettell and Carolyn Smith-Morris, who in their respective disciplines have taught me the methods and purpose of history and anthropology, and a potential place for myself in the effort to understand human experience. We require *other people* to enlighten us at every turn, whether they're teachers or regular folks. If we needed more proof that members of society are

interdependent – you know, besides politics and health care and infrastructure – then teaching and learning are the perfect evidence.

My argument is that *being guided* in our lives by a love of learning means approaching every social interaction as not only an opportunity to learn, but with the expectation that we make something of what we've learned. That the learning somehow guides our action.

In one of the readings for History of Anthropology last year, a phrase caught my eye: the phrase was “sociological imagination.” I looked it up and this idea was coined by a sociologist named C. Wright Mills, in a 1959 book appropriately titled *The Sociological Imagination*. Mills defined this “imagination” as, quote, “the vivid awareness of the relationship between experience and the wider society.” I love the use of the word “imagination,” because it suggests the necessity of the arts, including film, to activate our imaginations by bringing other modes of experience than our own into view. Mills himself called this imagination a way to, again I quote, “think ourselves away from our daily routines and look at them anew.” He believed that this capacity to shift perspectives would enable people to connect their personal struggles to social conditions that affect others, and therefore to capably respond to social injustice.

Whether we eventually end up in the arts, academia, engineering, business, medicine, or other trades, the ultimate goal is an active life led among other human beings. Some of us will be out producing capital, and some of us will spend our lives mostly in front of our computers, producing things for others to read *about* the people who are producing capital. Still others will eschew either of those options. It's a collective project. Regardless, learning for anyone is a process of the world opening up, of knowing every day one more thing about the other people and animals that inhabit the planet. The idea of being guided by a love of learning is to be guided by this curiosity about other beings. Not as a passing interest, but as a deep interest and investment in their situation – and as a reflection and refraction of our own situations in a globalizing world. The appropriately-named humanities – history, English, and cultural anthropology – have been particularly meaningful for me in this regard.

So here's the rub. Until there is a modicum of global equality, we as SMU students are being disproportionately invested in. The students here today have made good use of a privileged education, and should be congratulated – we understand how to excel within this system that has placed so much stock in us. As such, we have a special responsibility to help pay off that investment.

So what do we do with the founders' call to be guided by a love of learning? Vote. Talk. Write. Study. Teach. For starters, we can figure out how to ensure that every other child whose life we can touch gets the same opportunity to be in Phi Beta Kappa. To be guided by a love of learning is to be an applied anthropologist from your own position in the world – to seek information about the other people in it, explanations for their situation, and solutions to injustice. Unless one wishes to recede into a quite literal bubble, guarded from food picked by others or roads built by others or a system of laws founded on hard-fought precedent – and assuming that bubble wasn't physically constructed by workers in Mexico or China or someplace else – one has to accept that neither one's successes, nor one's failures, are wholly one's own.

The biggest difficulty we face is that some among us – here at SMU and in the world – believe that their efforts to help others can actually take place at a distance from themselves. That giving money to a homeless person, or to an esteemed charity, is a one-time act that emerges from spontaneous goodwill, without connection to the sociological matrix of power and privilege. Even worse, some believe that nothing they do should be expected to have a meaningful impact on any lives other than their family members'. The liberal arts and sciences and the humanities teach us that the opposite is true and that we are linked to everyone else on the planet. To ignore that fact would deny not only the purpose of this venerable honor society, but the reality of society in general. The central goal of the liberal arts since ancient times has been to prepare citizens for a responsible civic life. In our day and age, I believe the responsible civic life requires consciousness of the diversity of human experience, and the related issues of inequality and injustice. The classic call to learn the liberal arts

equates today to that “sociological imagination,” which enables us to view critically our position in global matrices of power. Phi Beta Kappa is just the beginning of the story, so today I welcome all of the new members. I hope we can work together in the future on this project of learning in action. Thank you.