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It certainly is an honor to stand before all of you to help welcome you into Phi Beta Kappa and to share some of my experiences with the Society. I’d like to thank the chapter for this opportunity – the preparation of these remarks, which will be brief, I promise, has been a most enjoyable exercise. As I am finishing my fourth year at TCNJ this semester, I feel like a senior in many ways and have found myself falling into moments of quiet reflection about my experiences here on campus and comparing them to my undergraduate years. Fear not: I will be brief!

Phi Beta Kappa has been a part of my life since I left Ocean County and walked onto the campus of the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, in August 1983 – yes, the same College of William and Mary you heard mentioned in the ritual just a few moments ago. William and Mary was founded in the year 1693 and is our country’s second oldest institution of higher education. And as America’s second oldest university, William and Mary often is among the first, if not ***the*** first, to introduce new practices into our academic culture. These “firsts” are noted on a large plaque in the entry of the Wren Building, the oldest classroom building still in use today in the US – the first law school, the first faculty of “modern history,” and the first school of “modern languages,” just to name a few. Phi Beta Kappa also makes that list, but I’ll be honest and say that PBK is overshadowed by the notation that William and Mary was the first school to introduce an honor code, which is a very big deal in Williamsburg, and not only because Thomas Jefferson wrote it…but as you quickly learn at William and Mary, yes, in large part because Thomas Jefferson wrote it.

Yet like the honor code, Phi Beta Kappa is very much part of the campus culture. My art history survey was held in Phi Beta Kappa Hall, I walked around Phi Beta Kappa Circle to get to my classes in the social sciences building, and we celebrated Phi Beta Kappa Day every December. Sure, PBK is part of the air you breathe on campus. As I have traveled the world in my career, keyholders have always asked me about academic life at William and Mary, what it was like to be a PBK keyholder there, and so forth. And they often ask these questions with wide eyes and weird smiles on their faces…as if they had the expectation that the act of studying at W&M was something out of the Chronicles of Narnia. People at TCNJ have asked me the same questions, and I’m here now to tell you exactly how the academic culture at William and Mary compares to TCNJ:

It’s pretty much the same as here.

Georgian architecture, two lakes, trees, Sodexo food…on the surface, there are many similarities between our two campuses. Our libraries are both buzzing with activity, our campus newspapers both inform readers and challenge them to think critically about their communities, and campus life is brimming with clubs, organizations and “things to do” in general. Perhaps more importantly, both William and Mary and TCNJ have very strong academic cultures – high-caliber students, top-notch teaching scholars, wide varieties of stimulating coursework, opportunities to engage in trailblazing research that contributes to the knowledge bases of our disciplines, and multiple opportunities to develop meaningful relationships between students and faculty members.

Yet there is a difference between the two campuses…okay, there are two. First, William and Mary would never have allowed the installation of the Pixels, those lovely colored spheres that grace the yard outside this building, on the most Georgian part of its campus. (This is not a criticism of them…but the Pixels would never have made it in Williamsburg.)

The second difference is that, across the street from the Wren Building lies “Colonial Williamsburg,” or “C.W.” This historical reconstruction of American colonial life, rebuilt upon 18th Century remnants and ruins by the Rockefeller family, provides William and Mary students with an opportunity to leave contemporary reality and literally walk into past, before electricity powered our lives, before we had the world at our fingertips in a couple of keystrokes. Some of you may have memories of your visit to C.W. – perhaps you watched candles being made or shoes being put on a horse. Or maybe you remember the summer heat and humidity and couldn’t wait for your parents to take you to Water Country USA down the road. The past is a very serious business in Virginia – my landlady, for example, was an interpreter in C.W. and wore only 18th Century clothing, even when she wasn’t working! We learned to think nothing of the guy in front of us at the bank who was wearing a powdered wig, wool breeches, and gold-buckled black shoes. Colonial Williamsburg allowed me to imagine the time when PBK was founded on December 5, 1776 – when students dissatisfied by such secret societies as the Flat Hat Club sought to create the clandestine intellectual organization of which you are now a keyholder.

Our ID cards allowed us free entrance into the Historic Area, and the great weather we’re having this week…we began to have these types of days in February, even before spring break. The Duke of Gloucester Street, or DOG Street, is one mile long, and before too long, each of us had managed to find a special space to study or begun jogging up and down this colonial thoroughfare. My place was the gardens of the Governor’s Palace, and I would find a bench or, if I was lucky, commandeer a big circle built into the brick walls of the garden…very much the yearbook picture cliché. I read a good part of *Utopia* in those gardens, struggled with Kafka’s *Trial* in its original German, and failed miserably at trying to understand linear algebra. In the fall of my freshman year, I had taken to the gardens to deal with a particularly troubling assignment – trying to find something unique to say about Tonio Kröger, the protagonist of a novella by Thomas Mann, for my Intro to German Lit class. I was all of eighteen years old, with no life experience outside of my hometown of Toms River...what was I going to be able to add to our appreciation of this major literary figure?! Tonio Kröger was a fish out of water, torn between the Hanseatic German culture of his father and the Latin culture of his mother…similar to Mann himself, whose mother was Brazilian. Essentially Tonio was miserable all of the time and always seeking things that he could not reach. OK, I had already moved out of a harder German class into this one, so I really felt I had something to prove in my first major written assignment in the class. The research was in my notebook, the novella had been read…but nothing was making its way onto the legal pad on which I wrote all of the rough drafts of my papers. It was in these gardens where I did something we don’t always have the chance to do in this age of instantaneous access to information and stimulation – I thought. I left the tensions of my freshman dorm and, frankly, engaged in a great deal of self-criticism. Why did I leave Toms River? Why didn’t I just go to Ocean County College? Why did I insist upon submitting myself to this torture with all of these southerners?

After an hour of wistful reminiscing, a memory floated back into consciousness: in my AP Spanish class, I had read the 19th Century poetry of Gustavo Adolfo Becquer. One of his *Rhymes*, or *Rimas*, focused upon unrequited love for a woman who was “intangible, incorporeal, impossible.” A-ha! Becquer always going after the woman he couldn’t have was sort of like Tonio’s impossible quests! I scribbled down the outline to my paper, ran out of the gardens, and managed to finish the paper that night. The professor gave me an A grade, read parts of the paper out to the class, and encouraged me to pursue more German courses. Apparently the paper had introduced Becquer to her for the first time and caused her to go into the stacks and pull out his poetry. I stand before you as the holder of a doctoral degree in modern German history thanks to this woman.

The day after I was tapped for PBK, this German professor walked into the Sociology library, saw me, and ran over to congratulate me on my good fortune. She must have been a member of the chapter and been a part of the electoral deliberations. As we concluded the conversation, she stopped, smiled, and said, “Always remember *Tonio Kröger*.”

I don’t know how I could have survived college in 2009-2013 – I could barely keep up with everything as it was in 1983, without a 24/7 news cycle, the Internet, and cell phones. I found it helpful to leave my reality once in a while, step back into a simpler time, and engage in some quiet contemplation to negotiate myself through whatever academic challenge lay before me. I still do this, only today my oasis might be a coffee shop in Greenwich Village where nobody knows my name and I can be alone with my deepest thoughts. You may not have the 18th Century outside your window as you progress in life, but hopefully you will be able to find spaces where you can separate from real life and work through your challenges, perhaps with the assistance of a great book, stimulating music, or some scratch paper and a pen.

My Phi Beta Kappa key has always been a reminder to me to slow down and focus. Perhaps you will think about what brought you to this place in life and remember a personal formula for success. One thing I hope you take away from my remarks: Always remember that your PBK membership entitles you to a lifelong 20% discount to Colonial Williamsburg and those special gardens at the Governor’s Palace.