The College of New Jersey

### April 9, 2007

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### President Blakely, President Gitenstein, Secretary Churchill, fellow keyholders, distinguished guests, family and friends, it is a distinct privilege and high honor for me to speak to you tonight at TCNJ’s inaugural induction ceremony.

### Newly elected members of the Delta Chapter of Phi Beta Kappa of New Jersey, being Phi Beta Kappa signifies that you have been elected to join a distinguished group of scholars who have demonstrated intellectual integrity, a broad range of academic interests, and outstanding academic accomplishment in courses in the arts and sciences. PBK stands for freedom of inquiry and speech, disciplinary rigor, breadth of intellectual perspective, the cultivation of skills of deliberation and ethical reflection, the pursuit of wisdom, and the application of the fruits of scholarship and research in practical life. It is the highest academic honor that a person completing their undergraduate studies can receive and I congratulate you all for having earned this honor.

### The Greek letters chosen for the name of this oldest and most prestigious of academic honor societies PBK stand for *Philosophia Biou Cupernetes* (love of wisdom is the guide of life). The Greek word *cupernetes*, which is also the root of the word “cybernetics”, literally means “steersman.” Combined with *philosophia,* love of wisdom, the name conjures up the image of life as a voyage on a sail boat being guided by a wise person whose hand is firmly on the tiller. This is, in any case, what I imagined when this was explained to me when I was inducted into the Epsilon chapter of Pennsylvania at my *alma mater*, some thirty-seven years ago.

### Several weeks ago when I was invited to give this speech I happened to be in my office talking to one of my students, a philosophy major and one of my senior thesis advisees, who had just asked me “How is it that you came to hold your political values?” When the phone rang, I was in the process of recounting how much I was influenced by my own undergraduate experience at Swarthmore College during the tumultuous times of the late 1960s, times which it seems to me are not unlike our present times. At that time becoming a philosophy professor at a good liberal arts college was the course in life I chose for myself. Unlike some in my generation, whose life goals were to become rich or famous, mine were to become wise and erudite. My heroes were Bertrand Russell, Albert Einstein, and Noam Chomsky, intellectuals whom I admired because they combined academic brilliance with a social conscience and political dissent. Like many other members of my generation, I was quite dissatisfied with the state of the country and the world, and believed that I (or rather we) could change it for the better.

### I am now the Chairman of the Department of Philosophy and Religion here at TCNJ. To many people this means that I am the person in charge of speculation and superstition. Our department also hosts the classical studies program, so I am really the person in charge of speculation, superstition and mythology. Being a philosopher does have its humorous side. For instance, the First Law of Philosophy states, “For every philosopher, there exists an equal and opposite philosopher.” The Second Law of Philosophy adds, “and they're both wrong.” There are also jokes about particular famous philosophers, for instance; Jean-Paul Sartre is sitting at a French cafe, revising his draft of *Being and Nothingness*. He says to the waitress, "I'd like a cup of coffee, please, with no cream." The waitress replies, "I'm sorry, monsieur, but we're out of cream. How about with no milk?" Studying philosophy and even being a philosophy professor does not necessarily make one wise. A philosopher is only a lover of wisdom, and one can be a lover of wisdom without oneself actually being wise, just as one can be a dog lover without oneself actually being a dog.

### Being elected to Phi Beta Kappa does not mean that people will automatically recognize your brilliance. One of my daughters sent me a story from yesterday’s Washington Post describing an experiment conducted at the L’Enfant Plaza Metro station on January 12th of this year.[f](http://www.blogger.com/post-edit.g?blogID=15715953&postID=117621064077384938#_ftn1) In order to determine the effect of framing on artistic appreciation they arranged for the world-renowned violinist Joshua Bell to pose as a street musician and perform several of the most difficult and enduring violin pieces in the classical repertoire for passing commuters. He played for 43 minutes and during that time he collected $32.17. Only two people among the thousands who passed by stopped to listen to him play, and only one of those two recognized him, and it was she who deposited a crisp $20 bill in the case of Bell’s $3.5 million Stradivarius that was lying open before him.

### While preparing this speech I came across an article from the Swarthmore College newspaper recounting a PBK initiation lecture at my *alma mater* given by the poet W. H. Auden in 1939 (which was before my time) in which he urged that man's only true vocation is the realization of himself or herself. Self-realization is guided by an inner light, what he called a "state of subjective requiredness," and which he described as a kind of inner passion that drives a person to pursue his or her chosen course in life.

### This is a nice thing to say to young people who are graduating from a good college and are preparing to go forth to make their marks on the world. Certainly it is true that a good steersman needs to have a firm sense of where they want to go in life if they are to have any chance of actually getting there. And it is also true that one needs a certain amount of determination, the inner passion Auden speaks of, to meet and surmount the various obstacles and setbacks that one is likely to encounter on ones journey. But I think that these requirements, although necessary, are not sufficient. There are several other things that one needs to bear in mind

### First, yours is not the only hand on the tiller. There are lots of other boats in the water, and there are fellow passengers on yours. Despite the value we place on personal autonomy, for most of us most of the time, we are not the sole masters of our fates, and our ability to achieve our own life goals depends to a large extent on what others around us are doing or not doing. We live in networks of social relationships and we work for the most part in cooperative or corporate enterprises whose success requires the coordination of the activity of many individuals. There will be cases in which you will want to pull the tiller to the left while others are trying to pull it to the right. On these occasions your powers of critical reasoning and persuasion will come in handy, but so will your skill in navigating interpersonal relations. There may also be cases in which you cannot reconcile your own values and convictions with what those around you, and on these occasions you must be prepared to jump ship and find another vessel to carry you forward on your life’s journey. But for the most part you will need to have courage of your convictions, and you must be passionate about advocating those values and beliefs that are most important to you. As George Bernard Shaw has written, “The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one insists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends upon the unreasonable man.”

### The second thing to keep in mind is that the conditions under which your life unfolds are constantly changing, and for your generation as has been the case with mine, they will be changing quickly and often dramatically. The inventor, author and futurist Ray Kurzweil has observed that the rate of scientific and technological change is exponential rather than linear. The better part of the wisdom which one needs to steer life’s journey involves knowing how to respond to the rapidly changing seas of modern life. One needs to cultivate the ability to accept and even embrace change, partly because change is unavoidable, but also partly because it often provides opportunities that you can use to advance your goals. In order words, rather than resisting change, you need to learn how to use it, and to surf its restless waves.

### The third thing is to avoid getting too wedded to your analogies and abstractions and don’t bother trying to understand the world by means of a single ideology or theory. No matter how detailed your map it not the same as the reality, which is always more complex and surprising than you think. Be prepared to explore the territory on your own. Don’t pay too much attention to disciplinary boundaries but instead pursue your intellectual interests wherever they lead. In his book about Tolstoy Isaiah Berlin described two kinds of intellectual styles: the fox who knows many things, and the hedgehog who knows one big thing. Let yourself roam: Be the fox

### The fourth thing to remember is that success in life is measured not by what you gain from society, but by what you give back. We have been conditioned to think that success in our society is defined by personal wealth, status, power, or fame. But if you choose these values as your guiding stars you are likely to lose your way. It is better to focus on expanding your capacity to serve others and on finding ways to contribute to the betterment of society. As the wise teacher “Socrates” in the movie *Peaceful Warrior* tells his young protégée “There is no higher purpose than service to others.” This will seem paradoxical to many of you now, but I believe that if you follow this advice you will find your journey through life to be both more personally satisfying and rewarding. Both the ancient Western philosophers, such as Aristotle, and the great spiritual teachers of the East, such as the Buddha, agree that *eudaimonia*, which is sometimes translated as happiness and sometimes as self-realization, is the reward of virtue.

### So as you prepare to leave TCNJ and embark on your life’s journey, think not that it is all about Me – it is really all about We – which, of course, also includes each one of us. And do not think about TCNJ as the place where you became the person that you will be for the rest of your lives, because in a short time you will be a different person than you are now and also the world will be a different place than it is now. Several months after Auden gave his PBK speech at Swarthmore the world was engulfed in an orgy of violence and cruelty with the beginning of the Second World War. With passionate conviction in a time of despair, Auden wrote one of his most famous poems, “September 1, 1939”, which he later repudiated on the grounds that it did not take adequate account of the moral distinctions between the Nazi’s and their enemies. Nevertheless, its closing lines contain an important message that I want to leave you with this evening, a message that I think encapsulates the meaning of living a life guided by the light of learning, of being a Phi Beta Kappan:

***All I have is a voice***

***To undo the folded lie,***

***The romantic lie in the brain***

***Of the sensual man-in-the-street***

***And the lie of Authority***

***Whose buildings grope the sky:***

***There is no such thing as the State***

***And no one exists alone;***

***Hunger allows no choice***

***To the citizen or the police;***

***We must love one another or die.***

***Defenseless under the night***

***Our world in stupor lies;***

***Yet, dotted everywhere,***

***Ironic points of light***

***Flash out wherever the Just***

***Exchange their messages:***

***May I, composed like them***

***Of Eros and of dust,***

***Beleaguered by the same***

***Negation and despair,***

***Show an affirming flame.***

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[**f**](http://www.blogger.com/post-edit.g?blogID=15715953&postID=117621064077384938#_ftnref1)[**http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/04/AR2007040401721.html?hpid=features1**](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/04/AR2007040401721.html?hpid=features1)