

**Phi Beta Kappa Induction Remarks
R. Barbara Gitenstein
April 25, 2018**

I want to thank the keyholders, particularly the officers of the Delta chapter of Phi Beta Kappa, for inviting me to speak to you this evening. This is a great honor and an important responsibility. I hope that the inductees will find my musings equal to the import of the evening. This night celebrates the achievements of some of the most accomplished students at The College of New Jersey. Congratulations to our new inductees to Phi Beta Kappa. Election to the most prestigious honor society in the Academy celebrates your intellectual curiosity, academic achievement and personal character.

TCNJ is a special place, a community filled with exceptional scholars and learners, but those of you who have been elected to Phi Beta Kappa exemplify the very essence of TCNJ's special community. I say that not merely because you embrace the love of learning and intellectual excellence but because you do so while being in the world.

I began my preparation for tonight's assignment by spending some time reading previous Phi Beta Kappa orations. As a former professor of American Literature, I had to begin with one of the most famous of these speeches: Ralph Waldo Emerson's "American Scholar," delivered at Harvard in 1837. In it, Emerson argues two major points. First, in order for man to achieve the highest of intellectual accomplishments he had to strive to be not a thinker but a man (read human) thinking. In other words, he had to learn from nature, books (sagaciously used) and action—in that order. The second major point of his speech was that the American version of man thinking should be based on a fervent belief in self-reliance and a thoughtful dedication to hard thinking, an ideal that he opined America had not reached in 1837. After studying Emerson's oration, I re-read the speeches of my predecessors who spoke to newly inducted Delta Chapter Phi Beta Kappa members. These speeches capture the ideals and spirit of some of TCNJ's most revered faculty and staff, individuals who are the foundation for this relatively young chapter, individuals who represent the very soul of our remarkable College. The advice from these members of Phi Beta Kappa always grew out of the speaker's intellectual passion whether it was environmental biology or George Frederic Handel, the meaning of time or stem cell research, the importance of changing the world or the importance of remembering our history. And all of them charged your predecessors, previous inductees, to begin from their own intellectual passion to make a difference in the world. In all ways that matter, they echoed Emerson's charge. I will humbly follow in their footsteps.

I submit that Ralph Waldo Emerson's challenge to the 1837 Phi Beta Kappa inductees, his challenge to you, is still unmet. In America, we have become even more complacent in our instrumentalist understanding of education and social engagement than we were in Emerson's time. We are not yet man thinking; I fear that in some cases, we are barely human. In many ways, we have lost the ability to conduct rational discourse, a necessary skill of man thinking. As lovers of wisdom, you have a special opportunity, indeed a special responsibility, in these times. You must resist the intensifying confusion between value and price, the false equations of economic status with success and of power with social status, and the dangerous rejection both of expertise and of the efficacy of civil discourse.

Let me give you a very personal interpretation of what I think the 21st century American Scholar should be and should do. I believe that these commitments are entirely in sync with the advice from each of my predecessors who charged your predecessors in the ten Phi Beta Kappa inductions that the Delta Chapter has held since 2007, the inaugural class of Phi Beta Kappa members at The College of New Jersey.

First, the 21st Century American Scholar should be a lover of learning, someone who loves the life of the mind. There is a special joy in the shape of a poem and a powerful exhilaration in the success of an experiment that proves a hypothesis. Second, he should be deeply schooled in at least one particular discipline but not so schooled that he cannot “see around the corners” as Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man said. He should be able to ask probing questions that challenge the status quo and conventional wisdom, even within his discipline. Third, she should be in and of the world. If she falls into the trap of becoming the hermetic scholar, she will not be engaged in changing the world and without this kind of American Scholar changing the world, we will be doomed to relive the worst aspects of our past. Fourth, he must be skilled in the art of listening as well as talking. By listening, I mean active listening. In other words, he is listening not to craft a witty response but is listening to learn and perhaps even change his mind. Fifth, she should understand that courage is perhaps the most important human quality— not physical courage but intellectual courage. The American Scholar is brave enough to articulate an unpopular opinion and wise enough to support that opinion with analysis, research, and civility. Finally, he should embrace the reality that we do not exist in the world alone. We do not learn alone, we do not live alone, and we will surely not thrive alone.

In my research on previous Phi Beta Kappa orations, I was reminded that some of the most effective have been poems written on the occasion of a Phi Beta Kappa induction. These poets included Robert Frost, Oliver Wendell Holmes and Seamus Heaney, just to name a few. My personal favorite is W.H. Auden's 1946 "Under What Lyre: a Reactionary Tract for the Times." It is wonderfully witty and highly critical of his times.

In that spirit and with apologies to Emily Dickinson, I offer you the following:

**One day I walked across the lawn
To see the path the sun had drawn.
I did not apprehend the scope
But could not lose my sense of hope.**

**Embracing what lay before my eyes
I knew that I could not disguise
My own responsibility to own
The future of the earth, my home.**

**And doing so I learned that I
Was not alone below the sky
But rather a seeming separate soul
Who only tied to others would be whole.**

Again, congratulations to tonight's inductees on all your achievements and best wishes in the years to come as you embody the 21st century American Scholar. Thank you.