

Phi Beta Kappa Induction Ceremony

Remarks by Kathryn A. Foster, Ph.D.

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“Lifelong Learning”

Tonight I am one of you, honored to be an inductee into Phi Beta Kappa, the nation’s oldest and most celebrated academic honor society. I am particularly honored to be joining the Delta Chapter of New Jersey at The College of New Jersey, an institution known for its academic rigor and exceptional educational quality, an institution that I and others have long admired from afar, and one I have come to respect even more “up close and personal” in my relatively short time here.

To say that this is an honor I never dreamed of would be true, not for reasons of humility or false modesty, but rather because it is not obvious from PBK’s criteria that I would have been eligible to use the front door. Fortunately, there is a side door. Above the transom it says, Honorary Member. This is the way into Phi Beta Kappa for someone “recognized for scholarly accomplishment after graduation.”

I guess that door fits. I have a 30-year career in the academic world, I have a scholarly record that includes many publications and occasional erudition. I read widely. I am of good character. I love to learn.

Also, and I say this unapologetically, I am a generalist, an intellectual dilettante. In college, I majored in geography, a classic liberal arts field that has the lovely property of being both a social and a natural science. The five courses I took in my first semester at college were physics, music appreciation, German 1, calculus 2, and History of Occidental Civilization.

The semesters following saw me doing more of the same: *Oooh, that looks interesting*, I would say, peering into the course catalogue as one would a candy counter, *I'll take one of those*. Sociology, evolutionary biology, urban politics, astronomy, logic, cartography, earth science, macroeconomics, 20th century architecture, multi-variate calculus.

These are my *bona fides*. Still, If I had it to do over again, I'd broaden my curriculum even more. I was light on the humanities and, true confession, I took no literature courses in college. Fortunately, it's never too late.

Which brings me to lifelong learning, the focus of my remarks. I chose lifelong learning partly because it is a tenet of Phi Beta Kappa, partly because Phi Beta Kappa is recognizing me for achievement beyond college, and partly because I have about 40 years on most of you, so my lifelong learning has a bigger head of steam. I will first cover autodidacticism (which I know is not a word, but ought to be), followed by learning by teaching, and conclude with experiential learning, featuring my best single piece of advice for how to maintain your Phi Beta Kappa *bona fides* now and forevermore.

Autodidacticism

I taught myself to touch type when I was nine years old, long before the days of electric typewriters or desktop keyboards or smart phones. The instruction manual was directive: *Adjust your posture. Position your hands as shown in the diagram. Curl your fingers. Strike the keys sharply. Repeat five times: f-d-s-a- [space] j-k-l;- [space]*. By lesson 8, I was typing, *"the quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog."*

At age ten I memorized Ernest Thayer's 13-stanza poem, "Casey at the Bat," an amusement that has come in handy as an Opening Day parlor game and bet winner. In my late teens, I bought lettering nibs and a bottle of India ink and taught myself calligraphy. An urgent self-teaching came in my mid-twenties in the half hour after I bought that really cute used Mitsubishi. It had a manual transmission. I did not know how to drive it. (*You better learn fast, lady*, the seller said, handing me the keys.)

There were also failed attempts to learn something on my own. Juggling never took, nor did French. The corn I planted one summer never got higher than my shin. I still haven't taught myself how to use an iPad.

After he retired, my father ordered from the Eaton Press a set of beautiful and not inexpensive leather-bound books on Classics of Thought. They came one a month for nearly five years. He did not come close to keeping up, but I know he intended to read and learn from them and in the meanwhile they looked sensational on the bookshelves. *On the Origin of Species*, by Charles Darwin; *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, by Mary Wollstonecraft; *Tao Te Ching*, by Lao Tzu, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius, the *Bhagavad Gita*, *The Koran*, *The Torah* and forty-five more in that vein. My father's intellectual ambition greatly exceeded his life, but to my immense pleasure those classics of thought are now on my bookshelves. And yes, I plan to read them....in retirement.

Enjoyable as it is, the disadvantage of autodidacticism is that you do not know the field, have not mastered the techniques, and may not be, despite all that you know about yourself, a particularly high-quality instructor. And so we move to my next topic, learning by teaching.

Learning by Teaching

All in this room are familiar with classroom learning, and perhaps cherished, as I did, being a student. Even in my early grades, it nourished me to be offered knowledge, ideas, technique, attention, inspiration. Not surprisingly, teachers have played oversized roles in my life, including as Muses for diligence, sources for professional ideas, and objects of intense crushes.

The story of how and why I became a teacher is too off point, but suffice to say I did eventually turn that way.

It remains for me a truism that the best way to learn something is to teach it. You may have experienced this as a peer educator or tutor or coach. My first year as a newly minted assistant professor at the University at Buffalo, I was assigned to teach four courses, including economics. I had taken and done well in economics, earning the equivalent of a minor and getting other doses of econ in urban planning school and when earning my doctorate. At least a dozen courses. No problem, I thought.

Think again. I know now that I never *truly understood* economics until I had to teach it. The discipline employs sophisticated mathematics, abstraction, and a way of thinking that does not come naturally, at least not to my urban planning students, some significant percentage of whom were terrified by a required class in economics. To teach the course, I had to become a learner again, unlearn and set aside the linear algebra, the econometrics, and the challenging problem sets.

I count it as one of my greatest adaptations that I developed a course with intellectual rigor but no graphs, no numbers, no marginal cost curves, no widgets. We used concepts of economic thinking to understand scarcity, opportunity cost, land use

patterns, housing markets, transportation tradeoffs, economic growth, and resource allocation. The students learned a lot, and I did, too.

In fairness, I have also had the experience of failing when I tried to relearn something and teach it. I am pretty adept at PowerPoint, combining a good brain for data with just-enough-to-be-dangerous skills in graphic design. It is conceited to say so, but my slides had dazzling images and purposeful animation, the visual and linguistic metaphors were pure, and the presentations themselves had the narrative arc of a Hollywood script. Colleagues at a previous position asked me to teach them how to do a good PowerPoint. We set up a workshop for a dozen people. It was a tremendous flop. I did not know as much as I thought I did nor could I tell people how or why I did what I did. They left disappointed and I left chastened.

I still argue that one can learn a lot by teaching – and I have -- but teaching, like autodidacticism, is neither necessary nor sufficient for learning.

Which brings me to experience, my third path to lifelong learning.

Experiential Learning

Some things you just can't learn from sitting with a book, watching a video or listening to a compelling lecture. Consider, for example, dancing, public speaking, swinging a golf club, building a better mousetrap.

At the risk of being stripped of my Phi Beta Kappa key, I venture that experience is not merely for kinesthetic topics. Learning in the humanities, natural and social sciences is, in my view, greatly enhanced by experience. Imagine, for example, listening to a native read from *Ulysses* while sitting in a pub in Dublin. You would

never more appreciate or understand Stephen Dedalus and the Blooms, I offer, than to hear their words in that venue and vernacular.

Numerous kinds of experience enhance learning. For me, the experiences of failure, of leadership, of collaboration, and of reflection always bring insights and lessons. But for my money, there is no greater way to learn, no more impactful experience you can have, than to travel. This is especially if you travel to a place very different from what you know, if you head there solo or nearly solo, and certainly if you go with an open mind and undetermined itinerary.

Travel offers the opportunity to gain cross-cultural competence, to experience difference, to learn what it feels like to be an outsider, to test your resourcefulness, to develop resilience and humility, to leave your comfort zone, to communicate using all senses. Travel lays bare what we do not know and asks us to exercise intellectual, physical, and mental muscles.

Let me reinforce the point with a travel experience from my mid-twenties. You may think I am going to talk about my Peace Corps experience – and no question that experience brought deep learning. But instead I turn to my first cross-country road trip, a journey I took with my younger brother in a borrowed Honda Civic so tiny we named it Toeclips. I was 24 years old and barely knew how to drive a manual transmission – my brother had never driven one. We started in my hometown in Verona, New Jersey, heading to La Jolla, California.

The day we left, my brother, an English major, set the tone by ceremoniously reciting Walt Whitman's "Song of the Open Road." My offering was more prosaic, but equally fitting, Joel Garreau's *The Nine Nations of North America*.

There are many hours between here and southern California. We observed, kept a journal, wrote poetry – okay, they were limericks – listened to local radio for middle-of-the-country culture, followed the loosest itinerary, not knowing where we would end of every night. We had breakdowns that required us to rely on the kindness of strangers. That was literally so in South Dakota when the car stopped running – well, maybe we had something to do with that. We experienced real Chicago blues in the sticky floor basement of a southside bar, and Mormonism in Salt Lake City. The Zion Motel on the edge of town – we were on a strict budget – still brings chills.

Somewhere in the west, while out for a jog – it’s hard to sit in a car all day and not need exercise – we were chased by what was, we were certain, a rabid dog. Nothing focuses the mind more. The trip was monumental not in spite of our challenges, but because of them, and it was intensely horizon-broadening. Imagine the insights and lessons the trip required had it been to a place with another language, currency, and customs.

One does not have to join the Peace Corps or travel across the country to have a profound travel-based learning experience. Go somewhere you have never been before. Test yourself. Stay open to possibility. Minute by minute, day by day, there is, to my mind, no quicker, more effective, or memorable way to achieve lifelong learning.

I end with repeated appreciation for this honor, congratulations to my fellow inductees, and anticipation for hearing of your pathways now and forevermore.

Thank you, Delta Chapter of New Jersey of Phi Beta Kappa, and thank you all.