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Speech to Phi Beta Kappa Induction Ceremony: “Docere, Delectare, et Movere”

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I took the title for this talk—Docere, Delectate, et Movere—from Cicero’s advice in *De Oratore* on the qualities necessary for a great orator—and, by extension, for a great teacher. It means, “to Teach, to Delight, and to Move.” From discussions I’ve had with many Pacific students, including you new inductees into Phi Beta Kappa, I know that Pacific’s wonderful faculty have been teaching, delighting, and moving you all in the best possible fashion over the years that you’ve been here. Cicero’s advice is about the manner in which the most effective teachers will inspire their student audiences to yearn for knowledge and wisdom and to know how to keep learning throughout their lives. When Pacific set out to win the privilege of joining the top ten or twelve percent of colleges and universities that have chapters of Phi Beta Kappa, the faculty committed itself not only to ensuring that students had access to a first-class liberal arts college curriculum but also the kind of spirited teaching of that curriculum that Cicero recommends.

As you all know, Phi Beta Kappa is the oldest honor society in the country; and, like other honor societies, it recognizes high academic achievement. But, unlike other honor societies, Phi Beta Kappa also stands for and requires of its members and chapters a commitment to the ideal of the liberal arts education—an ideal that stretches back to the very beginnings of Western civilization in ancient Greece. Indeed, the principles of the liberal arts education developed in tandem with the creation of Athenian democracy, and

the term itself refers to the arts necessary for the education of a free person. In an article titled “Liberal Arts Education in the Twenty-First Century,” W.R. Connor, former president of the National Humanities Center in the Research Triangle of North Carolina, remarks that “It’s not too much of a stretch to retranslate ‘liberal arts’ as ‘the skills of freedom.’ Since freedom or slavery was so often at stake in citizen decision makings [in ancient Greece], these were, as well, the skills needed to preserve freedom” (8). This civic and democratic origin of the liberal arts should remind us that, to preserve our democracy and our human rights requires active leadership by people skilled in the arts of freedom. Connor goes on to identify these arts and skills as “The ability to read texts closely, an alertness to turn of phrase or shift of argument, clear thinking and effective argument in all their forms, good writing, an understanding of how individuals and communities in the past have dealt with practical challenges and moral perplexities, alertness to the ironies of history, the ability to imagine the situation of others and to assess the responses most likely to prove effective ... [these skills are so clearly necessary, and yet they] are still rare commodities in our society” (12).

It is sometimes popular to refer back to the traditional seven liberal arts of the medieval period and to say that all that is required for a liberal education is to develop facility and knowledge in the Trivium of Grammar, Logic and Rhetoric, and the Quadrivium of Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, and Astronomy. And, while it is true that all of our modern day disciplines descend as it were from these seven, and while it is true that if we demonstrate mastery of this great range of disciplines we’ll be considered among the most well-educated people in society, such thinking obscures the real aims of liberal education in the context of preserving freedom by way of effective leadership.

In the midst of the last great economic downturn in our history—the great depression of the 1930s, the psychologist Phillip L. Harriman argued in an article titled “Antecedents of the Liberal Arts College” that “Historically, that education has been liberalizing and progressive which was content to challenge established curriculums, teaching methods, and aims. When it formalized its program, it created once again the need for a liberalizing education” (71). In other words, Harriman is saying that what the true liberal arts education does is to form a mind that resists stasis, complacency, repetition, and mindless clinging to tradition for tradition’s sake. Harriman recounts the development of the idea of the liberal arts education from Plato’s *Republic* and Hippocrates’s medical canon in the 4<sup>th</sup> century before our own through St Alcuin of York who led Charlemagne’s Renaissance to the philosopher Peter Abelard, who inspired the growth of the first universities of Europe to the Flemish Renaissance educator Andreas Vesalius. He argues that in each stage, the proponents of the liberal arts were rebelling against the status quo, calling for scholars to question, innovate, and lead in the pursuit of knowledge—and to convey that courageous spirit of challenging received opinion in their students. Let me quote him at a little length. He says,

The greatest danger confronting the liberal arts college is that it, too, will develop fixed principles. Such a procedure is contrary to the ideals of the movement and indicates a failure to profit by the lessons of the history of higher education. The liberal arts college seeks to give its students the best education to meet the demands of a changing social order. As soon as its ideals crystallize into a formal principles and a static curriculum, it then ceases to reflect the spirit of Plato, Alcuin, Hippocrates, Vesalius, and the

many other pioneers of progressive education. Most of all it falls short of the ideal set by the work of Peter Abelard, who may be said to symbolize the function of a liberal arts education in a dynamic society. The vitality of the arts college lies in its close touch with the wider society beyond the college campus. (69)

So, in other words, the purpose of a liberal arts education is to take it into action in our lives and communities. It is a spirit of inquiry, a dissatisfaction with mediocrity, hypocrisy, and injustice. Those who've attained it owe something back to the society that fostered and enabled it. Such an education is a national treasure, not merely a personal pleasure.

Thank you again for this Honorary Membership. I accept this high distinction with great pleasure and gratitude. I am pleased to see that Honorary Membership in Phi Beta Kappa has been held by some pretty remarkable people, including Mark Twain, Woodrow Wilson, Eudora Welty, John Hope Franklin, and Alexander Graham Bell, just to name a few. So, I feel humbled and challenged in a way that I expect all of you who've earned your Phi Beta Kappa keys must feel. The distinguished list of members who've earned their membership as you all have includes such names as Eli Whitney, Susan Sontag, John Quincy Adams, Stephen Chu, Betty Friedan, Theodore Roosevelt, Samuel Morse and Rita Dove. Each of these names adds luster to the keys you've all received, and I would charge you all to seek to bring further glory to the Phi Beta Kappa key by the way you lead your lives from here on out. I would urge us all to feel that we have a burden when we receive an honor as high as membership in Phi Beta Kappa to bring more glory to the award than the award brings to us. Again, congratulations to you

for earning your membership in Chi Chapter of Phi Beta Kappa. I'm honored to be in your company.

#### Works Cited

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