USC College of Letters, Arts & Sciences
and
Epsilon Chapter of California

Phi Beta Kappa Society
Initiation Ceremony

*Keynote Address by*
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Welcome — how is everyone doing?

That eminent scholar Groucho Marx once remarked that he would never want to be a member of a club that would have him as a member. I would like to adapt that statement to the present circumstance. It is very interesting to be considered for honorary membership in a club that, were it to see my record as a student, would never, ever have me as a member.

I thought that being a member of Costco and Netflix was a humbling experience, but to be chosen as an honorary member of Phi Beta Kappa is truly humbling. To join other honorary members such as Mark Twain, Alexander Graham Bell, Helen Keller and our illustrious USC President, Steven B. Sample — well, humbling is not even the right word. Fraudulent might be the right word.

Leaving aside fraud for a moment, but I will return to that theme in a minute, you should be tremendously proud of what you have accomplished — being selected for membership in Phi Beta Kappa is a phenomenal achievement. You are among the best of the best, singled out for your intelligence, ambition, creativity, work ethic, and motivation to be great. As a faculty member of this great University, I am very proud of you — and if I might speak on behalf of USC — and trust me, USC shudders whenever I speak on its behalf — USC is very proud of you as well. You join a highly select group of Trojans who have achieved one on the most prestigious honors that one can achieve in academia. Congratulations to each and every one of you for being inducted into Phi Beta Kappa.

...before you get too full of yourself, let me just take a moment to remind you that you did not scale these heights alone. You had family and friends to hold you when you needed holding, to guide you when you needed guiding, and to kick you in the pants when you needed your perspective rearranged.
Now, before you get too full of yourself, let me just take a moment to remind you that as a human being you are a social mammal, and as such, you did not scale these heights alone. You had family and friends to hold you when you needed holding, to guide you when you needed guiding, and to kick you in the pants when you needed your perspective rearranged. And, I don’t know of any learned person, who, at some point, did not have that one special teacher to provide a spark that ignited the boundless possibilities that come with pursuing a life of the mind. So I want to thank those family members, friends, and teachers who have helped make our inductees who they are today. I applaud the important role each of you played in making this moment possible for them.

...for as smart as you are,
I can tell you now – you don't know anything.

Phi Beta Kappa — those are the initials to a phrase that can be translated as: “Love of learning is the guide of life.” I can only imagine what it must have been like for those five students at the College of William and Mary when they established this society back in 1776; how doing so in that specific year must not have been a coincidence; how they must have looked around them and saw what could be accomplished by smart and energetic people devoted to the principles that underlie the liberal arts: freedom of inquiry, liberty of thought, and the pursuit of creative expression. You should be honored to be admitted to a society whose ideals are as great as these.

Each of you is so smart, motivated, charming and attractive — all qualities I admittedly lack. So in the brief 90 minutes that I have to talk to you today — what can I tell you that you don't already know? Well, one reason I don't feel too much like a fraud standing up here and talking to you today is that for as smart as you are (and you would not be in Phi Beta Kappa if you weren't) — for as smart as you are, I can tell you now — you don't know anything.

I paraphrase our former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who, when once asked about the situation in the Middle East, said: There are things we know we know, there are things we know we don't know, there are things we don't know we know, and there are things we don't know we don't know. But he left out one very important category: Things you think you know but you don't. I want to spend just a few minutes telling you about a few things that fall into that last category — things you think you know but you don't. Let's call them myths — myths that you probably believe — myths that right now could be making you anxious — myths that might have you questioning whether you should be included in the company of such Phi Beta Kappa alumni as John Quincy Adams, Samuel Morse, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Theodore Roosevelt, W.E.B. DuBois, John D. Rockefeller, Pearl Buck, Jonas Salk, Susan Sontag, John Updike, Gloria Steinem, Angela Davis, Condeleeza Rice, Sonia Sotomayor, and perhaps most importantly, Peyton Manning.
The Myths

There are many, many, of these myths, but let me just briefly clear up six of them for you.

1. The myth of early commitment
You belong in Phi Beta Kappa even if you haven't yet figured out what you want to do with your life. (Parents, cover your ears). I hope most of you haven't figured out what you want to do with your life. If some of you have figured it out, fine, that’s great — just don’t be so damn smug about it. Remember that you don’t get a special place in heaven for being the first in figuring out what you want to do with your life. In fact, you should take your entire life to figure out what you want to do with it. I hear people say that a great university takes an undecided freshman and makes her a decided graduate. That is false. A great university takes a decided freshman and makes her undecided for the rest of her life — because the kind of education that does that, a liberal arts education, prepares you for anything and everything.

2. The myth of passionate commitment
You belong in Phi Beta Kappa even if you don't really love any field of study. We are very fond of saying that you should use your undergraduate years to experiment and find your passion. And so then you try lots of stuff and find out that you have yet to find something that makes your tail wag. There is nothing wrong with that. People often say to do what you love — but they are the ones who do what they love. It is just as okay to love what you do. Most importantly, it is okay to neither love what you do nor do what you love. You can just do stuff — and you will still be wonderfully successful.

3. The myth of self-awareness
You belong in Phi Beta Kappa even if you are a quivering mass of indecision and stress. I know you look at the people around you and think “Wow — they really have their act together... I wish that was me...but instead I am this quivering mass of indecision and stress.” Realize that they are looking back at you seeing someone with their act together. We are all quivering masses of indecision and stress. We just can't always see it in others.

4. The myth of mistakes, learning from
You belong in Phi Beta Kappa even if you find that you do not learn from your mistakes. You will not learn from your mistakes. All the mistakes you make today you will continue to make again and again and again, for the rest of your life. The best you can hope for is that you will be able to see ahead of time the mistakes you are about to make — and then say: “Yep, here I go again.” Take comfort in that knowledge.

5. The myth of happiness, pursuit of
You belong in Phi Beta Kappa even if you find you are not happy all the time. Madison Avenue ad agencies have brainwashed you into thinking that there is something wrong with you because you are not deliriously happy happy happy 24/7. It is how they sell you luxury cars and teeth whiteners and antidepressants. You will not be happy all the time. At best, you will have a few little crumbs of happiness in an otherwise stressful and anxious life. But that is okay. You are a mammal and you have evolved not for happiness but for struggle. Get some crumbs of happiness by knowing that.

6. The myth of “those other people”
You belong in Phi Beta Kappa even if you go to their website and see all of the great accomplishments of “those other people” who came before you in Phi Beta Kappa — U.S. Presidents, Supreme Court judges, astronauts, leaders of the arts, of industry, of academia, pro football quarterbacks, etc. Don’t look around thinking that “those other people” out there are going to be the ones changing the world. The reality is that YOU are “those other people.” YOU are the world changers.
So, in conclusion, if you haven’t figured out what you want to do with your life, unsure of where your passion lies, full of anxiety and stress, failing to learn from your mistakes, not particularly happy, and sure that you will never make an important contribution in the world — congratulations — this is what success looks like. You could not be more on track for greatness. And my guess would be that you are also exactly like every person ever inducted into Phi Beta Kappa. So I want to extend my sincere congratulations to each of you. Being elected to membership in Phi Beta Kappa is a tremendous achievement, but with such honor comes responsibility. You have excelled at USC because you have been given a great gift. I challenge you to use that gift to go do great things and change the world.

Thank you.

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About the Phi Beta Kappa Society

Founded on December 5, 1776, Phi Beta Kappa is the nation’s oldest academic honor society. Phi Beta Kappa originated as a secret society at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. The Society was named after Greek-letter initials, BK, of a secret Greek motto which translates to “Love of learning is the guide of life.” The Society set the tradition of naming collegiate societies after Greek initials which has been adopted by American college fraternities and sororities.

The symbol of Phi Beta Kappa is a golden key bearing three stars, a pointing finger and the Greek initials of the Society. The stars represent three distinguishing principles of the Society: friendship, morality and learning; and the pointing finger, ambition. On the reverse, the initials SP stand for the Latin words Societas Philosophiae, or “Philosophical Society.”

Since inception, 280 chapters have been established at America’s leading colleges and universities. About only ten percent of academic institutions in the United States belong to a chapter.

USC belongs to the Epsilon Chapter of California and was founded in 1929. Every year about five to ten percent of the arts and sciences undergraduates are selected for membership and are inducted at an initiation ceremony.

Students who are elected to the Society represent excellence in the liberal arts and sciences. They demonstrate intellectual integrity, tolerance for other views, and a broad range of academic interests. Among those who have been inducted into the Society are 17 U.S. Presidents, 37 U.S. Supreme Court Justices, and 131 Nobel Laureates.

The selectivity of membership, as well as the society’s rich history, are the reasons that Phi Beta Kappa is considered among the most prestigious American college honor societies.