

“A little learning is a dangerous thing”

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Prof. Dr. Berktaş warned after Alexander Pope, 18th Century British poet, “Drink deep or drink not of the Pierian Spring,”

» Ibn Haldun University Head of History Department Prof. Dr. Halil Berktaş gave the inaugural lecture that emphasized the significance of self-cultivation to an enthusiastic group of undergraduate students on the first day of the 2017-2018 academic year:

Young men and women, one way or the other, you have made it into college. Now what are you going to do with this? What is it that you want? Are you here to pursue learning? Are you here, perhaps, to search for yourselves; who you are, who you want to be or who you are supposed to be? Or are you here just to get a diploma, a certificate, some useful piece of paper, and to make an exit that way?

Far be it from me to deny the importance of a diploma. Such certificates are crucial, indispensable, for the struggle to survive, to pursue a career, to make a living in this tough modern world. The modern research university was born in the early-19th century; the new University of Berlin was the first of its kind. It was a response to the double impact of the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, which together resulted in both a new kind of public space, and an immense proliferation of professions, far beyond the needs and requirements of traditional agrarian societies, for all of which conditions of entry needed to be strictly defined. Over time, as modernity has kept developing, so have universities, colleges, or all other kinds of institutions of higher education; new fields of scholarly inquiry have emerged, new sciences, new fields and sub-fields, all of which have been organized into new departments and diploma programs. One thing, however, has not changed; indeed, it has become deeper and stronger if anything -- a fundamental sense of universities as institutions absolutely necessary for any society in terms of the endogenous production and reproduction of knowledge, without which countries can neither educate and train their elites, nor supply the requisite kinds and quantities of highly skilled human resources for each and every sector of a 21st century economy. Not everybody can be a Bill Gates or a Steve Jobs or a Mark Zuckerberg, by which I mean all those famous names that are wholly superficially and misleadingly held up as examples of the supposedly non-necessary nature of a university education on the dubious grounds that if they could develop Microsoft or Apple or Facebook without a BA or BSc, you too can find your own way to becoming a young multi-billionaire. Leave aside the existential question of whether making such big money is a desirable end in itself. Simply remember that for each such unique and exceptional example, there are tens of millions out there whose lives depend on a proper university education, a proper diploma, a proper license or certificate.



But is that all? Is that what university, and therefore this university, too, is going to be for you: just a ticketing machine that will somehow issue a license for you to enter this or that profession? Bear in mind, please, that in order to be able to do even just that, the university has to set up and maintain a huge, an immense universe of learning way beyond what we each need individually for our narrow purposes, a whole mountain of knowledge only a tiny portion of which we can hope to consume. That is the heart of the matter -- a universe of learning, which you are now expected to dive and immerse yourselves in, as if stepping into the deep ocean. Just how are you going to go about it, if I may ask? Do you think that since you have managed to put your foot inside the door, the rest is going to be a quick-in, quick-out affair? That you'll be able to take it easy, grousing about the need to read a hundred pages at one go, instead preferring to get a friend to give you the gist of it, or attending not all but only some courses, occasionally but not always bothering to take notes, believing against belief that come exam time you will somehow turn out to have retained everything? Or will you keep boasting to your classmates, in middle or high school fashion, that you have studied just enough to get a 60 or a 70 or a 75, whatever, because you actually need only a 52 or a 68 to pass? An obvious question, of course, would be about whether you can possibly calculate precisely how much work you need to do in order to get by with “just enough” papers in the 60s or 70s. Leave aside the sheer absurd impossibility of it; what is far more problematic is the underlying philosophy, its minimalist approach to life. Are you going to persist in such delusions? Or are you going to make do with whatever standard fare you might be served? In Turkish culture, unfortunately, there is a deeply ingrained habit of just accepting anything that happens to be placed in front of you at a given time. The state, the government, politics, this or

that institution, a private or a public university... They all invite you to a set

with just consulting these and nothing else? Displayed on our departmental web sites are sample courses of study. Will that be enough for you, so that you can smugly say: “Well, I have fulfilled all the basic requirements for a HIST or POLS BA, or for a Turkish Studies or Theology MA; what else is left for me to do?” Or are you going to try and taste other things? Is life always about following the line of least resistance? Back in my youthful years, I used to be an avid sports fan, something of an armchair expert on track and field. In the 60s and 70s, I was keenly aware of how most Turkish athletes were trying to train as little as possible. Today globalization and international competition have led to significant change. But at the time, their horizons were limited to local meets, that is to say to the domestic market. Hence they would set mediocre targets for themselves, and approach training as a loathsome burden instead of embracing it willingly, enthusiastically, as the sine qua non of success. Middle or long distance runners, instead of hitting the road for 30 miles a day, would come back after just 15; on track, they would do 10 instead of 20 x 400 repeats. Sprinters would be happy with winning the national 100-metre championship in 10.5 seconds; they would not even think of moving up to the 400 or even 800 meters with that kind of low basic speed. Without realizing it they were deceiving themselves all the time. Because when you are in an actual race and the gun goes, you cannot possibly deceive your rivals, nor for that matter your own body; it will show that you are not ready, or that you shouldn't be there in the first place.

There is this Alexander Pope, a famous English poet, wit and essayist in the early-18th century. Born in 1688, he was only 23 when he wrote a verse Essay on Criticism, all 744 lines of it. Included are two couplets where he talks of thick versus thin knowledge. In ancient mythology, somewhere in Macedonia there was supposed to be a region called Pieria, home to the legendary Pierian Spring, whose magical waters were believed to impart divine knowledge, wisdom and inspiration to any mortal who might drink of it. So “A little learning is a dangerous thing / Drink deep or drink not of the Pierian Spring,” Pope warned. That was in 1711, on the threshold of the Enlightenment. I had a very good friend in my high school years at Robert College, where I was part of a “gang of four” with three other kids who were a year below me. I belonged to the Class of '64, and though they were all class of '65, for one reason or another we became very close and spent a lot of our time together outside class. This one person that I'm talking about stood out in all kinds of ways. In an age when grade inflation was unknown, with teachers not putting the whole class on some logarithmic curve but just issuing absolute marks, he may well have recorded the highest GPAs ever in the history of Robert College, graduating with 97.5 or above. At the end of the school year, he would purchase next year's mathematics textbooks, read them and understand them all by himself, and solve all their problems; this is what he most enjoyed over the summer. But it was not just studiousness; he was also cerebral and spiritual in other ways. They had

this family mansion, he later told me, where his grandfather (who may have been a

rustic, while his father, who was a famous cardiologist, inhabited the middle floor with his collection of Western classical music, so that my friend went back and forth between the two and somehow managed to merge both in his own inner world. In time we all graduated, with one person from my year (i.e. I myself as the class second) going on to Yale and another friend, our perennial class first, going to Harvard. Then from the Class of '65 this time two were admitted to Yale and two to Harvard, so that our gang of four was able to regroup on the Boston - New Haven axis. The chap that I'm talking about was among those that ended up at Harvard. In the US law and medicine are studied at the postgraduate level. Hence this kid, too, first did a pre-med degree before attending medical school; climbing his way up the academic ladder, in time he emerged as a world-famous physician. In 1997, when I was still at Boğaziçi University and my wife at Istanbul University, we managed to put together two Fulbright half-scholarships to take a year's sabbatical at Harvard. And of course I immediately called up with my dear old friend; this was twenty years ago, so we were both fiftyish, though he did warn me over the phone that he had gone completely white. They promptly invited us over for dinner, and after we got up from the table, the first thing he did was to ask me to make a list of the twenty best history books that I thought he should read. While writing, I asked: What do you do with your time anyway? “Six days a week,” he replied. “I get up at 6 in the morning to go to the hospital [Mass General, or Massachusetts General Hospital, which is the biggest and most famous of Harvard Medical School hospitals] where I do three or four procedures through the day. It is usually 11 pm by the time I get back.” What about Sundays, I said, just to keep up the conversation, and without expecting any distinctive response. He blushed. Whatever was visible of his face between his mop of snow-white hair and his snow-white beard turned a deep red. “I do my math homework.” What?! “You know,” he explained, “math was always my first love, and I actually came to Harvard to do mathematical physics, though it was my fantastic biochemistry professor who caused me to change my mind and move into medicine. Nevertheless, I was never quite done with math, and recently I decided to have a go at doing a math PhD; it's been a few years now.” The person who was saying all this, let me remind you, was a full professor at Harvard Medical School and simultaneously a senior cardiologist at Mass General. But it wasn't enough for him, as a result of which he had started taking night classes at Boston's Northeastern University; by 1997, it turned out, he was working on his dissertation because he had already finished his course-work. We returned to Istanbul in early 1998, while he was recruited by the University of Texas at Austin, though he seems not to have liked it there, for he subsequently moved to Columbia, and New York. That was where I saw him last year; he had completed his mathematics PhD, which he had done purely for the love of it, long ago. Dear people, dear students, this is not some kind of fairy tale but a true story, without an iota of fiction or exaggeration. Of course, not everybody can be so exorbitantly talented as my old high school friend. Genius must have its due. Still, for us more ordinary mortals, too, there might be a few things to learn from him, as from Alexander Pope three centuries ago. Boundless curiosity. Never giving up. Always asking for more... Thank you for your patience.