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The Unruly Pilot: Address to New Members of Phi Beta Kappa (Theta of Minnesota), April 23, 2014

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Recommended Citation

Herzfeld, Noreen L., "The Unruly Pilot: Address to New Members of Phi Beta Kappa (Theta of Minnesota), April 23, 2014" (2014). *Phi Beta Kappa Lectures*. 1.
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The Unruly Pilot
Phi Beta Kappa Induction
St. John's University
23 April, 2014

Fellow members of Phi Beta Kappa, I am honored that you asked me to address you today.

First, congratulations to those who have been newly inducted into this society. Your academic achievements and the esteem in which your peers and teachers hold you are things of which you should rightfully be proud.

You join a society that honors your achievements in the liberal arts and sciences, an elite group of men and women that includes luminaries as diverse as presidents Bill Clinton and George H. W. Bush, Condoleeza Rice and Paul Bernanke, Glen Close, Jeff Bezos, Peyton Manning, or, going back a bit more in time, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Mark Twain, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Oliver Wendell Holmes. There's even a Playboy bunny in the mix, who posed for a cover wearing not much more than her Phi Beta Kappa key.

As you heard, Phi Beta Kappa was the first fraternity, founded in 1776—guys from the College of William and Mary who sat around their local tavern, think Sal's, sometimes drinking and sometimes debating, trying to get their bearings in a country that had just gone to war. They chose a motto for their society, *Philosophia Biou Kubernetes*, and, at that time, kept it secret by using just the initial letters of those three words, Phi Beta Kappa.

Philosophia Biou Kubernetes. Let's look at that motto, which is now your motto. *Philosophia* is pretty obvious. *Biou* is the genitive form of *bios*, think biology, biosphere, biography, in other words, life. The third word, *kubernetes* signifies the pilot of a ship. The Latin version is *gubernator*, from which we derive our word governor. The one in charge. (By the way, the computer scientist in me also has to point out that *kubernetes* shares its root with the Greek word *kubernetike*, cybernetics, a rare word used by Plato, and revived fifty years ago to describe the science of governing or controlling by . . . you guessed it, computers.)

Put it all together: *Philosophia Biou Kubernetes*, “love of learning, life’s pilot.” You have already demonstrated a love of learning. This love will be the pilot of your ship of life. In ancient Greece, and still today, it is customary for a pilot who knows the dangers that lurk in a particular harbor to board a ship as it approaches, take over the helm, and guide the ship in. The captain relinquishes control of the ship to this pilot. By joining Phi Beta Kappa, you are promising to relinquish the helm of your life to the pilot of continual learning. However, before you do, I want to give you three warnings about that pilot:

1. First of all, you have no idea where this pilot is going to take you. And, frankly, sometimes it may feel as though your pilot is really a hijacker. When I graduated from St. Olaf and was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa just as you are now I was pretty sure I knew where my life, my professional life, at least, was going. I was off to grad school in mathematics. A love of formal logic led me, not into mathematics, but into computer science. There I thought I was safely harbored, in a field where programs either ran or they didn’t, where problems had right and wrong answers. None of that human messiness for me. But after teaching Artificial Intelligence and Computer Ethics for a while I found that the most interesting questions were about how we humans used computers, and how they used us, and how and why, in artificial intelligence, we wanted them to be like us. Questions I couldn’t answer as a scientist, questions that required the input of the humanities. So, off to Berkeley I went for another degree, this time in religion. Then 9-11 happened, and the courses I had taken in Berkeley on Islam, just to fulfill a requirement, turned out to be what was needed in our curriculum. So I began teaching The Spirituality and Politics of Islam, a class a few of you took. This led to an invitation from Professor Hayes to go to Bosnia, and pretty soon I found myself teaching a class on Religion, Identity, and Conflict, and a few more years later actually teaching in Bosnia. Religion, Identity, and Conflict. So much for my intention of avoiding human messiness! Now I am teaching Great Books in World Religions, reading the Bagavad Gita, the Tao Te Ching, trying to wrap my mind around zen koans . . . I gotta tell you, it’s all a long ways from my neat and clean mathematics with its right and wrong answers. Let that pilot on board and you have no idea where he is going to take you.

2. Second, you have no idea who that pilot is going to be. The best teachers in life may be ones you are pretty reluctant to invite on board. Totally unsavory characters. The Buddhist nun Pema Chodron wryly tells the story of how she was standing in her garden drinking an early morning cup of tea when her husband asked for a divorce seemingly out of the blue. Yet, for her this became the turning point of her life. She writes: “Life is like that. We don’t know anything. We call something bad; we call it good. But really we just don’t know. The very first noble truth of the Buddha points out that suffering is inevitable for human beings as long as we believe that things last . . . and can be counted on to satisfy our hunger for security. . . the only time we ever know what’s really going on is when the rug’s been pulled out and we can’t find anywhere to land.”

In my own life, a promotion for my father took me from the safe and very happy cocoon of a childhood in the Cities to Philadelphia. It was a move I hated, the loss of friends and a neighborhood I knew like the back of my hand, a change from quiet Lutherans to loud South-Philly Italians, from the world of “you betcha” to the world of “youse guys.” I hated it and fled back to Minnesota at the first opportunity. But as I look back now on a life that has contained long stints of living on both coasts as well as a few European countries, I wonder if I would have ever left Minnesota had I not been forced to. A move I hated opened me up to a larger world.

The Sufi poet Rumi sums up the unruliness of some of the teachers life throws at us in his poem, The Guesthouse:

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,

still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice.
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes.
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

3. Third, while some pilots will be all business and head straight into harbor, others are more like Cap'n Billy. They'll put their feet up, light their pipe, and maybe even pop a beer and take their time. Randall Jarell, in his poem, "A Girl in a Library", writes:

The soul has no assignments, neither cooks
Nor referees: it wastes its time. The soul wastes time.
Here in this enclave there are centuries
For you to waste...
The books, just leafed through, whisper endlessly.

Go ahead and let your pilot waste time once in a while. Take an hour in a library, looking at the new acquisitions and letting them whisper to you endlessly. Waste time on-line, letting "way lead onto way", as another poet put it. When you are stuck, read. Anything. Or go for a walk and let the book of nature be your guide. In the process of writing this speech I obviously learned a ton about Phi Beta Kappa and a bit of ancient Greek, thanks to Professor Richardson. I also learned, I kid you not, how to deseed a pomegranate, that a French doctor concluded about a year ago that it's healthy for women to not wear bras (though he says he definitely needs to do further research—gotta love those French), and I read the entirety of T. S. Elliot's Four Quartets. I also gazed out the window at the woods covered with the last snow of winter and took time out to walk in those woods and watch the snow geese head north. Let your pilot kick back once in a while. The soul wastes time.

So, in conclusion, whatever route your pilot takes, you will end up in the harbor of wisdom. And there is no better place, because wisdom will give you the equanimity to see that every guest in your guesthouse is there for a reason, to see that your sorrows and your joys hold deeper truths and that the spirit of God is in each of them. King David prayed "Indeed you love

truth in the heart, then in the secret of my heart teach me wisdom.” I pray that with him every day and I pray it for you. Let the love of learning and the hand of wisdom steer the vessel in which you take your life’s voyage. I cannot guarantee the ride will be smooth nor the harbor the one you expected, but I can guarantee you one thing: it will be one hell of a trip! Welcome aboard.