

**Address to Phi Beta Kappa,  
Alpha Chapter  
University of Wyoming  
April 29, 2016  
David G. Brooks**



Ric, thank you for that kind introduction. Once again, warm congratulations to the Phi Beta Kappa initiates and your family members.

I would like to start by saluting Eric Nye for being elected the first-ever Phi Beta Kappa senator from Wyoming, and for his leadership of this great tradition here at the University of Wyoming.

In the ominous sounding year of 1984, Eric Nye and I nearly passed each other like ships in the night. Eric had just arrived in Laramie with a newly minted doctorate from the University of Chicago. I was in the final two years of my picaresque undergraduate studies. Under Eric's gravitational pull, I became a passionate student of literary criticism. They say the candle burns brightest at the end, and this was true for me, as Eric Nye, Ric Reverend, Walter Eggers, and others got me hooked on the power of language, literature, and critical thinking.

At one point, I gave serious consideration to pursuing graduate studies. However, the lure of jumping back into the human cauldron of China was simply too powerful, so I became a soft drink salesman instead. Was this academia's loss or the Chinese beverage industry's gain? Or perhaps the reverse? Today, I invite you to judge whether my address is a cautionary tale about the value of a liberal arts education, or a story of redemption.

Let me tell you why I am so grateful to speak to you today. Two months ago I was still a resident of Shanghai, living behind what is known as the Great Firewall of China. China's digital great wall blocks Google, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, the *New York Times*, and many other sites deemed untrustworthy. However, news still gets through, like water seeping into dry, cracked ground finds a way to the roots below.

Several recent news reports caught my attention. One was about a proposal by a U.S. state governor to stop funding scholarships for the study of French because this language had no practical value. The second was a statement by Presidential candidate Marco Rubio calling for the U.S. education system to produce "more welders, and fewer philosophers."

Sitting at my desk in Shanghai, these reports struck a nerve. Frankly, they reminded me of the simplistic Orwellian slogans employed during the Cultural Revolution in China, a time when blind ideology triumphed over common sense. I was especially struck by the story of the Governor trying to kill funding for French studies because of another story that is very important to me.

In the late 1940s, a boy with round rim glasses and a sturdy crew cut took a bus every day from Sinclair across the plains of southeastern Wyoming to attend high school in the thriving metropolis of Rawlins. On afternoons after school, the boy made pocket money by catching rattlesnakes in the hills around the little company town with the big green dinosaur sign that was his world. He was growing up on an island in a sea of grass and sage. In other words, a typical Wyoming childhood; perhaps some of you share similar stories. This was taking place at the height of an era some call the “American Century.”

The boy from Sinclair later attended this university, where his passions pointed him to a major in Speech and Drama, with a minor in French. One thing led, as they say, to another. Due to his academic achievements and his French studies, this child of Wyoming qualified to study in France on a Fulbright scholarship after graduation from UW. Following two years in France, he then began a career as a U.S. diplomat. His first posting was in Vientiane, Laos, where his French skills were put to immediate use. In this tiny country, he earned a reputation for being a “barefoot diplomat,” skilled at engaging people from every walk of society, from village chiefs to senior officials: the antithesis of an “ugly American.”

He even took part in a dramatic rescue of American hostages, leading to an award from the State Department in 1960. Even more dramatically, he later married one of ladies he had rescued, a brave girl from Malden, Mass., who was working with the U.S. Agency for International Development in Laos. To this day, his humble confidence is the single biggest reason he is my ultimate hero.

His time in Indochina led naturally to curiosity about the “big neighbor” to the north, so he started Chinese language studies. This led to a fascinating career as a China expert representing the United States in our diplomatic re-engagement with China before, during, and after Nixon’s historic visit in 1972. This re-engagement and the “Open Door policy” it enabled within China proved to be one of the most fundamental shifts in modern history.

So when Eric Nye invited me to speak to Phi Beta Kappa today, it was impossible for me not to think about the story of my father, Stan Brooks. During the lifetime of the little boy from Sinclair, China went from being an isolated pauper hiding behind a great wall to a rising world power. Today, with 20% of the world’s population, China is no longer an isolated, geographically defined territory on a map. “China” (in the expansive definition of this noun that I prefer to imagine) is engaging with the other 80% of the people in the world in every imaginable way: in-bound and

outbound investment, imports, exports, education, emigration, global warming, regional and global security. In 2016, China is your neighbor for better or for worse, whether you live in Leuven or in Laramie, and whether you intend to learn Chinese or not.

As the son of the boy from Sinclair, I lived my father's life in reverse. After growing up as a child of the world in Taiwan, Nepal, Beijing, and Hong Kong, I decided to attend university here in Laramie. Why? Because despite being raised around the world, Wyoming was my natural home. This was a transformative choice for me. As an English major here at UW, I learned a lot about Thomas Hardy and Charles Dickens, tried to decipher Jacques Derrida, and I learned how to write a clear sentence. Footnote: and yes, I learned about rock climbing, rodeo, keggers, and cowgirls, although not necessarily in that order. The University of Wyoming helped me fill in the pages of my American passport with vivid experiences about what it really means to be an American living in America. That's at the core of who I am as a person.

During my junior year, to improve my then basic Chinese language skills, I attended Taiwan National University on a UW exchange program. *Mon Dieu!* I even studied French in Hoyt Hall, never imagining that two years later I would fall madly in love with a girl from Brussels. Phi Beta Kappa initiates, the lesson is clear: pay attention in *all* of your classes, as you never know which subject will provide the most useful over time!

After graduation I leveraged my Chinese language skills to start my working career in Hong Kong and Shanghai. After disabusing myself of the idea of becoming a lawyer, I joined Coca-Cola in China during the early days of the company's business there.

During my very first week in the company, I was asked to interpret for Donald R. Keough, the company's president during a three-day visit to Shanghai. Mr. Keough was a charismatic Irishman with a jet-engine voice and a natural talent for connecting with people. I was a brand new employee with a UW undergrad diploma and a decent competence in Chinese, but not much else.

During our visits to local retail stores on Huaihai Road, Mr. Keough shook hands, smiled for photos, and engaged Chinese customers in his folksy but focused way. In many of the stores, he would end the visit by asking the customers if they had considered installing a Coca-Cola fountain unit in their stores. "Fountain" as in "soda fountain," dispensing drinks not from a bottle or can, but from a counter-top dispenser. For the president of a beverage company with the motto of being "within arm's reach of desire," this was a well-honed selling pitch.

The first, then the second, then the third Chinese customers were clearly taken aback by Mr. Keough's friendly suggestion. They all laughed, as Chinese will often do

when embarrassed. In the moment, I ascribed this to a lack of exposure to the ways of capitalism. Mr. Keough looked at me quizzically a few times but let it pass.

A few weeks later I realized that my Chinese was good enough to be dangerous, in this case to my own career prospects! Interpreting for the president of the world's leading beverage company, I had asked the customers if they would like to have a "large ornamental water fountain" installed in their stores; something more appropriate to a garden in Versailles or a piazza in Rome than a crowded retail shop in Shanghai! Fortunately, I survived this and many other quixotic mis-adventures.

Without a doubt, language skills and a liberal arts education made my career possible. As each year of my career passed, I increasingly valued the power of language either to empower breakthroughs or trigger huge misunderstandings. Language is truly at the heart of everything.

My liberal arts-based undergraduate education equipped me to have a sensibility for the wider context for any given situation, and to be curious about how other people perceive "reality." The study of English enabled me to craft meaningful narratives that made sense from a Chinese perspective, or South African perspective, or a Bulgarian perspective, not just my own.

A case in point: in China, the 2008 Beijing Olympics were actually *not* about either Beijing or the 16 days of the Summer Olympic Games. Instead, this was a moment of affirmation for Chinese people in the context of the "story" of the past 200 years of China's history, as perceived from their unique perspective. The insights required to unlock this cultural puzzle came directly out of a liberal arts toolkit of skills.

My career often involved starting new organizations and teams. Therefore, being adept at the skills required to create "shared frameworks for meaningful action" has been invaluable. This involves collectively asking and then answering some basic human questions: Where are we? What is going on? Why? Where do we go next? How will we get there, and how will we work together on the way? It turns out a decent undergraduate degree in English or philosophy makes you well-qualified to wrestle with questions like these in a public way.

Back to my story: firstly, I don't believe we were in an "American Century" back when my dad was catching rattlesnakes in the hills around Sinclair, or even when I attended UW in the early '80s, just a few years before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Secondly, after spending 30 years living and working in China, neither do I believe we are witnessing the cusp of a "China Century," as some pundits say.

Although the United States still has disproportionate economic and cultural influence at the end of the day 95% of the people in the world live somewhere else, and most of them think and speak in a native language that is not English. Even China, with a stupendous 1.37 billion citizens, is still only 20% of the world's people, although it is growing more deeply engaged (and entangled) with the other 80%

every passing day. It is true that the “other 95%” spend a lot of time and energy trying to understand us here in America. Some of them speak English, and many yearn to learn our language. Ultimately, however, our ability to deeply understand other people requires us to engage them on their own terms, and in their own languages.

Instead, I believe we are in a “Global Century.” This is a period characterized by trans-national, global opportunities and challenges. Ask the Tibetan herder with his iPhone 6, or the Greek islander on the beaches of Lesbos, or the African villager living next to a Chinese mining project in Gabon, or the Pacific islander faced with rising sea levels, or the Wyoming rancher affected by changes in global commodity prices. Connectedness and interdependence, in direct and indirect ways, are clearly the signature themes of our time.

In this country, there seems to be a lot of talk these days about building walls. That’s sad, and futile. History tells us that most of the walls we humans have built did not hold back the tides of change for very long. Think of the walls of Troy, or the Maginot Line, or the Berlin Wall. The wall I am most familiar with is the Great Wall of China. It is a truly awe-inspiring barrier, and a wonderful place to hike. It deserves to be called “great,” but it did not work: China’s Yuan dynasty was founded by the Mongols, who came across the wall. China’s last dynasty, the Qing, was also founded by invaders from the north, the Manchu.

This brings me to the Phi Beta Kappa initiates here today. Instead of wasting our energy building walls, we all need to build valuable skills and minds. The Phi Beta Kappa members and initiates here today exemplify the value of building skills through their commitment to excellence in the liberal arts. Phi Beta Kappa members understand and respect the power of education.

As individuals, and as a country, we need to build the full range of skills required for this interconnected world. It’s not about a *reductio ad absurdum* argument about “more welders, less philosophers,” or “less chemical engineering, more languages.” In fact, we need more welders who are comfortable making complex arguments. I would modestly propose that we also need more philosophers who know their acetylene gas from their argon. And if our learned welder can also master Arabic or Chinese or Spanish or German or Farsi, that will almost certainly make him or her a hot commodity in the job market.

Somewhere along the way, this became a zero-sum debate: “STEM vs. Liberal Arts.” My personal experience tells me this is a false dichotomy. Yes, you do need to graduate with a specific degree. Sadly, PhDs are not normally granted in the field of “undecided.” It does pay to specialize, but that specializing does not mean you need to build a wall around yourself.

We need more people with skills learned through a traditional liberal arts course of study, such as languages, to engage people from other countries and cultures on

their own terms, not ours. We need people who are comfortable dealing with ambiguity and with complexity. We need people who know how to listen well. We need people who are able to communicate persuasively to others who have very different assumptions and beliefs. We also need more engineers, and geologists, and coders and scientists with these same skills. It's not an "either/or" argument. We need vibrant liberal arts programs *and* strong STEM programs, especially here at the University of Wyoming. In other words, we need more people like you in Phi Beta Kappa.

I know I'm preaching to the choir. But if a kid from Sinclair, Wyoming, today is to have the same chances a kid from Sinclair, Wyoming, did back in the '40s, then this is something we must fight for.

I know that is exactly what Phi Beta Kappa members are doing, and that is exactly what we must all do if we want the next generation of Wyoming kids and University of Wyoming graduates to succeed.

So far, I have shared my reflections on the value of languages and the liberal arts in the world, and in a working career outside of the ivory tower. However, for me, there is another value, so I want to share one last story.

Last October, my father and I made a tour around England, searching out the mining towns where our English ancestors lived in Devon and the North Country. One morning in the Lake District, I set off at 4:30 am to climb Helvellyn, the third highest mountain in England. Here in Wyoming, we would grudgingly call it a hill. Climbing a winding stone stair by moonlight, I followed high walls of stone snaking up the hillside just meters away, silent testament to centuries of human habitation and effort.

I traversed a spine of sharp rock called the "Striding Edge" just as the sun rose above the horizon. Then I bounded up to a small cairn of stones carefully poised at the summit... just in time to bask in the full rays of a glorious sunrise, which illuminated Ullswater and other lakes of the district in every direction. It was one of those moments of natural beauty that radiates a deep sense of calm and transports you beyond the limits of your being.

At that moment, and during the walk down the mountain to meet my father, I was genuinely filled with gratitude for having studied liberal arts here at the University of Wyoming. In the early hours of that stunning morning, I had not walked alone. The spirits of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge were alongside me. Their beautifully expressed reflections on the Lake District and Helvellyn itself colored my own experience in powerful, inexpressible ways. That glorious dawn, my thoughts were connected to the experience of other human beings who had taken the same path before me.

I can't put a price tag on that state of being, or swear an oath that I will be able to make a better contribution to our competitiveness as a nation as a result of my experience that morning. However, I can honestly state that it was unforgettable, and it made my life better: for me, one morning climb fully paid off my decision to study English here at the University of Wyoming.

In closing, being here today provides me with a chance to say "thank you" to people who touched my life and made it better. I am so grateful to that little boy from Sinclair who studied French and did so well at UW; his choices made my life possible. Thanks, Dad.

I am deeply grateful to Eric Nye, an inspired teacher who introduced me to the lifelong pleasures of intellectual curiosity. I am grateful to the University of Wyoming. This is where I learned to be an American, and this is the place that prepared me for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in the wide world far beyond Laramie, so that I could return here one day.

Finally, I am grateful to be with this special group of people gathered in Laramie today, people who are determined to help Wyoming thrive in this Global Century.

Congratulations, Phi Beta Kappa initiates and your families. My father and I are truly honored to become alumni members of Phi Beta Kappa. Thank you for having us here today.

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