

# In Each Pause I Hear the Call

Governor Mark Gordon

I suppose it is never a good thing to start off a talk by bastardizing Ralph Waldo Emerson, but the thought expressed in the following stanza from “Walden” published in a 1904 edition of Poems caught my attention when I was a freshman in college. It reads,

“How drearily in College hall  
The Doctor stretched the hours,  
**But in each pause we heard the call**  
Of robins out of doors.”

Now truth be told, at the time I was sitting in English class looking through an open window at one particularly delightful afternoon. I was probably thinking about going fishing no doubt or possibly climbing – anything outdoors. I love my home mountain range, the Big Horns and try to get into them as often as possible. So that line, “But in each pause we heard the call of robins out of doors,” resonated at the time.

In the fullness of time, however, it is the phrase, “In each pause I heard the call,” that kept bouncing around in my mind as my life has progressed. It was in fact those very words which came to mind when Professor Nye invited me to share some remarks with you today about what a liberal arts education has meant to me.

Those words describe a lifelong love of learning that was instilled in me as a child and was nurtured by an education that covered science, literature, music, religion, athletics, French and German – even Latin, where I was the victim of a different approach to teaching Latin from the standard *Jenny hic hiec hoc, horum, horum, horum* my peers were learning. We were learning Latin as a conversational language – a really practical pursuit. From all of that, I do remember *semper ubi sub ubi* – always wear underwear.

There is something in phrasing, in punctuation, and in the setting that brings meaning and life to words, just as Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. said, “A word is not a crystal, transparent and unchanged; it is the skin of a living thought and may vary greatly in color and content according to the circumstances and time in which it is used.”

For me the “call” of my youth for the outdoors has gained meaning. In each pause these days, I am anxious to know more about our world, to understand more about her peoples and cultures, and to appreciate more fully my opportunities to make it better.

I am a historian by education. My principle field of study was Europe pre-World War I. I am fascinated by that period of history. I think of it as a time when there were so many exciting and optimistic things being invented and trends being forged. There was incredible new knowledge, unbelievable new technology, “evolution” was new thinking and infused nearly everything. We had

confidence that science would inform our world and our future could not be brighter. The world was changing. Even society would evolve “scientifically” to a utopia where “from each according to ability to each according to need” would govern the affairs of mankind.

I mention this period of time because comparing broadly the circumstances, the expectations, the confidence, and the course of history at the time, one can find interesting parallels with our time. But there was a whole bunch of fascinating things to study in that time as well.

I was particularly curious why, when so much good was happening, the era ended with “the War to End All Wars.” A war in which a soccer game was played between opposing sides on a Christmas Eve, to be followed within a few months with the most ghastly carnage the world had ever seen up until that time. Where the chivalry and all that civilization seemed to promise would be replaced with profligacy, ruination, greed, and in the end depression. I was fascinated with how it was Russia, not Western Europe that proceeded first to become communist and that the Bolshevik Revolution would occasion so much optimism and creativity in the arts that foreshadowed much that would come later elsewhere only to see that freedom crushed in time in the tyranny of a totalitarian regime of a megalomaniac.

To me that is what a liberal arts education offers. It offers a remarkable tool kit to investigate the world. It offers the ability to turn curiosity into knowledge, knowledge into perspective, and perspective into considered action.

In each pause, I hear the call to learn something more about our history, our art, our world, its flora, fauna and how they interact. It gives us tools to think about climate and culture and perhaps even a glimpse of our future. It can give us insights into our fallibility as well.

I think back to the age between 1890 when Wyoming became a state and today. Over the course of the first 100 of those years, technology advanced more profoundly than perhaps at any time in our history, society changed radically, and we built the foundations of new systems government we are still trying to understand today. We developed an appreciation of the natural world that would eventually inform almost everything we do today. And we built a dependence on technology that was absolute and misplaced. For example, the unsinkable Titanic sunk in 1912 ferrying thousands of immigrants among others to the land of opportunity.

Robert Gordon, no relation but a professor at Northwestern University, has written an extensive tome called “The Rise and Fall of American Growth” in which he compares the amazing advances of those first 100 years roughly extending from the end of the Civil War, when Wyoming was just a Territory, to the technological revolutions of today. He concludes that moving from horse drawn transportation to modern aircraft, from washboards to washing machines, and from the Pony Express to email have all improved our standard of living dramatically. He wonders though, if the hyperbole of the information age which matches that of the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century can deliver the same benefits over the next 100 years. It is a question predicated on whether the iPhone of today is a better tracker of steps than that of 10 years ago – and indeed if that information is that valuable anyway.

It is an interesting question for us to solve. Where technology leads us is still a bit unclear. It is stunning that today our President or anyone for that matter can instantaneously and simultaneously

communicate with Vladimir Putin, a villager in Argentina, and a fisherman off the coast of Florida really anywhere in the world directly, where news is streamed live, but perhaps more filtered by bias than when fewer outlets felt more responsibility to deliver just the facts. It is a wonderment that today, using the CRISPR cascading protein, we can edit DNA to create new lifeforms -- in a word to play god? And isn't it fantastic that artificially intelligent, machine learning, robots can take the place of monotonous back breaking labor and do the job better more often than humans can? Our technological advancements today, what we can do or get done for us, is in many ways outstripping our own ability to think about what it is we are doing to ourselves at the same time as we push these frontiers. That is why one must have a liberal arts education.

Sure we can do many things, but should we do all of them, and how should we do any of them? These are essentially human things to consider and one must have a wide perspective.

Another economist, E.F. Schumacher, wrote a couple of decades ago about the need for technological advancement to enhance human endeavor not to replace it. This is a concern lying within a paper Elon Musk, and the late Stephan Hawking both signed with many others entitled "Research Priorities for Robust and Beneficial Artificial Intelligence: An Open Letter." It raised among other considerations the following,

"we could one day lose control of AI systems via the rise of superintelligences that do not act in accordance with human wishes – and that such powerful systems would threaten humanity. Are such dystopic outcomes possible? If so, how might these situations arise? ...What kind of investments in research should be made to better understand and to address the possibility of the rise of a dangerous superintelligence or the occurrence of an "intelligence explosion"?"

Our ability as a society to apprehend the fascination of what we can possibly do, what we anticipate we will be able to do in the future call now more than ever for us to have a wide range of knowledge, a wide range of experience, and a solid common sense. In each pause, I hear the call.

We need now, perhaps more than ever, to pause and consider, to hear the call to learn more. None of this is easy in the heady times in which we live any more than it was when the elixir of theory fully articulated by the Bolsheviks which postulated that obviously it was Russia that was uniquely obligated to be the catalyst that would catapult the world into a proletarian utopia. It was meant to be so they thought and expressed in the theory of permanent revolution. Yet they were bitterly disappointed that the excitement of the residents of St Petersburg with the overthrow of the Romanovs was squandered on a prolonged drunk the cellars of the Kremlin were opened wide, and not on the betterment of mankind that was supposed to happen.

These days we face similar worries, to my thinking. I have travelled with Uber drivers who cannot find their way in their own home town because they have become so dependent on the GIS in their cellphones. And my daughter has told me about workmates of hers at Stanford who are uncertain of how to find – let alone make – supper due to their reliance on Door Dash and Blue Apron. These are cool technologies, but what have we done to ourselves?

A luddite I am not. However, I do have an ambition for the future of my kids much different than that envisioned in a technological utopia where I receive a "living wage" just for being alive and

machines take care of everything else. We humans need more than just an existence. It is the thought enshrined in our constitution. It is the “the pursuit of happiness” not necessarily the state of happiness. The perils of the latter were considered in Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World.

He said, “There are things known and things unknown, and in between are the doors of perception.” I am delighted to have grown up on a ranch where, in order to be successful, one must have a broad range of knowledge from ecology, to genetics, history, economics, psychology, physiology and obstetrics. There is a touch of marketing and politics involved as well. Ranchers learn from tradition and observation. There is experience and knowledge to be had in our big wide world. And there is critical perspective which comes from embracing both. That perspective becomes ever more essential to success in an evolving time.

In this time, where our communications can reach the farthest extents of the world easily and inexpensively, where anyone can become a news source, the importance of a well and broadly educated populace becomes obvious. We are an amazing species all of us. And we live in a very special place. Understanding that and our opportunities in light of the prospects we are capable of achieving is truly our responsibility. Now more than ever almost every endeavor needs the context of the scope of human experience. As Ezra Pound put it, “Real education must ultimately be limited to those who insist on knowing, the rest is mere sheep-herding.”

I was fortunate to grow up here in Wyoming in a state filled with experience surrounded by folks whose lifelong love of learning was infectious. My education helped me to accept opportunity when it presented itself. I still ranch, but I have also started small businesses, worked for a fortune 500 oil and gas company, served on the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, and the board of the Sierra Club nationally, I have served with Professor Nye on the Wyoming Humanities Council, as State Treasurer and now as Governor. It has been a fascinating experience, and today receiving this honor makes me extraordinarily proud.

Finally, although the notion was the title of two great songs by two amazing musicians K.D. Lang and Duke Ellington, let me leave you with a couplet attributed to Lawrence Ferlinghetti with all due respect to the mores of today against smoking, “Life is like a cigarette, the bigger the drag the more you get!”

Thank you for today, for this honor! Now go do great things!