

President Ed Seidel

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### **Continuing the Relevance of the Liberal Arts: Lessons I've Learned**

It is with great pleasure, a touch of irony, and profound honor that I stand before you today, as we gather to celebrate the induction ceremony of Phi Beta Kappa at the University of Wyoming. This moment is particularly special for me, not only as the President of UW but also as an alum of the College of William and Mary, where the seeds of Phi Beta Kappa were first sown.

I must admit, it is not only an honor, but quite humorous that I find myself being inducted into Phi Beta Kappa now, as a university president, considering my colorful history at William and Mary. Yes, I, your humble President, was once suspended from the very institution where Phi Beta Kappa originated.

I felt speechless when Prof. Joy Landeira informed me that this would be coming. Such is the honor that I know this is. I excitedly texted Kathy Seidel, my former wife from my rambunctious William and Mary days. You see I met Kathy, then Kathy Baker, at the French House where I lived. Yes, we spoke French, or were supposed to, and discussed topics from Sartre's existentialism to how to make pain au chocolat...Kathy actually earned this honor the traditional way, as you all

have, by dedication, hard work, and rigorous intellectual achievement in her major of French literature. Our friends were so proud of her that she earned the honored nickname of “Phi Beta Baker” across the French House.

So when I texted to tell her the news, she texted right back, something like “Wow, 45 years later...I always knew I was smarter than you!”.

In all seriousness, the journey from a rambunctious student at William and Mary to the President of UW is itself is a testament to the transformative power of education, the second chances that life may graciously offer us, and I must say, the enduring power and relevance to our lives of the liberal arts. As an alum of the 2<sup>nd</sup> oldest university in the nation I am reminded of the rich history and tradition that Phi Beta Kappa embodies. Its founding in 1776 during a time of great change and revolution in our nation speaks to the values it embodies – intellectual curiosity, critical inquiry, honest and principled ability to express oneself, the belief in the power of education to transform lives and societies.

Today, in another era where we face incredible change and extraordinary political discord, the liberal arts could not be more relevant. And as society changes, they too will need to come along, to remain central, to remain relevant. At UW we must continue to make certain that this continues to be the case. And we will.

But, what do we mean by liberal arts? No, it has nothing to do with modern day political discourse. It is not liberal, nor conservative. It is something very fundamental. *Liberalis* means (at least according to Wikipedia) “worthy of a free person”. In the era of Pythagoras, the seven liberal arts included subjects like music and mathematics, physics and astronomy, language, literature, public speaking and so on, subjects that were considered essential for a free person to lead an active civic life. *The need to lead an active civic life*—pause a minute to take that in—is a value we carry to the present day.

Simply put, the liberal arts collectively describe who we are, and who we strive to be, with a framework for considering who we need to be in our rapidly changing world, to address problems in our very – oh—let's call it rambunctious-- society--- something I am familiar with since my early colleges days.

So with this, I want to give some examples of how the liberal arts have helped make me who I am today, how they helped transform me, and guide me, how they have been relevant, and critical to me throughout my life.

Back to my college days, or even before that—for many of you, that would be literally before the beginning of time. As a child, I had the great fortune to have an English and History teacher for a mother. While I was always enamored of

science and math, of the space program and Star Trek, my mother ensured that I read books, literature, even poetry. And while I am proud that my profession became that of a physicist, the person I became, including how I see the world, and who I strive to be in it, came more from the books I read, the music I heard, the art I saw, and most importantly, the people I was lucky to have around me.

This is the relevance of the liberal arts.

And now permit me to share with you a few stories---stories being firmly rooted in the liberal arts---from which I have taken many lessons in life.

**Story 1.** When I was just able to read, I still remember reading perhaps my first work of serious literature (to a 5-year-old at least), “Horton Hears a Who”. Do you know that one? Horton the elephant hears voices from a speck of dust. It turns out that there is an entire world, so small it can’t be seen, way down there on that speck, with tiny people. A lesson therein was “a person is a person no matter how small...all entitled to be treated with dignity”. So here we have a lesson in social justice as relevant today as when Horten heard that Who---in our society, we all matter. And we can make a difference. And as a young budding scientist, I also took in the profound lesson of how incredibly small we are in the wondrous enormity of the Universe.

This sense of both meaning, and wonder, and our ability to appreciate them, are part of the enduring relevance of the liberal arts.

Fast forward to high school and to college. I was again very fortunate that my high school best friend was a literary genius---he would drag me to the Newtown library and expose me books by deep thinkers like Nietzsche---an existentialist philosopher. I doubt I really understood that stuff, but it was amazing. Meanwhile my English teacher had us read *L'Etranger*---the Stranger--- by Camus, cementing my lifelong love of philosophy, building a framework for how to consider life.

**Story 2.** Onward I went to college, but rather than behaving as you might expect a future college president to do, I was suspended for misbehaving, came back and failed out. A letter from my Dad - I still remember it verbatim-summarized the situation: "Dear Bug, I am not proud of this fiasco!" That was the whole letter.

Apparently I took a page from the absurdism of Camus --- perhaps an unfortunate application of the relevance of the liberal arts. So I dropped out, went to Switzerland to learn French, found work in a hotel, and read books. Eventually I made it back to William and Mary, where I minored in philosophy, and became enamored of Sartre. And here I learned a lesson that, as I now understand it, truly influenced my life. In Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, he said there is "no inertia

in consciousness". At every moment, we have the freedom to choose who we are, and he described Pierre the waiter. In Sartre's view, Pierre, could be anything he chooses to be. But instead at every moment, he chooses to be a waiter. Pierre, as all of us do, has the freedom to choose. And we must choose who we will be.

For me, this was very deep. You have the freedom not only to express yourself, but in principle, to be who you are. And in my life I have become many different things, from college dropout to president, from black hole physicist and professor to economic development vice president.

**Story 3:** So, knowing I have the freedom to choose, I chose to apply myself, finally graduated from William and Mary---certainly not as a Phi Beta Kappa--- but did manage to end up at Yale in graduate school to study astrophysics. But this isn't a story about astrophysics. No. Kathy became executive assistant to the Chair of the Yale French Dept and Director of the Whitney Humanities Center. And another great fortune of my life occurred: I became right fielder on the Yale French Dept softball team. This became the centerpiece of my social life. Eating New Haven pizza, drinking beer, and playing softball with brilliant students of luminaries like Jacques Derrida and Harold Bloom, and professors like Roberto Gonzalez

Escheverria---who later won the Presidential Humanities Medal from President Obama! But for me, he was our shortstop, who'd played in Cuba!

So there you have it, my most important --- perhaps only real credential--- in the humanities is that I played on this (not very good) softball team. Hanging out daily with them influenced me as a person certainly as much as my physics training.

And I had some small impact on them. I was told by UW Prof. Noah Novogrodsy from UW's law faculty that when he was in law school at Yale years after I was, my old team is strangely still called "Frogs and Astros"...now you know why! And boy did we used to love to hate—but never beat-- the Yale Law School team!

**Story 4:** Finally, one last short story about the relevance of the liberal arts. Later in life, I led a research group in astrophysics. Excited about our science, we were all enamored of the stories of Star Trek. In one episode, Jean-Luc Picard, the great and legendary Enterprise Commander, asks a super-being named Q to change something in his life he had always regretted---as a young, talented, but very immature student at Star Fleet Academy---something I could identify with---he provoked a fight in a bar with a Klingon...really not a good idea! He was stabbed in the heart, but thanks to 24<sup>th</sup> century technology he was saved.

He always regretted his past. So when Q changes history so that Picard avoided this fight in his past, he finds in the present day that he is no longer Commander of the Enterprise, but merely the Astrophysics Officer, and otherwise unknown to the crew! Desperate, he finds Commander Riker---who in the original history was his second-in-command. Picard tells Riker---who barely recognizes him---"Picard, isn't it"---that he believes he can do more, he can go "beyond astrophysics". Riker replies, well Picard, frankly you've never shown any initiative.

Another lesson learned, from a well-told story, from the liberal arts: events in our lives, even tragic ones, shape who we are. We must embrace them, and we have the power to build on them in choosing our future. I had every member of my research group watch that episode, and have carried its message with me throughout my life.

Well, I have gone on, to make a key point: liberal arts, celebrated by Phi Beta Kappa, should always be relevant to all of us as a society. They can give not only a better appreciation for who we are, they can provide tools for understanding and addressing societal problems. Science and technology problems are the easy ones – social problems are the hard ones! How are we to view freedom of expression



and respectful discourse, or to frame solutions to current discord around Diversity, Equity and Inclusion? Liberal arts provide us the framework.

And as society changes, so do the liberal arts, as a mirror of society itself. At UW, we will continue to celebrate the liberal arts, and continue to ensure they remain relevant to our lives. An example--our new PhD in Public Humanities aims to ensure that our most advanced degree in liberal arts, with a strong focus on storytelling, provides relevance to life in Wyoming and the world. And we will continue to evolve our programs as our world evolves, to retain that relevance.

In closing, as we welcome a new cohort of scholars into the ranks of Phi Beta Kappa, we celebrate your academic accomplishments, your dedication to the pursuit of knowledge, your potential to live an active civil life – and the continuing relevance of the liberal arts. I would like to extend my heartfelt congratulations to each and every one of you. Your induction into Phi Beta Kappa is both the culmination of your academic journey and the beginning of a lifelong commitment to intellectual inquiry and service to others. I am proud of you all, and proud to now be among you myself!