The Love of Learning and the Call to Responsibility

Thank you, Dr. Landeira, and thank you all the members of the University of Wyoming chapter of Phi Beta Kappa who invited me to join your ranks, and especially to Professor Barbara Ellen Logan, my dear friend Bunny, who nominated me. I am so honored, and frankly *excited*, to be here today to join the nation's oldest honor society.

I'm honored because I get to join all of you; I get to be in your company, which is very good company. You're students who have committed yourselves to an outstanding, broad-based, liberal arts education that will enable you to be the shapers of your own lives, the protagonists of your own stories, and that will enable you, too, to recognize and promote those things that are most valuable in our society, and to build new forms of value where you see a need.

I don't know if it feels this way to you today, but you're going to go on to be the leaders of our society. Just look at the previous members of Phi Beta Kappa; so many of them have had a huge impact on the life of this country and the world; and all of them, at one time or another, stood just where you're standing today. Here are a few of their names, past and present -- see how many you recognize:

John Quincy Adams, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Eleanor Roosevelt, W.E.B. Dubois, Paul Robeson, J. Robert Oppenheimer, Jonas Salk, Ursula LeGuin, Susan Sontag, Stephen Sondheim, Benazir Bhutto, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Joan Rivers … I have to admit I didn't see that one coming; Francis Ford Coppola, Lynne Cheney, Jimmy Carter, Roslynn Carter, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, Pete Buttigeg, Vivek Ramaswamy, Jeff Bezos, Amanda Gorman, and six members of the current U.S. Supreme Court, just to give you a very small taste of the company we're in.

Now whatever you think of these people individually, they're unquestionably leaders. They, and you, have pursued the kind of education that defines leaders and more generally people who make a difference. What kind of education is this? Well, you've been curious learners; you've poked your noses and your brains into all the corners of this university; you've learned new languages and experienced the perceptual shifts that new languages offer; you've challenged yourselves to encounter unfamiliar subjects; you've honed your critical thinking and your communication skills. This is the kind of education that enables you always in the future to keep learning, to adhere to high standards of evidence and logic, and to pursue your passions. It's also the kind of education that makes you an ethical human being, because in addition to identifying your own needs, you've learned to pay attention to the needs and the legitimate rights of others.

So, in the future, when you're at work, in the office or the schoolroom or the boardroom, in journalism or medicine or philanthropy or whatever it is, people are going to seek you out, they're going to ask you for advice, they're going to ask you to lead. I hope when they do, you'll say yes, because we need you, and I hope you'll let yourself be guided by the principles of integrity, truth, and compassion that you've learned at the University of Wyoming.

I've tried to ask myself, beyond the honor conferred today, what is the significance of joining Phi Beta Kappa. The society says in its motto that "Love of Learning is the Guide of Life." I do

believe that to learn, to feel our brains grow, makes us healthier, more alive, and more effective. Knowing how to learn is a life-long gift that, if we remember to use it, will always keep life interesting.

But I'm not going to lie, knowing how to learn can also on occasion feel like a burden because it means that we have to change as we go through life. This can be inconvenient, this can be scary. Just when you think you have it all figured out, learning asks you to think in new ways, it takes you into the unknown, it challenges what you thought you knew and it makes you realize you don't know it all. What a downer. But if you reject the learning process, you stop growing. You might feel comfortable, but you're not realizing your potential and you're not contributing in the ways that you could. "Contributing" is an active verb, by the way; learning calls on us not just to *think* but also to *act* in the world. If we're ignorant about something that needs doing, we can't act on it; but once we've learned about something that needs doing, it's very hard to stand down, stand by, and do nothing. Learning calls on us to act. In the end, if we believe that advancing our learning takes us somewhere better, in medicine, or space exploration, or philosophy, or the arts, technology, then we need to commit to it, even if it means leaving old certainties behind, even if it requires courageous action. It's how we grow and become more fully ourselves.

I've been lucky recently to encounter the ideas of Paul Steinhardt, an eminent physicist; in fact he's *so* eminent he's the Albert Einstein Professor of Science at Einstein's old university, Princeton, no less. Steinhardt has given me remarkable insight into what it means to let the love of learning guide your life. Forty or so years ago, he was very influential in promoting the Big Bang theory of the universe's origin; but as the years have gone by, he's been more and more troubled by the fact that a lot of the evidence doesn't fit with the Big Bang theory. He's noticed that when a dataset troubles the theory, physicists tend to produce a patch to make the theory work anyway; but then more troubling data come along and you need another patch; and then another patch, and then another patch. At a certain point, Steinhardt asks, doesn't it make sense to stop producing patches and instead question the validity of the underlying theory. He's done just that, repudiating the Big Bang in favor of a theory known as the Big Bounce. I'm no cosmologist so I won't even dare to outline these theories and pretend I understand how they all work. My point is simply that Steinhardt, who had every incentive to stick with the ideas that made him famous in the 1980s, has continued to pursue learning, even if it meant saying that his earlier ideas were wrong, and even if it means going against scientists who disagree with him now. Steinhardt says it's important not to fall in love with your own ideas and we all know, as humans, how easy it is to fall in love with your own ideas; but Steinhardt says it's only by letting your ideas go, when you need to, that you can keep learning and keep growing. Incidentally, Paul Steinhardt is at UW right now. He'll be giving a talk on the origins of the universe tomorrow at 4 in Classroom Building 129; if you want to hear a great scientist explain his own lifelong commitment to learning, I encourage you to go.

In my own scholarly life, I've also been part of a community of researchers that has questioned received wisdom and it's been very exciting. I've been part of a group that has questioned the long-standing axiom that in Shakespeare's world, no women participated in theatre. It's one of the few things you can count on the general public knowing about Shakespeare – there were no women in his theatre. Scholars have even coined the term, the "all-male stage," to make it clear there were no women in the theatre. Theatre history has enshrined the all-male stage so

profoundly that we lost our ability to see any evidence that contradicts it even when that evidence is right in front of our eyes. If a woman appears on stage as part of a play, which did happen in 1610, then it's an exception that proves the rule; if the young aristocrat Alice Egerton plays the lady in a performance of John Milton's masque *Comus*, which she did, it's another exception; if women perform in parish dramas or elite theatricals at court, then they're also exceptions, or those forms don't really count as performance, or the controversy they provoked proves the rule that women couldn't play. But women did play. Again and again and again. At a certain point, the archives produce so many exceptions, it seems worthwhile to question the underlying concept of the "all-male stage" and take a serious look at the world of women's performance. And scholars did this, with the result that an exciting new field of study, early modern women's performance, has been born – this field has given us a richer sense of the social life and theatrical culture of Renaissance England; it has given us new ways to understand Shakespeare and his male contemporaries; and it's given us a richer history of the forms of women's performance that are so wildly popular globally today.

So that's a small example of how I've gotten to experience the satisfaction of reorienting theories to fit the evidence. I'm no Paul Steinhardt but the point is whether you're Paul Steinhardt or any one of us in this room today, we all have the capacity to build knowledge based on evidence, we all have the capacity to think more accurately and more complexly based on what we learn. We've all already done it.

We've been able to do it, each in our own ways, because we've had access to a fine university, the University of Wyoming, one of the thousands of universities and colleges that have made the United States so successful as a country. Our universities give us the chance to explore ideas, to connect with smart people different from ourselves, to engage in robust exchanges, to disagree when we need to, and to be part of advances that have made this country the envy of the world. The free quest for knowledge at universities powers economic development – it keeps our local and national economies humming; it drives advances in medicine, in psychology, in literature and the arts, in economics, in agricultural technology, in education; it enhances our ability to understand and connect with others on an individual level and also on a national and international level; it provides the critical thinking skills necessary for tackling our biggest problems; and it develops the leaders who will take us into the future.

OK, I've clearly gotten on my high horse. I've gotten on my high horse about the value of learning and the value of universities, and I suspect there's not too many people in the room today who would disagree with what I'm saying, at least not fundamentally disagree – we're all here, in the first place, because we value learning; we're a self-sorted group. But so that I don't make it too easy for myself or for you, I'll return to that question of what does it mean to be inducted into Phi Beta Kappa today. If we'd been inducted ten or twenty or fifty years ago, when universities by and large were fat and happy, and complacent about the future, all of the good things I say about pursuing knowledge would seem self-evident and uncontroversial and we could sit here feeling great about ourselves. But we are now at a moment in history when the public faith in universities has radically diminished, when giant federal spending cuts threaten the entire research enterprise; and when the pursuit of knowledge itself risks being made into just one more issue that divides us across polarized partisan lines.

In this context, being inducted into Phi Beta Kappa isn't just a moment of celebration, although it *is* that, and I do congratulate you. But maybe more meaningfully, being inducted into Phi Beta Kappa is a call to responsibility, for each one of us: if we get to join an elite society that proclaims the "love of learning is the guide of life," then what is each one of us going do to protect the love of learning? What are we going to do to be worthy of the place we've been given and the privilege we've enjoyed? We have benefitted so much individually from the opportunity to learn to our hearts' content. What are we going to do now to protect the infrastructure of learning, to protect a culture that values learning, so that we can continue to learn moving forward, so that we can preserve for others the same freedom to learn that we've enjoyed ourselves? History doesn't look kindly on those who climb a ladder and then pull it up behind them so no one else can follow. We each have a responsibility to protect the ladder of learning and all that it represents.

As a national organization, Phi Beta Kappa has partnered with the American Council of Learned Societies and the Council of Graduate Schools to support the National Endowment for the Humanities and to protest the threat to dismantle it. Phi Beta Kappa has spoken against threats to abolish the department of Education on the grounds that the department has been an essential tool for giving people across this country access to life-enhancing educational opportunities. They've warned against cuts to research funding on the ground that a healthy society depends on pushing the frontiers of knowledge; they've advocated for protecting open inquiry at the Smithsonian on the grounds that "the freedom to ask hard questions and consider alternative perspectives is key to both the development of citizens and the health of our democracy." On multiple fronts, then, Phi Beta Kappa is promoting the existence of a rich, multi-faceted society in which learning elevates us all.

Which makes me think about Wyoming Senator Alan K. Simpson, whom we've just lost – Senator Simpson had a strong sense of the varied streams that must come together to make a healthy society. Reflecting on his political life, he famously said, "Politics is barbaric. You need the softening effects of friendship, theatre, books, art, and music." Others will frame it differently, to be sure, but the message is the same: individuals and societies thrive when we have open, well-supported access to research, ideas, and free expression. In joining Phi Beta Kappa, we join an organization that is advocating precisely for open, well-supported access to research, ideas, and free expression. Phi Beta Kappa is modelling for us how to advocate for what we need, even when times get tough.

We need to advocate for access to learning for our own good and also for the good of our fellow citizens. Too many people across the country and across the world lack access to ongoing formal education. Only 7% of the globe's population has a university degree – we're in the 7%. Our advantages call on us to make our educational opportunities accessible more broadly, to help our neighbors understand and take advantage of what they have to offer. Education gives us all more pathways to reach our fullest potential and make our fullest contributions, so let's push for it for everyone all the time.

You know that I'm an English professor. I work in the humanities. One of the early humanists, the Italian Pico della Mirandola, wrote an oration in 1486 trying to explain what made human beings, of all God's creation, the most special. "The Oration on the Dignity of Man" it was

called. Pico lays out a thesis that astonishingly still holds up after all these years. He does it in a very Christian context in which God says to man (and here I quote), “I have placed you at the very center of the world, so that from that vantage point you may with greater ease glance round about you on all that the world contains. We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you prefer. It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine."

For Pico, human beings, positioned between the angels above them and the animals below, are uniquely situated to determine their own fate. They are created to *appreciate* the world around them – God needs someone to *appreciate* the world he has made -- and based on what they appreciate about the world, they are free to decide what their own place in it will be.

I love the word “appreciate” – it means to recognize the value of something. Pico gives it to humans to recognize the value of the world, to see what is beautiful and worthy of our admiration, to decide what we will support, what we will build up, what we will protect for posterity. That’s still our job. And it’s a job that requires knowledge and learning – we can only appreciate the world in any genuine way if we know a thing or two about it. The good news is, when we know enough to be able to see and understand and appreciate something marvelous about the world, it’s one of the most glorious experiences we can have as human beings; it enriches us immeasurably.

Here it’s lovely to think about another meaning of the word appreciate: appreciate doesn’t just mean to *recognize* value -- it also means to *add* value; when something appreciates, it grows in value. If we appreciate the world around us, if we do it knowledgably, ethically, responsibly, we *add value* to the world around us. That’s an amazing power. Think about it just in your own studies – whether you study literature or photography, animals or humans, rocks or trees, the ocean or the stars – you add value to your subject by the very act of appreciating it. And you add value to yourself, too – for Pico, humans can add to, or subtract from, their own value according to how they appreciate the world. The same remains true of us. Let’s make it our business to keep learning so we can appreciate our big, beautiful, intricate world, so that we can leave it better than we found it. Let’s advocate for learning, in all its forms, wherever we can, all across our society until that future day when advocating for learning becomes once again as uncontroversial, as non-partisan, as it should obviously be, when it becomes once again as American as apple pie and Phi Beta Kappa.

Thank you again. Together, through our learning, we can make this world a better place, that’s not just a cliché, it is true. Let’s have courage, *coraggio*, and go, go, go.