

The  
**PHI BETA KAPPA**  
Society

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Acceptance Address by Douglas Greenberg

Recipient of the 2009

Distinguished Service to the Humanities Award

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The 42<sup>nd</sup> Triennial Council of the Phi Beta Kappa Society  
Austin, Texas

Thanks to John Churchill, Phi Beta Kappa Senate, etc.....

In full disclosure, I must first say that I am not a member of Phi Beta Kappa, except as an honorary inductee who, *ex officio* as Dean of Arts and Sciences, was inducted last spring at Rutgers. Forty years ago I was also a student at Rutgers, but I was not that Phi Beta Kappa sort of kid (besides it was the sixties and there were other...distractions). So it was nice to get into Phi Beta Kappa at last – even if it was on the late decision plan! Even nicer to get an award after being a member for less than a year!

Still, I confess that I find this award to be a little embarrassing. I am not a believer in false humility, and I am proud – sometimes inordinately proud -- of what I have done professionally. But the news that I was to receive this award really did induce, to use a Texas metaphor, shock and awe. In fact, I thought that some terrible mistake had been made, and I immediately wrote John Churchill the following note:

Dear Secretary Churchill:

I arrived in my new office here at Rutgers to find your letter waiting for me. At first, I thought that it must have been intended for someone else. Despite several re-readings, however, I cannot avoid the conclusion that Phi Beta Kappa has actually selected me to receive its triennial Award for Distinguished Service to the Humanities. To be counted among the list of previous awardees seems to me both wonderful and absurd. Nonetheless, I am humbled and flattered by this honor and, of course, I accept it gratefully.

I want to say a little bit more about why the receipt of this award so surprised me. Almost everyone who has received it previously, is someone whose work I know and who helped to shape my own. Names like Howard Mumford Jones, Louis B. Wright, Dumas Malone, and Daniel Boorstin are names of scholars of another generation whose work touched my earliest intellectual interests and whose dedication to the life of the mind inspired me. Barnaby Keeney, Charles Frankel, Jack Sawyer, Bob Lumiansky, and Sid Yates all helped to establish the frame in which the humanities are practiced in this

country and were passionate defenders of humanistic scholarship, and each of them, especially Jack, Bob, and Sid touched my own life and career in very direct and formative ways. Joe Epstein's essays have alternately infuriated and inspired me for a long time, and Rich Franke has been a genuine hero to anyone who cares about the humanities as a public rather than private and narrowly academic activity. Robert Pinsky's poetry is sublime, and Gerald Early writes eloquently about those two most American of subjects that have determinatively shaped my life: race and baseball.

To have had the opportunity to meet and even to know some of these people has been itself among the most wonderful educational opportunities of my life. I think of them as my teachers. To be counted in their company in receiving this award is truly an honor of such astounding character that I know I can never properly express my simultaneous amazement and gratitude.

So I think Phi Beta Kappa may have made a mistake in selecting me for this award, but that does not mean I am not deeply honored to receive it, nor does it mean that I don't intend to take advantage of the opportunity to utter a few pompous, mildly self-promoting phrases, as all good award winners must.

I have moved around a good deal in my career – and the luckiest part of a very lucky life has been that Margee, who is here with me tonight, and my two daughters, Molly and Gracie, have tolerated all that moving around so lovingly. I owe them everything. We have lived on both coasts and in the middle of the country. I have worked in colleges, universities, museums and libraries, non-profit corporations, and even on a movie lot. I have taught and written, sometimes with feigned expertise, on many subjects. I have travelled to 50 countries. And I wasn't kidding when I said I didn't believe in false humility. I freely confess that I have tried to take the advice of my favorite philosopher, Yogi Berra: when I came to a fork in the road, I took it. And to paraphrase him: my career has been 90% physical; the other half was mental.

Having done that has sometimes made me feel like a jack of all trades and a master of none. I came of academic age during the great dearth of jobs for humanities Ph.Ds in the early 70s; I was fortunate to get one, but this external condition forced upon me an introspection about my professional choices that I might not otherwise have had the wit or experience to indulge. Experience, however, is what we get when we don't get what we want, and so, inevitably and very happily, I have had my share of experience.

Yet returning to university life after many years away and seeing the list of others who received this award reminded me of how and why I wound up on this peculiar journey in the first place: teachers and teaching. Learning is something we do alone. Learning happens inside us in some miraculous neurochemical transformation, and almost anything can be learned. Teaching, in contrast, is social. It requires engagement with another, and it was teaching that first drew me to academic life.

Learning is interior; it is a solo act but it arises in an exchange between a student and a teacher. Sometimes that teacher stands before us in a lecture hall, a stage with which many in this room are familiar. Sometimes the teacher is playing a musical instrument or singing a song. Sometimes the teacher painted a picture, made a film, or carved a sculpture. Sometimes she wrote a play; sometimes he published a book. And sometimes, of course, teaching is just talk between friends or colleagues or lovers or between parents and their children. And not all teaching results in learning -- as many of us in this room have cause to know.

That is my text. Here comes the sermon. Which is hell of a thing for a nice Jewish boy from New Jersey to do.

Always, always good teaching is about the human connection; it is about how others change us, about how they make us better, more than we were. And I must say that I worry that we may frequently forget this essential, if obvious, truth in our research universities, where the call from administrations is for entrepreneurialism, fundraising, and grant getting to support a mission we can no longer define; where the ideal with which I was inspired in my own education, the teacher-scholar, has given way to a two-tiered faculty – those who do research and those who teach; where our humanists quarrel about their too heavy teaching loads and our scientists quarrel about their indirect cost returns and where each thinks the other is running off with all their stuff; where our libraries are places where we can get a good cup of coffee but we cannot always find a good book; where graduate students conclude that teaching is a second-class activity for second-rate minds; and where undergraduates, in many of our best institutions, public and private, find that more than half their courses are taught by devoted people who are not tenured and never will be.

This is not a money problem, and it does not need a stimulus package; it is, to use another Texas phrase, the vision thing. I do not blame my faculty colleagues for these trends, but I do blame myself and my fellow deans and the provosts and presidents and chancellors who, sometimes unwillingly and against our better judgment, promote these discouraging departures from our best ideals, highest aspirations, and most enduring values.

Teaching and learning are inextricably bound to one another; I do not believe we can promote learning (by which I mean both what happens in the labs and libraries and what happens in classrooms) while we abandon teaching (by which I mean exactly the same thing). We are now recklessly endangering both of them as the essential foundations of our greatest institutions of higher education. I have some statistics to back all of this up, of course, but this is an award for the humanities, and I will leave the social sciences part of the sermon for another day!

End of jeremiad and enough about the higher education enterprise. Let's get back to talking about me!

I want to conclude only by returning to my point about teaching and learning as the most human and most humanistic acts in which we engage. In a life filled with great teachers of all the kinds I have mentioned, in universities and colleges and outside them, the very best teachers I have ever had or will ever have were the 52,000 men and women whose stories are recorded in the video archive of the Shoah Foundation Institute, many of whom did not finish high school because they were transported to concentration camps before they could. For eight years I had the honor to lead the effort to collect and disseminate their stories, and I made a point every day, no matter what else I had to do, of spending some time watching and listening to the faces and voices of men and women who survived what most of us here cannot even imagine, men and women who suffered in or rescued others from the incomprehensible horrors of the Holocaust. They changed my life, as only great teachers can. The opportunity to learn what they had to teach, day by day, every day for eight years, has been the greatest good fortune of a career filled with good fortune. Of all the great teachers I have known -- and I have been lucky to have had many -- these are the greatest.

Great teaching, like learning, is inestimably joyful and purely magical. We know it when we see it or hear it. If we are really lucky, we also know it when we do it. When teaching succeeds and that virtuoso solo act -- the learning -- begins, we are simply and completely thrilled, no matter which side of the stage we are on. Each of us in this room has been a teacher, each has been a learner, and each of us knows the wonder of that ineffable moment when something amazing happens between a teacher and a student. May we all have many more such moments, and may we see to it that others have them too. In the end, those moments are the essence of what really great scholars have always done: ensure the endlessly repetitive, yet somehow always unprecedented and miraculous, exchange between teacher and learner. If this award actually recognizes my many teachers, therefore, as I believe it does, I accept it both proudly and gratefully on their behalf.