

The following speech was given by John Churchill, Secretary of the Phi Beta Kappa Society during the annual President's Convocation, August 24, 2010.

**Reasons, Values, and Imagination:
The Moral Case for Education
in the
Liberal Arts and Sciences**

**At the Annual Opening Convocation
Centenary College
Shreveport, Louisiana**

**John Churchill
Secretary, The Phi Beta Kappa Society
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It is a very great pleasure indeed to be here at Centenary today celebrating the beginning of the 2010-2011 academic year. This is a place I have known and admired for a very long time, and it is a great pleasure to see its leadership, as ever, in the hands of people whom I admire. God speed you all!

A disinterested looker-on might well wonder what we are doing, and why. Some of us are oddly attired. Some of us have trouped in with an air of great dignity and purpose, accompanied by gracious music, wearing our important event faces. We have collected in this great hall in the midst of a leafy, park-like expanse, studded with lovely buildings, with an air of expectancy. Something will happen. But what is it? No one is getting married, or declared fit for burial. No laws will be enacted. No rock stars or gods of country music will appear. There will be no stand-up comedy—at least not intentionally. So what's up?

Well, this is what people do at the beginning of an academic year. The habit of doing this sort of thing—dressing up, trouping about, speechifying, bits of singing, etc.—is very old. At Oxford, for example, it's been going on for nearly a thousand years, and at Centenary and its forerunners, for nearly two hundred. So we stand in a grand tradition.

But what are we doing? The short answer is...we're celebrating. Specifically, here, today, are celebrating education in the liberal arts and sciences. Which simply raises the next question: Why is that worth doing? Why do we think beginning a year's round of study of the liberal arts and sciences is such a big deal? Before we can say we first need to see what it is we are celebrating.

What, exactly, is it then, this stuff we do that merits such celebration? Therein, as Hamlet said, lies the rub. Sustaining a sense of our common purpose is not much—despite what curriculum committees often seem to think—like finding the True Grail. It is a lot more like keeping up the quest itself. Sometimes it is like the Monty Python conversation between King Arthur and the French knight on the battlements. Arthur invites the Knight to ask his Lord to join him on the Grail quest, and gets the response: “OK, I’ll tell him, but I don’t think he’ll be very keen to go. You see, he’s already got one.” “Already got one?” says the startled Arthur. “Oh, yes,” says the Knight. “It’s very nice!” Our job, of course, is to help each other in our quests, never too sure that nice as it is, whatever we’ve already got is quite the Grail itself. In that spirit, I will continue today with a little questing.

As the example from Monty Python suggests, one of the values we cherish is respect for diversities of perspective. We value difference, and disagreement, in the confidence that they will lead us closer to the truth. But it is just possible, that as we exercise our commitment to diversity of perspective, we could be left hung up, balanced like a car on high center. Let me take a moment to explain my metaphor, for the benefit of those who have never been off the pavement. Time was, less than a lifetime ago, when many roads were unpaved and became worn with ruts. Driving in the ruts was the easiest way to keep your bearings. Until you came to a spot where the depth of the ruts was greater than the height of your undercarriage. Then you hit “high center,” and were stuck. In the right circumstances you could even hit high center in the middle of a mud hole. I did just that once, in a mud hole so deep that when I opened the car door, mud poured in. And there were crawdads in the mud. This story is perfectly true, but I will resist the impulse to allegorize the crawdads as something terrible that can happen in your intellectual life. Stuck on high center is bad enough.

What happens then to our commitment to diversity of perspectives? You can have recourse to what I recently ran across, advertised as “Oscar Wilde's famous dictum that ‘the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.’” More often, though, the line is attributed to F. Scott Fitzgerald. Well, here’s a pair of opposing thoughts: Fitzgerald said this. No, Wilde said it. I think it must have been Fitzgerald, though in such matters Will Rogers, Winston Churchill, Shakespeare, and the Bible are also perennial suspects. In any case, it was certainly Walt Whitman who wrote “Do I contradict myself? Very well, I contradict myself. I am large. I contain multitudes.” If that seems to you a little too smug and complacent about the contradictions, I have to say that I agree. The multitudes in questions may be those crawdads I was talking about. Likely to pinch, in the long run.

So let’s say, then, that accepting multiple perspectives is not embracing the pinchy claw of contradiction, but accepting instead that figuring out what it makes sense to believe is a contest, sometimes a muddy one, and one that will leave us at times, simply stuck. But better to be stuck than to be off in the wrong rut. Still, the issue is, how to get unstuck.

A few years ago we asked members of Phi Beta Kappa, all over the country, to discuss what they found of lasting value about their education in the liberal arts and sciences. Few people talked about accumulating facts. Few talked about becoming learned. Most said something that amounted to this: Their education gave them a lasting ability to think critically and creatively about difficult topics. It wasn’t the French they learned and then forgot, or the intricacies of Thomas Hobbes’s views on the foundations of government, or something about the periodic chart. What they valued was a certain capacity of reflective and deliberative thought.

It is not easy to say what deliberation is. It isn't just saying what you think. And it isn't even the bit where you tell the reasons that lead you to think that. It's the bit where, perhaps under challenge, you stop and think about what makes your reasons good reasons to support your belief. Deliberation is the bit where you ask "Why do I think that?" and then go on to weigh, critically, the reasons you come up with. Ideally this is done with a sympathetic interlocutor who will reciprocate in her own case, and not with a barracuda who sees your pause for reflection as an occasion to take another bite out of your hide. Deliberation takes special circumstances. Don't expect to find it on the stage during a presidential debate, or at a meeting of political zealots. It belongs to the family of cooperative enterprises, not competitive blood sports.

And like so many cooperative enterprises, it has to be learned. If we are lucky we learn it in the civil and protected setting of a seminar, or a classroom, where all parties are dedicated to weighing reasons, not slamming them around, and examining sensibilities, not dragging them out for denunciation.

I suppose the fact that I am giving this characterization of deliberation against a background of imagined incivility and verbal aggression is a symptom of my being influenced by these hideous times in which we live. At Phi Beta Kappa we champion the values of learning, freedom, reason, and deliberation in the confidence that a world influenced by them will be a more just and peaceful world. But there is no guarantee. Deep in his classic work, *The Republic*, Plato has one of the characters, Glaucon, pose a critical question to Socrates. Socrates has been going on about training the young in philosophical thought, when Glaucon asks, "How do you know, Socrates, that they won't use their new abilities destructively, like puppies, pulling and tearing at everything?"

And indeed, doesn't it seem as if many in public life who are most skilful in rhetoric and most visible (should I say "audible?") make it their business to slant, obscure, hide, conceal, obfuscate, dissemble, distract, deceive, mislead, confuse, confabulate, prevaricate, lie, and in every conceivable way prevent the transmission and understanding of knowledge? Doesn't it seem that one of the prevailing approaches to disagreement is to take the opposing view and represent it in the least plausible light, to denigrate it, to impugn the motives of those who express it, and to assert its equivalence with views held by the worst monsters of the 20th century? So we get charges that so-and-so is a Marxist-Stalinist-Hitler-Communist-Fascist, and a term that 100 years ago was a perfectly respectable, though minority, political label becomes libel instead. There was a day when calling someone a "Socialist" could be simply a description of his views, not a verbal assassination. Even Dwight Eisenhower, recall, was happy to be thought of as "liberal." These days people who would once have called themselves "liberal" have taken shelter in the term "progressive," though that label, too, is being demonized, and erstwhile liberals and progressives will have to find a new term: perhaps "fugitives."

I say this not in critique of some one political perspective, or in praise of another, but as a plea to resist the decent of debate into name-calling. On the road we are presently headed down, future debates will consist of exchanges of "Am not," "Are, too," "Am not," and "I know you are but what am I?" Or maybe we are already there.

Language, you might say, is only a symptom, and the real malady of American public life is something deeper, or more substantial, that is reflected in language. And that would be right, were it not for the fact that in the social, human world, what things are is in large part determined by what they are called. You have only to recall the odious terminology that once outlined our culture's semi-official

racial and ethnic categories to see that language is sometimes not secondary and derivative at all, but actually constitutive of the reality. That is why it is so important. Abraham Lincoln may have said that calling a dog's tail a leg doesn't make it one, but calling a group of citizens second-class can certainly make them so, in fact if not in principle.

So what does this jeremiad have to do with Phi Beta Kappa? If the love of learning is the guide of life, and if learning is an activity that has conditions, and if those conditions are under dire attack in our culture, then allegiance to the principles of Phi Beta Kappa demands a defense of the conditions, in our culture, that make possible the learning we profess to love.

Those conditions *are* under attack. Hardly a month passes without news that on some campus, somewhere in the country, some speaker's engagement has been cancelled after off-campus supporters, or donors, or legislators, or church authorities, or simply "the public" have objected. As the AAUP pointed out after such an episode at the University of Wyoming, it is precisely the unpopularity, the controversial nature, of opinions that make them useful for the kind of exploration we seek. As for disciplinary rigor, you have only to look at the distortion of science and history by politics and religion in public school textbook editing in Texas to see that there are those in our culture who are eager to use the tools of public education to inculcate a partisan agenda. These are merely examples.

If we value learning, we have to protect the context that makes it possible. It is only too rare in human history that such a context comes into being. What a shame if, in our time, we let this one slip away, a victim of fear, hatred, and cramped, self-regarding perspectives.

But it doesn't have to be so. This morning's celebration is evidence that we can rally for the cause of enlightenment. But there is more to protecting freedom of inquiry and expression than simply safeguarding access to the facts. Of course there is, in this age of inundation with information, a problem about simply getting the facts right. Indeed, facts are important. They are necessary. But they are not enough, and without context, even the facts themselves can be deadly. Here's how that works.

Let me quote: "Now what I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of service to them. . . . Stick to the facts, Sir!"

Thus Thomas Gradgrind, proprietor of a school, one of the most unlovely characters in Dickens, addressing his schoolmaster, Mr. McChoakumchild. His pedagogy was resonant with its setting: the smoky, grimy, dark, and Satanic cluster of utilitarian mills known as "Coketown." Readers of *Hard Times* will remember how the repetitively monotonous work of the piston of a steam engine is compared to the bobbing head of a pitiful elephant, crazed by captivity. In Coketown animal spirits are reduced to mechanism.

The novel *Hard Times* has many dimensions, but at one level it is about the collision of Gradgrind's philosophy of instruction and of life with an irrepressible insistence on imagination. As the balance to Gradgrind, Dickens gives us the lisping Mr. Sleary, "never quite sober and never quite drunk," who runs a shabby, dog-and-pony circus, guided by the motto, "People mutht be amuthed . . . They can't be always a-working . . ." (The fact that we cannot, today, enter into Dickens' condescending amusement at Mr. Sleary's speech does not make the latter's opinion less worth consideration.)

Mr. Gradgrind and Mr. Sleary bring us opposing, but perhaps mutually complementary sensibilities. If you don't have much a sense of real horses from the definition "graminivorous quadruped," so also you don't get much of a grip on things from watching a pony run in circles with a little dog on his hindquarters. But to forestall a simplistic solution, let me make clear that we are not dealing simply with a question of balance. It is not a matter of "all work and no play" being corrected by appropriate attention to industry and to leisure. Rather, a life guided by a command of the facts must also be steered by imagination, not as a separate faculty, but as an essential ingredient in being, as Gradgrind says, echoing Aristotle, a reasoning animal. My aim this morning is to display this relationship and to show how its cultivation is the central aim of education in the liberal arts and sciences.

I mentioned earlier that a few years ago we discovered that old members of Phi Beta Kappa regard the greatest lasting benefit of their education in the liberal arts and sciences to be the acquisition and development of deliberative skills. *Why* do people value the possession of skills of deliberation?

The obvious answer, surely, is that life presents us with choices, and some of them are important. When a choice is important it is important to get it right. Getting important choices right calls for a consideration of the reasons in favor of this or that option. Marshalling reasons is a process of bringing facts out of their inert "facticity," (This is how philosophers sometimes talk.) into a supporting or dissuading relationship to an option before us. So it is important to know which facts matter in a given case.

You can see that this is right by considering the case in which two parties are arguing about a moral issue, and when the one presents his reasons, the other cries out: "That's irrelevant!" The truth of what you say is beside the point unless it's relevant to the issue at hand. This shows us what a value is. Our ordinary language about values makes them sound like medium-sized pieces of dry goods. They can be held, lost, given, clung to, shared, and so on. They can even be kicked around, like metaphysical footballs. All this vivid metaphor is misleading. Values aren't things of any kind, not even abstract, intangible, metaphysical things. Or, especially, not abstract, intangible, metaphysical things. They are principles of relevance.

Consider what the two parties just mentioned say next. They have established that what one of them thinks appropriate to bring up to decide an occasion of choice, the other thinks irrelevant, and presumably *vice versa*. And each then says to the other: "I don't share your values." The term "value" is shorthand for referring to the principles that determine, for each of us, what it makes sense to bring up as reasons for choices. If we bring up the same things, we share values. If we bring up different things, we don't.

Let's pause to give Mr. Gradgrind his due. If you don't know any facts, you can't offer any reasons. Remember, that's what reasons are: facts or purported facts trotted out in support of choices. So there is much to be said for knowledge of the facts. To quote the motto of Faber College, home to Delta House, Dean Wormer, Douglas C. Niedermeier, Flounder, and the immortal Bluto Blutarski, "Knowledge is Good." That's why, to take the flip side, ignorance is bad. You don't have to be a Gradgrind to despair the fact that, in a survey reported a few years ago in the *New York Times Magazine*, fully two-thirds of registered voters could not name a single member of the United States Supreme Court.

As you are aware, such survey results surface regularly, featuring such splendid outbreaks of ignorance as the California student who thought that not only Toronto, but also Chicago, were cities in Italy. You hope they didn't ask about Sacramento. So again, there is much to be said for knowledge. Without it you can't construct arguments, and you can't do the mulling over arguments that constitutes deliberation.

To be useful, knowledge must be relevant to life's choices. But immediately we see that the unpredictability as to what choices we may face loosens the scope of prospective relevance marvelously. As the Kentucky farmer and philosopher Wendell Berry once wrote, you never know what you'll need to know. So it's a good thing to find out all you can. Even "useless" knowledge may turn out to be valuable—who knows? And therein lie arguments for breadth and for serendipity. So a part of what those old members of Phi Beta Kappa meant was that the breadth of their learning in the liberal arts and sciences—even if the particulars would be forgotten—cultivated a disposition to gather knowledge, a habit of replenishing the store of knowledge to keep pace with, or even outpace, its inexorable decay.

To go the next step in this exploration, let's turn to a room at the top of a staircase in Whewell's Court, Trinity College, Cambridge, early 1930's. There the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein would lecture, or rather, think out loud in a very tortured way, in front of a class of usually bewildered students. He now has the reputation of being, paradoxically, one of the most influential philosophers of the 20th century, and one of the most difficult to make head or tail of. His colleague G.E. Moore often came to the lectures, and kept notes. Wittgenstein was spontaneous, passionate, intense, and intensely self-critical. Moore was his opposite. Think of the Dormouse at Alice's Mad Tea Party. A calm, mild, retiring man, Moore is remembered now for an ethical theory called "Intuitionism," and his influence on the Bloomsbury set of Leonard and Virginia Woolf, *et al.*

Moore was also bewildered. Wittgenstein's topic was the foundations of logic, and the intricacies of the logical structures of language itself. And yet, Moore found, he continually made comparisons with the judgments we make in aesthetics. And it seemed as if, in his view, something akin to aesthetic judgments lay at the very foundations of logic. Why would this be unsettling? Logic we like to think of as hard, crystalline, universal, fixed. Aesthetics on the other hand is soft, squishy, variable, changing. Logic deals with how things must be. Aesthetics deals with how things strike us. So if something like aesthetic judgments lie at the basis of logic, that which ought to stand most solidly rests on the quicksand of human judgment.

Wittgenstein did in fact mean something like that, and wrote in his greatest work *Philosophical Investigations*: "If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions, but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments. This seems to abolish logic, but does not do so." But that does not entail relativism, or nihilism, or any of the other ugly "isms" adduced by those who define themselves as rescuers of objectivity and truth. Notice that Wittgenstein does not say just "judgment." He says "agreement in judgment." Similarly, the ancient Greek Sophist Protagoras said that humanity (*anthropon*) is the measure of all things, not the individual man (*andron*) or woman (*gyne*).

So where does agreement come from? Sometimes it seems to be hard-wired from our evolutionary history. Sometimes it is rooted in our cultural training. And sometimes it is the result of arbitrary agreements to agree. Often it comes from all three jumbled together. For example, our vision is such that we can discriminate among different small scribbles. We live in a society that has an

institution called “the U.S. Postal Service.” (More or less.) And we have submitted to someone’s decree that “AR” should be the postal code for Arkansas. And so it is, in part because nobody gives a rip whether AR should be the postal code for Arkansas or for Arizona. But what if people did care, the way they care where congressional districts should be added and subtracted following a census?

Remembering cases of *that* sort reminds us that disagreement is devilishly persistent, and that is one of the conditions that make the deliberative life so important. Uncertainty and its prevalence is another. Ambiguity. Vagueness. Complexity. Indeterminacy. These are the conditions that bring to the fore the fact that people marshal different bodies of fact as reasons. In some sense the broad facts are well-known to all, and most issues that people spend effort arguing about are relatively few: “Birth, and copulation, and death. That’s all the facts, when you come to brass tacks: Birth, and copulation, and death.” (T.S. Eliot, *Sweeney Agonistes*) We might add the environment, unless we suppose that it’s already implicit in all three. But my point is this: from a small range of unarguable facts about life spring disagreements fraught with uncertainties, complexities, and ambiguities.

And sometimes these disagreements matter. People are forced to do things against their will or refrain from things they see nothing wrong with. Or maybe they are killed or dispossessed because of someone’s crack theories. Human history is full of such stuff. Complex disagreements can lead only in three directions. One of them, agreeing to disagree, is not available in the tough cases. Resort to violence is always available, though not a sure road to a reasonable outcome. The third option is argument. We give reasons hoping to persuade.

If, in a case in which we cannot agree to disagree, the only alternative to violence is to argue things out, and *if* we have a moral duty to do all we can to avoid violence, *then* we have a moral duty to argue. That means a couple of things. First, it means we have a duty to learn how and to accumulate the facts that might be available to serve as reasons. Earlier I claimed that ignorance is bad. That claim actually has a moral dimension. Ignorance of the available facts on which an argument might turn might well be morally culpable. Second, it means that we have a duty not only to make arguments, but also to listen to them. And this is the point that leads to the heart of things.

Part of the structure of any argument is that each side thinks it’s right, and that its reasons are the right and sufficient ones. The other guy has got the facts wrong, or his facts are irrelevant, or his reasons, relevant though they may be, are not strong enough. Recognizing this range of possibilities opens a new dimension to the disagreement. Why do his reasons strike him as reasons? Why does he think they’re strong enough? Once these questions are posed, they will not go away, and a part of the disagreement becomes—in addition to trying to get my interlocutor to see the facts *as I do*, trying to see how he could see them as he does.

If, in a tough case, we have an obligation to pursue argument to try to resolve a disagreement, then we also have an obligation to enter this new dimension, to try to see how the other could take his reasons as he does. If both parties enter into this effort, they are deliberating. The very word comes from a Latin word denoting scales, and has to do with weighing: we weigh each other’s reasons. And that it the same thing as exploring each other’s sensibilities. So in a tough case of disagreement—this is my claim—we have an obligation to try to see how the other person could see the world as she does. We have an obligation to try to indwell her sensibility.

Moreover—and here we find ourselves rediscovering a very old thought—we have the obligation to examine our own sense of relevance, to look critically at how and why we take things as we do. We

have to move our own responses and “takes” to a conscious level where we can make them the object of critical inquiry. At Socrates put it: “The unexamined life is not worth living.” And the precondition of progress through any disagreement is to know oneself.

I am not saying to we succeed, even in trying to do this, very much. I am not saying we are naturally disposed toward it. I am not saying we are very good at it, or that it necessarily succeeds or even succeeds very often. I am not saying that the effort will elicit a reciprocal generosity of spirit. It may or it may simply get us duped and cheated. I am saying that if we have an obligation to avoid violence, we have an obligation to try it.

But what would it be like to try to gather skill at this endeavor? Martha Nussbaum (in *Cultivating Humanity*, 1996) made current the phrase, “narrative imagination.” Borrowing a page from Marcus Aurelius, she advocates a “cosmopolitanism” that is the antithesis of identity politics. It is not necessary to buy entirely into her conception of global citizenship in order to see that imagination is the faculty requisite for entering into the sensibilities of others, into the sensibilities of people who, despite common humanity, may be in important ways unlike ourselves. This is what we have to be able to do to understand their arguments, to understand how they hold their reasons as they do.

But imagination requires nourishment. It feeds on acquaintance with difference. As Stern’s narrator says at the beginning of *A Sentimental Journey*: “They order matters differently in France.” Or as L.P. Hartley’s says at the beginning of *The Go-Between*: “The past is a foreign country. They order things differently there.” Imagination also, oddly, feed on facts, and makes an understanding of facts possible. What should we call Darwin’s breakthrough to the concept of natural selection or Mendeleev’s insight into the ordering of the periodic table if not acts of imagination. So the realms are not as separable as Mr. Gradgrind would have it, nor is imagination simply a matter of entertainment, as Mr. Sleary seems to think. But no, this is not fair to Mr. Sleary. Recall, if you will, that we heard him earlier holding out imagination as the route out of sheer self-interest: “[T]here it h a love in the world, not all Thelf-interetht after all, but thomething very different; [and] it hath a way of ith own of calculating or not calculating.”

If it is not obvious what all this has to do with the aims and justification of education in the liberal arts and sciences, let me now make it so. After you examine what is really is for people to make arguments about things that matter and to reflect on the arguments that they themselves and others make, it turns out that values—principles of relevance that determine what facts it makes sense to bring up—are the connecting sinews of arguments. So the evaluation of arguments is at the same time an examination of the sensibilities of those who make them. And the deliberative life, so prized by old members of Phi Beta Kappa as the lasting worth of their education, is the life characterized by the disposition of collect knowledge, to deploy it in support of reasonable choices, and to reflect on the structure of that deployment in their own case and those of others.

In the first or second paragraph of almost every liberal arts college catalog, you will find a trinity affirmed: broad knowledge, skills of critical thinking, and a concern for values. This is not a random list. It is a roadmap toward the deliberative life, a map of the journey we take up again, here, today. Journey well, Centenary!