

MAKING A SPACE FOR IMAGINATION AND CREATIVITY

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President Lieber, members of the Society, new initiates, and guests. It is an honor for me to be with you today to congratulate those elected to membership and to share some thoughts about how universities can either stimulate or stifle creativity and imagination. Not being a member of this august body myself, I thought I should do a little research beforehand. So I consulted a book entitled *Phi Beta Kappa in American Life: The First Two Hundred Years* by the highly regarded American historian Richard Current, who was elected to membership in the Society as a junior at Oberlin College.

Current's opening sentences made me want to read more. "This is not exactly an official history," Professor Current began. "The Phi Beta Kappa Society, which commissioned me to write it, has permitted its publication but has done so with some reluctance. The Society's history committee, consisting of five Phi Beta Kappa senators, unanimously disapproved large portions of the manuscript." The senators "were troubled by the negative impression with which they were left at the end of their reading..."¹ Expecting a work of hagiography, the committee got more than it bargained for from a crackerjack historian.

Flipping through pages to find the negative parts, I soon discovered that Current had merely tried to make the organization and its members come alive and to situate it

¹ Richard Nelson Current, *Phi Beta Kappa in American Life: The First Two Hundred Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), vii.

and them within the context of American life from the time of the Revolution forward. One episode from the very early days of the Society caught my eye. I have been thinking a good deal lately about how young people educate themselves outside the classroom and how their teachers can either kindle or smother their sparks of creativity. This story from 1776 provided a fresh way of looking at that subject.

Phi Beta Kappa was founded by students at the College of William and Mary five months after the Declaration of Independence. You may recall that many of the creative sparks of independence had been kindled right there in Williamsburg. Born in a revolutionary moment, this new Society created a safe space within which students could imagine alternative futures for themselves. At a time when William and Mary's rules forbade debate of controversial issues in the classroom, the society's president welcomed new initiates to Phi Beta Kappa with these words: "Now then you may for a while disengage yourself from the scholastic Laws and communicate without reserve whatever reflection you have made upon various subjects; remembering that everything transacted within this room is transacted *Sub rosa*, and detested is he that discloses it."²

And communicate they did! In their secret meetings the young members debated such topics as "Whether Commonwealths or Monarchies are more subject to seditions & commotions," whether it is right to remain neutral during a civil war, and "the justice of African slavery." At a time when the King's army was on the march to put down the rebellion and when slavery supported the family fortunes which allowed most of these young men to attend college, these were no idle debates.

Imagination is, I believe, a universal human trait, independent of time and place. We begin life with an acute sense of imagination and creativity. Watch a toddler playing

² Current, *Phi Beta Kappa in American Life*, 8.

alone: he or she is creating imaginary worlds, learning through play. “As we grow, our play gets more complicated [and more social]. We add rules and goals. The result is something we call games.”³

Regrettably, much as William and Mary’s rules stifled free discussion in the classroom, schooling sometimes trains imagination and creativity out of children: spontaneous and playful learning gives way to “real” learning, as in regimented preparation for standardized tests. Once I was discussing with a friend the gifted and successful high school graduates who were entering our university, some of whom seemed to freeze when confronted with the risks and uncertainties which creativity requires. He observed: “Our students have been carefully taught how not to fail.”

Luckily, formal education does not have to produce such results. I hope *you* have been challenged by the richness of the arts and sciences during your years at the University of Arkansas. You have had opportunities to explore the best, and the worst, of human civilization. You have been invited to join professors in the marvelous work of discovery through research and other creative endeavors, where imagination and creativity thrive. And while not all of you have been able to join learning and play within the formal curriculum, you may well have done so in your own private spaces, as did the first members of Phi Beta Kappa, who imagined new worlds through debates conducted out of earshot of their professors.

In an article in *Wired* magazine Will Wright, the inventor of Sim City and other videogames, described a form of learning outside the classroom that many of you will recognize: “Now an entire generation has grown up with a different set of games than any before it and plays these games in different ways. Just watch a kid with a new

³ Will Wright, “Dream Machines, *Wired* (April 2006).

videogame. The last thing they do is read the manual. Instead, they pick up the controller and start mashing buttons to see what happens. This isn't a random process; it's the essence of the scientific method....It's a rapid cycle of hypothesis, experiment, and analysis. And it's a fundamentally different take on problem-solving than the linear, read-the-manual first approach of their parents."

Wright acknowledged the potential risks of videogaming, including addiction and anti-social behavior. "But," he argued, "the positive aspects of gaming—creativity, community, self-esteem, problem-solving—are somehow less visible to nongamers....Like the toys of our youth, modern videogames rely on the players' active involvement. We're invited to create and interact with elaborately simulated worlds, characters, and story lines...."⁴

Although this kind of talk sends chills down the spine of some educators, others see an opportunity. They ask, "what can we learn about learning from our own students who are into gaming, and what can game designers like Wright teach us about reconnecting formal education with imagination and creativity?" At the suggestion of Chancellor White, the University of Arkansas will address this question next fall by hosting a conference tentatively entitled "Gaming (and) the System: Higher Education Responds to the Millennial Student." The conference will bring together leading game developers and some of our own best teachers and most engaged students to address (or better yet, play with) this question.

In closing I want to tell you how some of our own students are helping to create a physical space that will foster the same kind of imagination and creativity that videogames encourage in a virtual space. A Fayetteville civic and business leader named

⁴ Wright, "Dream Machine."

John Lewis has envisioned a new kind of science museum for northwest Arkansas. John has been working quietly for several years now, along with others in the community, to develop this vision for a science center that will be highly interactive and exciting and will “inspire everyone, particularly families, to engage in hands-on science and technology.”⁵ The center, to be named “Science Springs,” will not only engage young people (and not so young people) in cutting edge science and technology and will also invite them to explore the natural history and cultures of the Ozarks over time. The underlying purpose of Science Springs is to raise up generations of Arkansans who will be inspired and equipped to sustain that environment and advance the quality of life in our region.

John and his associate Brent Robinson have listened to museum experts, consultants, and business leaders, and they have paid particular attention to bright, energetic young people who exhibit that spark of creativity and imagination. They turned to a group of about a dozen juniors and seniors here at the University, first to have them tell their own stories of how they got hooked on science and became involved in creative activities. It was amazing to sit in while that group shared their stories with board members and consultants. Afterwards the museum group engaged these students as interns and asked them to find out how even very young children might be turned on to a new science center, perhaps dragging their parents along behind them. So during the past academic year these students, several of whom are being inducted into Phi Beta Kappa today, have visited science museums in other cities to see how people actually use such places and have surveyed and interviewed people in the Fayetteville to area learn about

⁵ White Oak Associates, “Concept Paper for Science Springs, NW Arkansas,” January 16, 2007.

their interests. The work of these students is included in the newly released Development Plan for Science Springs.

I tell you this last story, not just to brag on some students of whom I am very proud, but also to bring us back to where we began and to remind us that expressions of creativity and imagination, whether nurtured in the secret meetings of Phi Beta Kappa in the 1770s or in the private and public spaces where students gather today, are not merely idle intellectualizing. They have purpose.

The new world which creative and imaginative people can envision is a world worth striving for. But imagination and creativity, when focused exclusively inward, can actually be dangerous, even destructive, to you and to others. When focused outwardly on a larger community and imbued with a sense of service, they become the hallmark of professionals and citizens who will change the world for the better.

So while congratulating you on your election to Phi Beta Kappa let me also hold before you a challenge to use your imagination and creativity for positive change. Some of you have already accepted that challenge. I hope that all of you will.