

## **Form of Initiation**

**May 26, 2010**

*The Chapter is sequestered behind closed doors. The Guide orders the robe candidates in alphabetic order, and verifies correct pronunciation of names. When the candidates are assembled, the guide raps on the door and awaits a return rap. The guide then opens the door. The president gives a short speech followed by the guide's introduction of the candidates to the Chapter by their diploma name, one by one. The candidates take their place in the front row as they are introduced.*

**President:** “Fellow members of Phi Beta Kappa: We are assembled for the purpose of receiving into the membership of our Society certain persons who, having been duly elected by the Chapter, desire to be admitted to its privileges and opportunities. The Guide will introduce the candidates.”

**[Guide leads in and introduces each candidate by name]**

**Guide:** Mr./Ms. President and Members of Phi Beta Kappa, I have the honor to present the following persons, who agreeably to our invitation here present themselves for our initiation.

**President:** In accordance with the rules of this chapter and in consequence of our good opinion of your intellectual and moral character supported by your record of high attainment in the College, you have been selected as worthy of becoming members of Phi Beta Kappa. Your names have been submitted to the scrutiny of the Constitutional elections of the Chapter by the Phi Beta Kappa members of the Wells Faculty and have met with their approval. You have been formally notified of your election, and by your presence here, you signify your desire to be enrolled as members of this ancient and honorable society.

Before formally inducting you into the Society, I offer the following to clarify the ideals of Phi Beta Kappa and the responsibilities of membership.

First, I quote from an address by former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Charles Evans Hughes at the 100th anniversary celebration of the Alpha Chapter of Rhode Island:

“The unique position of Phi Beta Kappa, and its usefulness, can be safeguarded only by unremitting attention to what has become the law of its being. The prestige of the Fraternity is due to the fact that it is an association of individuals of scholarly attainments who have proved their merit according to the accepted standards of college discipline. The best proof of the utility of the Fraternity is the esteem in which the election is held. Whatever may be said of the value of various activities proposed for the organization, the essential thing is to hold to the theory of the Society as a fellowship of scholars, admission to which is an honor conferred by reason of demonstrated worth. *The success of Phi Beta Kappa continues to lie in what it is, rather than in what it does.*

“The particular interest in Phi Beta Kappa is in liberal education. Whatever debate there may be as to its exact definition, or its prerequisites, it persists as an ideal. Intensive critical study of educational aims and methods has found nothing to take its place. It means the development by careful training of the capacity to appreciate what has been done and thought, the ability to make worthwhile appraisals of achievements, doctrines, theories, proposals. It is liberal because it emancipates; it signifies freedom from the tyranny of ignorance, and, from what is worse, the dominion of folly.” [END QUOTE]

Last year, our esteemed colleague, current chapter vice president, and former president, Professor Gagnon, took this quotation and tied it masterfully to the mission of Wells College. In so doing, she made even clearer the ideals

and responsibilities of being a member of Phi Beta Kappa. I beg your indulgence as I try to do the same in my own way.

I was elected to Phi Beta Kappa in 1996. Humbled by the honor, then and now, I've always heard a little voice in my head saying "Earn this." (Some of you may recognize this line as something Tom Hanks said to Matt Damon in *Saving Private Ryan*.)

In trying to earn this—this admission to Phi Beta Kappa—I've since been on the lookout for role models, people who embody the ideals of Phi Beta Kappa--whether they're official Phi Beta Kappans or not. In my experience, it's rare to find such a model, but I recently did when I picked up the *Christian Science Monitor* for a weekly news update.

You probably know that the U.S. space shuttle program is winding down. In a retrospective, the editor of *The Monitor* shared some thoughts about and from an astronaut named Story Musgrave. Musgrave flew on 6 shuttle missions, including one to repair the Hubble. I'd like to quote from the story:

“When I visited Musgrave at his home in [Houston](#) in 1996, he showed me shelves filled with well-worn, annotated books ranging from [St. Augustine](#) to [Virginia Woolf](#). When he sat in an evening literature class at the [University of Houston](#), he kept three notebooks open – one for the lecture, another for what the ideas meant to him, and the third for how he might apply those ideas to the experience of spaceflight ... [the story continues]

Musgrave attacked the humanities in the same way he attacked extravehicular activity on the shuttle. Why? Because if you don't prepare yourself, "the inner experience is not going to happen," he said. Too many members of the space-traveling fellowship, he said, told him they regretted blasting off, shouting "wow" once in orbit, and then losing the whole amazing experience in the tasks at hand."

I think Story Musgrave embodies the ideals of Phi Beta Kappa. He reads and learns widely and aggressively. He thinks across disciplines, connecting classic literature to spaceflight. He keeps alive a sense of wonder, and he keeps sharp his mind so that, when wonder strikes, he can do something about it.

Yes, our responsibility as Phi Beta Kappans is to do the hard work of using our intellectual gifts to blast off. But it's more than that: being broadly and humanistically educated, we also have a responsibility to appreciate the ride and enjoy the view so that we never forget, and so we can remind others, how remarkable and precious life and our earth are.

OK, back on script ...

By the rules of this Chapter, each initiate must personally pledge her or his allegiance to the Society and sign her or his name in the Roll Book. I am instructed to administer the following promise, at the end of which you may answer, "I do." After this the Guide will call the roll, and each of you will in turn sign the Roll Book. This Roll Book was begun on May 7, 1932, at the founding of the Wells Chapter of Phi Beta Kappa. Since then, all newly inducted members have signed their names in this book. As you reflect upon your induction into this Society, please consider the historical continuity of

which you are now a part. As the Roll Book is a historical document of record, I ask each of you to write your name legibly, so that future generations may discern and affirm your membership.

Will you please stand? I shall now administer the promise: "Do you solemnly promise that you will be true and faithful to this Society, that you will obey the laws thereof, and that in the election of members you will have paramount regard for moral character and scholarly attainment?"

**[Initiates respond "I do" and the Guide calls the roll]**

Initiates: please be seated. A brief historical statement, along with an explanation of the symbols and mottoes of Phi Beta Kappa, will now be given by vice president Gagnon.

**[Historian ends with "...at the end of this ceremony of initiation"]**

I shall conclude in the words of the Ritual of 1779:  
 "You all at this moment experience in yourselves the heartfelt satisfaction which I do at this, our valuable acquisition. Friendship herself, pleased with her success, now smiles at this addition to our Society. Let it be our joint care to extend the friendship which has ever been exercised by this Society to these new members, that they hereafter become veterans in her service."

Please rise. By election of the Chapter, and by your assent to its pledge and the placing of your signatures in the Book, the Society's requirements for initiation are fully satisfied. I therefore, in the presence of these members of the Society, declare you members of the Chapter Xi of Phi Beta Kappa in the

State of New York, authorized to wear its key as a badge, and to participate actively in its meetings.

Before we eat, some final words. First, at Wells—this is not a policy of the national Society--there is a tradition of serving cheese curds at the reception. I don't know why; perhaps Prof. Bennett, who commandeered the curds this year, will enlighten you as you nibble. Second, I invite you to look over the Wells roll book that you all have just signed, to see the names of those who preceded you. Names like Macmillan, Weld, Clugston. On the back of the third page you will see that the Chapter has only had five honorary inductees in its entire history; one of them is with us today: **Provost/Dean of the College Leslie Miller-Bernal**.

Third, Wells College chapter Xi of New York has a tradition whereby new members are welcomed by current members through demonstration of a secret handshake. I invite you to turn to the Chapter member directly behind you so that they may welcome you into the Chapter themselves with the official handshake.

Finally, I want to thank a few people for their extra work in preparing for tonight. Professor Gagnon is largely responsible for the reception and dinner you're about to have; it wouldn't surprise me if she actually put on an apron to help. Prof. Stiadle, as chapter secretary, was critical in keeping paperwork for tonight organized. And Provost Miller-Bernal: thank you for the financial support of your office.

Congratulations, initiates.