

## **Form of Initiation**

**May 23, 2012**

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 asks initiates to please be seated]**

**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 we get started I'd like to introduce myself to those of who may not know me. I am Deborah Gagnon, associate professor in psychology and co-president of the Wells College Chapter of Phi Beta Kappa, also known as Chapter Xi of New York.

Professor Milene Morfei, also in psychology, shares the president duties with me.

Together, it is our privilege and honor to read the words of initiation and, with the rest of the Wells College Phi Beta Kappa members seated behind you, to witness your induction into the Society. If you should ever find yourself in Aurora on the Wednesday of senior week, please consider joining us as witnesses at this induction (but please do let us know if you plan to attend so it's not a surprise!) Otherwise, the ceremony, as you know, is a closed and private affair.

Before formally inducting you into the Society, I shall speak in interpretation of the ideals of the Society and the responsibilities of membership. To this end, I shall begin with a quote from an address by former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Charles Evans Hughes. The president of the chapter reads this particular passage every year and its presence in our induction ceremony has reached the level of the sacred, as most Wells traditions do. However, I warn you: it is a fairly opaque passage – archaic in form -- and difficult to digest on first hearing, so I will send you all a copy of it electronically to do with what you will, which I hope will be to further digest at your leisure. In the words of former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Charles Evans Hughes:

“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, [liberal education] 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.”

“Learning is not its aim, so much as intelligence served by learning ... At this time, when the world stands in need of every influence which favors intellectual discipline and achievement, the service of Phi Beta Kappa is of heightened value. It holds aloft the old banner of scholarship; to the students who have turned aside from easier paths and, by their talent and fidelity, have proved themselves to be worthy, it gives the fitting recognition of a special distinction.”

So now it is my job to turn this into something meaningful for you. Every year I read this passage over in preparation for this moment and every year, I read something new into it. This year, as I reread it, what I seem to want to say to you is: ‘Keep doing what you’re doing.’ What Hughs is telling you is that you have been deemed worthy of special distinction by a community of scholars who were also deemed worthy before you. The ‘service of Phi Beta Kappa’ – its whole reason for being -- is to continue this tradition of recognizing – and encouraging -- personal and scholarly excellence. The election process that Hughs alludes to is indeed held in high esteem and taken very seriously. It is the very – and only -- means by which the continuity of the ideals of the Society are ensured. You should know that it was not enough to simply achieve academic excellence to be elected into this Society. You cannot simply be ‘smart’ or perform well in the classroom, you cannot simply do well in your major, you cannot simply have a high GPA. The Latin honors of cum laude, magna cum laude, and summa cum laude, and distinction in the major, recognize those achievements. But to be elected into Phi Beta Kappa signifies something beyond that: you must also hold to a high standard of personal

excellence which includes evidence of a strong character and a breadth of personal and scholarly interests. The Phi Beta Kappa Faculty deemed your path to have been ‘not easy’ – you chose a challenging curriculum for yourselves, one that aimed to broaden as well as deepen understanding, knowledge, and experience – and they have examined your ‘talents and fidelity’ and found them to be of the highest order. To the extent that you hold their opinions in high esteem, you should hold your own election to this Society in high esteem, and I hope it is an honor that you will deeply cherish and appreciate in years to come.

I know that I, personally, cherish the honor and more so today than the day I was inducted because I have increasingly come to appreciate what Phi Beta Kappa stands for. I am humbled to belong to a group such as those you see in the row behind you, people who responded to the Phi Beta Kappa call to excellence and the call to continue to excel as individuals and as scholars, and finally, to share that gift with others, to better the world. And now, I am inspired by you. I hope that as you look to your left and right, you too feel humbled, and inspired, to be among such peers of your own, but also very proud of yourself for being deemed by the other Phi Beta Kappa members to be worthy for inclusion among them.

The other thing I seem to want to say to you after re-reading Hughs’ address this year is ‘Keep doing what you’re doing, but you can do even better!’ The Society serves to recognize – but also encourage -- personal and scholarly development. To that end, may your election into Phi Beta Kappa encourage and inspire you to continue to pursue personal and intellectual excellence. None of us is ever finished with this particular ‘project’. Every last person that I just honored by my words in the row behind you – some of whom may be a faculty member that you hold in particularly high esteem and may seem to be a finished product to you – knows in the silent confines of his or her own heart that they are not a finished product. They each are a work in progress. And knowing that is a good thing. It keeps us humble and thus, keeps us going. So Hughs

tells us with his words that the Society serves two purposes: one of recognition and one of encouragement. Today, I am honored to recognize you and, equal to equal in the eyes of the Society, to encourage you to keep going on the path to excellence that you're on.

One way to continue on the path you have begun for yourselves is to commit to the responsibilities of Society membership. In a few moments you will be asked to pledge to uphold those responsibilities. You may wonder, and rightly so, what those responsibilities are. I quote from the National Chapter: The Phi Beta Kappan "stands for freedom of inquiry and expression, disciplinary rigor, breadth of intellectual perspective, the cultivation of skills of deliberation and ethical reflection, the pursuit of wisdom, and the application of the fruits of scholarship and research in practical life. We champion these values in the confidence that a world influenced by them will be a more just and peaceful world." You will be asked, in a few moments, to pledge to be true and faithful to those ideals and that, should you find yourself in the position of electing members into the Society, that you will do so with paramount regard for moral character and scholarly attainment.

And so now we come to that pledge. 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 then sign the Roll Book. I would like to point out that our Roll Book was begun on May 7, 1932, at the founding of the Wells Chapter of Phi Beta Kappa. In the 80 years since that date, all newly inducted members have signed their names in this book. As you reflect upon your induction into this Society, it is worthwhile to consider the historical continuity of which you are now a part. As the Roll Book is a historical document of record, I would implore each of you to write your name legibly, so that future generations may discern and affirm your membership. [A few years back I had the unenviable job of creating an electronic database of the names in our log book; it took quite a bit of

handwriting analysis, investigative work with alumni records, and research in the archives and there are still three names that cannot be identified. Don't let that be you!]

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]**

The initiates will now be seated. A brief historical statement with an explanation of the key, mottoes, and signs of the Society will now be given by the Chapter Historian, Professor Catherine Burroughs [in absentia; read by Professor Bruce Bennett].

**[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.”

The initiates will 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 and on behalf of our co-president, 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.

There are three Wells-specific traditions to share before the ceremony is officially over. What would Wells be without its traditions? The first tradition is that cheese curds are always served at the reception – please be sure to have one. I'll leave it at that; if you are curious, please see Professor Bennett [Professor Linda Schwab], the kind and

benevolent provider each year of the Phi Beta Kappa cheese curds. The second 'tradition' is an invitation to look over the Wells induction signature book that you have just signed, to see the names of those who preceded you. Names like Macmillan, Weld, Koch, Clugston, Carter Woods will be familiar to you. The final tradition – and the one you have all been waiting for -- is the welcoming of our new members by current members of the Society through demonstration of the official -- and highly guarded -- Phi Beta Kappa handshake. Welcome to Chapter Xi of New York and to the Phi Beta Kappa Society! I now invite you to turn to the Chapter member directly behind you so that they may welcome you into the Chapter themselves with the handshake ...