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The Offer of the College: A Life of Meaning and Purpose

Ana Conboy

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, aconboy@csbsju.edu

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Ana Fonseca Conboy
Assistant Professor of French
Department of Languages and Cultures
College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University
Phi Beta Kappa Induction Ceremony Keynote Address
April 24th, 2019
Alumnae Hall, Haehn Campus Center, 5pm

“The Offer of the College”: A Life of Meaning and Purpose

Do you know what the meaning of life is?... No, really, what is the meaning of life? Because I've been trying to figure it out for a while now... I'm sorry I can't give you the answer to that question, but today I would like to address what can bring and give meaning and purpose to life, on a daily basis, in the present moment. It is a true honor to stand before you today and to be one of the first to congratulate you on your election to the Theta chapter of Phi Beta Kappa. Before we continue the celebration with a communal meal in honor of the liberal arts and of your accomplishments, I would like to offer some personal thoughts about how your education in the liberal arts can provide the building blocks to finding your personal answers to what brings meaning and purpose to life.

You have just been inducted into Phi Beta Kappa, a highly prestigious academic honor society. But you are not here today solely on the merit of your GPA. You have been deemed exemplary liberal arts students, ones who—if we, as faculty, and CSB/SJU as institutions, have done our job right—are critical thinkers, seekers, questioners, and students who embody the values of availability to and respect for other perspectives, who embody the values of emotional intelligence and empathy. Your versatility, personal integrity and good moral character have warranted the seal of approval. You have demonstrated intellectual curiosity in

a breadth of disciplines and dedication to the liberal arts and sciences that will make you reflective and engaged citizens of the world.

You began your trajectory some years ago, and your reasons for attending a liberal arts institution may have been wide and varied. I chose my alma mater, not because of the job I hoped to land—in fact, that was the last thing on my mind throughout most of my college career—but because of the sense of home, of place, of belonging I felt the minute I set foot on its Quad. This sense of place has not faded, and I regularly return to the pines of dear old Bowdoin, one of the many places I can proudly call home in this vast world, thanks to my many travels and sojourns.

During my time in college, I described myself as an international student, Biochemistry major and French minor, with a passion for Music and Theater. My aunt endearingly tagged me as the “singing chemist”. I didn’t quite make a career out of that, but it is still inherently part of who I am, at my core. Many of the foundations of who I am today, how I engage with the world with a sense of gratitude, reverence and wonder, how I try to exercise sound and right judgement, were ingrained in me during those four years. Two of these foundations, these building blocks, specifically, have stuck with me and I find them pertinent and poignant to share with you on this day of celebration for your multiple successes in the liberal arts. The first building block is entitled “The Offer of the College”, a poem by William DeWitt Hyde, the president of my alma mater just over one-hundred years ago. He speaks of what the college has to offer to a student who is open-minded and nestled in the liberal arts. He speaks not of concrete skills and knowledge, but of a holistic development of the person. What does the College offer in Hyde’s mind? *[The Offer of the College]*

*TO BE AT HOME in all lands and all ages;
To count Nature a familiar acquaintance, and Art an intimate friend;
To gain a standard for the appreciation of others' work
And the criticism of your own;
To carry the keys of the world's library in your pocket,
And feel its resources behind you in whatever task you undertake;
To make hosts of friends... Who are to be leaders in all walks of life;
To lose yourself in generous enthusiasms
And cooperate with others for common ends -
This is the offer of the college for the best four years of your life¹.*

Human beings are, by nature, social beings—we “cooperate with others for common ends”, as Hyde states: we seek kinship! We depend on each other for survival, for happiness and for a sense of a fulfilling life. What better way to bring purpose to life than to encounter and enter into relationship with others and engage gracefully to cultivate that web of connectedness that binds us together?

Not long after I learned about “The Offer of the College”, another building block was laid, when I learned from the Dean of Students one word that has stayed with me since: *sprezzatura*. As good students of the liberal arts, I invite you to repeat after me: sprezza... tura. *Sprezzatura!* The Italian word dates back to the 16th century and was simply defined as a “studied carelessness”, that is, everything you do should appear effortless, possessing a certain grace, even if struggle went into it. I have since learned that this word can also carry negative connotations, but let’s focus on the positive today. I offer the interpretation of *sprezzatura* as

¹ Adapted from the original "Offer of the College" by William DeWitt Hyde, President of Bowdoin College 1885–1917.

the ability to exercise prudence and attain moral victory even in the midst of failure. One of the greatest values of the liberal arts is that you have the tools necessary to conduct yourselves with that positive spin of the concept of *sprezzatura* and to keep learning. A life of commitment to the liberal arts guarantees that you will never stop growing and coming into being.

Development and self-understanding are life-long journeys. These ideas are, of course, not new. Numerous thinkers have reflected on and offered their own building blocks to creating meaning in life, many of which I have embraced over the years, and some very recently, in fact. A few have become important to me—I hope you will find them useful in building your own meanings for life. In his book *Liberal Learning as a Quest for Purpose*, William Sullivan explores the topic of vocation for undergraduates and encourages faculty and staff to foster a collaborative environment with students to help guide them in discerning what their vocation (or vocations) may be in life. Vocation, as so many of you have so well articulated to me on various occasions, goes well beyond success in the workplace, or career. It touches on the essence of the person, who they are meant to become, and how they are meant to belong, in the context of their community, rather than what they are meant to *do* in society. It *incorporates* the concept of career, but it is overarching and necessarily connects to the Other. Recent articles published in Forbes and Inside Higher Ed corroborate William Sullivan's views and reveal that Millennials (that's you...) constantly seek purpose in what they do in life. A report from Gallup and Bates College shows that 95% of four-year college graduates consider a sense of purpose at least moderately important in their work. And that sense of purpose is correlated with an overall sense of well-being. Each one of you has strengths and weaknesses, gifts that you can, and should share with the world. Others will help pinpoint those gifts, but

who better to know what they are than you, yourself? Your strengths are your assets and will be your contribution to the web of connectedness in our world. Cultivate a sense of attentiveness and awareness, of listening, and you will hone in on those gifts that make you who you are, gifts you are meant to share with those around you.

Do not settle. Pursue newness in the repetition and routine of life and discover the unfamiliar that lies in the familiar. Restlessness is what keeps life interesting and sustains us on the journey forward. A sense of satisfaction and contentment in that restlessness [a paradoxical idea, I know] will keep you exploring and developing your love for lifelong learning. There will be moments when you sense a desire, a thirst for more—GOOD! You must dig deep into your vocation—ask yourself, what brings you joy in life? Listen, as Saint Benedict encourages us to do, with the ear of your heart. Listen for the answer to that question, openly, vulnerably, with no preconceived judgements, and use it to construct a life of purpose. What activities are life-giving for you? Commit to them. When I was about to graduate from college, I made a pact with myself that, no matter what I ended up doing and becoming, I would never go without singing. So far, so good... How do *you* want to be remembered?

New York Times columnist David Brooks makes the crucial distinction between résumé virtues and eulogy virtues. In his book *The Road to Character*, he argues that the latter, the traits that you will be remembered for at your funeral, are those that you should live by, and those that, ultimately, make your life one of meaningful purpose. Your road to character passes through our liberal arts institutions and, in your time here, whether you are aware of it already, or not, you have garnered skills and tools to live your life according to your eulogy virtues. It may not yet be evident, but let the delayed gratification pleasantly surprise you in the future. If

we, as an institution, as a community, have not failed you, these tools are instilled, or in the very least, are planted in you and will blossom and bear fruit in years to come. How do *you* want to be remembered? Then, live your life that way. There are no multiple choice questions or rubrics that can assess one's eulogy virtues, but you know (or will learn in a few years) that you have done well in that realm. Just as we are trained to think critically about a novel, about a historical event or scientific discovery, we must also think critically of ourselves.

The most formative moments in our college career are not necessarily those spent in the classroom. They are those in the dining hall, in class projects, in theater productions or athletic meets, when we are in communion with others, companions on *their* journey and accompanied by them on *our* own development and journey to self-understanding. The polysemic nature of the verb "to err" is indicative of life's challenge and duality. We err, we wander, we navigate, we journey... and in the process, we also err, we struggle, we make mistakes, we fail. But we, disciples of the liberal arts, have the strength and courage to graciously accept failure and re-imagine our lives beyond those potholes on the road. Have the courage to err, for "To live a creative life, we must lose our fear of being wrong" (Joseph Chilton Pearce). It is in erring as we err that we learn, that we better ourselves and that we work to improve our world. After lengthy erring, in both senses of the word, Voltaire's character Candide, from the eponymous novel of the French philosopher, learns that all **is** not well in the world. Rather, all *will* be well. All shall be well. All it takes is for us to cultivate and grow our garden... our communal garden. But to properly tend a garden, one must care for it, and occasionally weed it, to get rid of unnecessary blight.

Marie Kondo has gotten a lot of press lately for helping to weed and tidy up people's homes and, hence, sparking joy in the world. She spells it out as her mission. I would argue that we can take her example and make it our mission not to spark joy by decluttering our material possessions (though that's always good, too!), but by decluttering our moral and spiritual character, and so focus on the eulogy virtues to which David Brooks refers. As students of the liberal arts, we are not threatened by self-reflection or by a quest of self-knowledge. In fact, we find true wisdom in these exercises. They should be a part of our daily practice of decluttering what is unnecessary and unproductive. Where have things not quite gone right? What/how would we like to improve them in the future? How can we improve our relationships with others? How can we spark joy by tidying up inside?

As models of undergraduates rooted in liberal arts education, and as inductees of Phi Beta Kappa, you are equipped with the personal integrity, the commitment, the resourcefulness and the perseverance necessary to question yourselves and dedicate your lives, with intentionality, to the common good. The universe will unfold as it should. So, what *is* the meaning of life?... Instead of leaving this evening and trying to find the meaning of life, I challenge you to go out and create the meaning of *today*. And, tomorrow, create the meaning of tomorrow, and so on and so on. Congratulations, once again, on being selected to be a part of this prestigious society that is Phi Beta Kappa. Make it part of your quotidian to spark joy for yourself... and spark joy for others. With grace and confidence, spark joy, engage your surroundings with *sprezzatura* and, as Ignatius of Loyola incites us to do, go forth to set the world aflame. Thank you.