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"The Mysterious Stranger": Address to New Members of Phi Beta Kappa (Theta of Minnesota), April 23, 2013

Scott Richardson
College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, srichardson@csbsju.edu

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I used to know everything. Then I went to college. As I was about to enter college, I was pretty sure I had the world figured out. I didn't need and certainly didn't want my professors to do anything but reconfirm my beliefs, values, and vision of the world. I was in for a real surprise.

There's nothing innocent or comforting about a liberal arts education. I've been on the other side for a while now, a professor greeting similarly minded students with a wry smile that says, "You think you're getting on a soothing carousel, but watch out, my young friends, because sometimes these horses come to life and try to throw you off." Not the welcome you might have expected, I suppose. Still, you seem like the sort of students who learned quickly to enjoy the ride.

The society into which you have now been initiated was founded on the premise that a liberal arts education is intrinsically good not only during the college years when your principal duties are to pursue knowledge, develop talents, and explore the nature of the world. It should also affect your whole way of life for the better as you leave the hallowed halls of academia and bring your enlightenment to your workaday lives, your families, and your communities. The three Greek letters now associated with your names stand for the words Φιλοσοφία Βίου Κυβερνήτης (Philosophia Biou Kubernetes) — "Philosophy, pilot of life." A κυβερνήτης is a navigator, the person who operates the helm on a ship and guides it through the hazards of the sea toward the desired destination. This society claims that philosophy, the love

of wisdom, is your pilot through the precarious journey of your lives. I would like to talk about two ways in which your college years have, if we've all done our jobs properly, prepared you to take on the love of wisdom as the pilot of your life. The first presents the deconstructive aspect of our enterprise, and the second suggests how together we work toward rebuilding what has been taken apart.

Disruption

Many of my favorite works of literature involve the theme of "The Mysterious Stranger." We start with an apparently happy and stable community or family thrown into disarray by the arrival of an outsider, a mysterious stranger who upsets what everyone else has taken to be normal and natural. The basic pattern can be seen plainly in a book we've all read, *The Cat in the Hat*. We see a normal bourgeois family home with extremely bored bourgeois children who conjure up some excitement, an enchanting but amoral playmate who throws over their inhibitions and magically engages them in playful and unwholesome activities their parents wouldn't care for. *The Cat in the Hat* shakes up the children's lives for the afternoon, throws out the window everything they've held as standard and proper behavior, and in the end walks out the door. What he leaves them with is left to our imagination. All we know is that the children's lives have been rattled. The Cat has shaken up their lives of dull routine and given them a glimpse of an alternate way of life that would never have occurred to them.

Sometimes the mysterious stranger exposes evils or at least bad habits the community members have grown so accustomed to that they simply cannot recognize them as offensive or problematic. In Gogol's classic comedy, *The Inspector General*, the arrival of a huckster who goes along with everyone's mistaken assumption that he is a government inspector in disguise, brings out the greed, lust for power, and basic dishonesty in virtually all the townspeople. Dostoevsky's Idiot, a naïve young man who harbors no resentment, falsity, or ulterior motives to his goodness, functions as a photographic negative to the pettiness, social insincerity, hatred, lust, and rapacity that his sudden presence brings to the fore

in Russian society. The Ekdal family in Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* is getting along quite happily until an old friend returns to town and, with a firm conviction in his moral enterprise, exposes the illusions that have kept this family afloat all these years, without which they crumble.

The mysterious strangers serve to disrupt the apparent harmony of normal people, sometimes to their detriment, but often to their healthy but unwelcome enlightenment. The ends of these works are generally a lot messier than the beginnings, and it is because of this mess that some characters, or at least the readers, can see the true nature of people and society that false harmony and blind allegiance to the status quo have hidden. In my mind, it is a principal function of college professors and in fact of the whole college experience to perform the role of the mysterious stranger, to be a disruptive influence in the lives of our students, to unsettle you and to create a mess. Whatever you're comfortable with I would like you to feel some discomfort about. Whatever is in your minds normal and natural I would like you to consider to be less than universal, perhaps peculiar to your own circle, and quite possibly wrong. And if you're absolutely certain of something, I want you to see that not everyone shares your certainty and not without good reason. This disruption is not itself the goal, of course, but rather a necessary means to the sort of critical analysis of yourselves, your culture, your habits, and your relation to the world that educated people practice.

Those who are satisfied with their understanding of what makes themselves tick or who just aren't interested aren't living a very full life, no matter what their formal education. Those, on the other hand, who feel occasional surprise at themselves, recognize the complexities of their self-contradictory impulses, stay curious about their motivations and personality quirks, and remain somewhat dissatisfied with their current state of knowledge — these are the people I respect as vibrant, enlightened, and alive. A major objective in a liberal arts education, perhaps the paramount objective, should be a move toward this refusal of self-satisfaction. It should encourage you to shun complacency and to feel a life-long itch to work toward a better understanding of yourselves and of your world.

Reconstruction

Breaking down the barrier of your contentment is a necessary step toward a proper liberal arts education. Still, we would be remiss, I suppose, if all we do with you is to throw your lives into disorder. I like to think that the relationships you have developed with some of your professors have given you the material and the method to transform that disruption into a new and improved scaffolding on which to build your approach to life.

Professors might not all intend to be anything more than founts of knowledge when we decide to join the faculty. We know a lot and we're happy we can make a living passing our knowledge on to others. You students are lucky to have people with such a dazzling wealth of erudition to tap into, and we're willing for a modest stipend to sprinkle you with organized bits of our intellect, and that's about it. We're not camp counselors after all, we're professors, and we're at the front of the classroom because we've gone to great effort to learn things you don't know yet.

To many of us, then, it comes as a surprise when we realize that students are looking to us for more than the information we can dole out. I remember being rather daunted in my early days as it slowly dawned on me that many of these young people were expecting me to serve as a sort of guide and, in some cases, even a companion in their development — and not only in their intellectual development but sometimes in the cultivation of their moral sense and in the search for self-understanding.

In my second year here, I was astounded one day when a student in my mythology course the semester before came by the office to thank me for what I'd done for him. Now, I barely knew this guy. He rarely spoke up in class, and I never saw him or talked with him outside of class. All I knew was that he learned from me the names and attributes of many fictional Greek characters, he read a lot of good stories and several classic works of Greek literature, and he listened to my interpretations and analyses. He took the tests and wrote adequate papers and was now more literate and knowledgeable than a few months before. I knew his name at the time but right now I can't even picture his face.

So what was he doing in my office? What he'd gotten out of the class, apparently, was more than an acquaintance with classical mythology and literature. Or rather, through this acquaintance he had the opportunity to take a good hard look at himself and his own life, where he was now and where he thought he was going. He cited the *Odyssey* as the most influential book of the semester, the story of a middle-aged man forced to take a good hard look at himself and his life, where he was now and where he thought he was going. So when I'd suggested in class that, if we dare, we too can undergo the sort of self-exploration the hero of the *Odyssey* puts himself through, this student took me seriously and a couple of months later felt the urge to let me know that this book affected his life at a reasonably profound level.

Imagine my astonishment. All I thought I was doing was displaying my own high-brow education and passing some morsels on to the students. Now all of the sudden my course had pushed someone a little further toward self-discovery, or at least toward recognizing self-discovery as a worthy activity. What if others had a similar reaction, even if they couldn't articulate it like this fellow or didn't realize it yet? I wasn't much older than the students and some of them were looking to me for guidance in life? I was having a hard enough time trying to figure myself out.

But this realization shouldn't have taken me by surprise. Most of us professors have not only fallen in love with our subjects but have been so deeply moved by them that our lives have been shaped, enriched, even transformed by our studies. Literature keeps me entertained, elicits curiosity, gets me riled, and introduces me to many locations, time periods, mentalities, and philosophies beyond my own little world. It takes me on explorations of the human condition, the nature of the divine, the complexities of what looks simple, and the quandaries that have long pestered the most creative and thoughtful minds. My aesthetic faculties have been sharpened by the way authors use language, and I've come to recognize my appreciation of beauty itself as one of the blessings of life. The devotion of much of my waking life to literature and languages has in large part molded my personality, transfigured my sensibilities, and determined my relations with others, and I couldn't have developed

the way I have without the teachers who guided my studies, tutored my judgments, served as models, and shared their passions.

In my courses I want to infuse some of this wealth and wonder into the young people before me. Not all of them want it; many turn out to be impervious; many aren't aware at the time, maybe never will be, that their minds have been stirred; most perhaps can't express coherently just how they've been changed or enlightened. Yet in well-run classes, the passion your professors display for their subjects and their ability to give you a glimpse of how they can enrich your lives have certainly reached all of you at some level. No one can assess just how much a professor has benefited a student in the long-term or even at the time. We can't measure spiritual, moral, aesthetic, or intellectual development. But that's what we're here for. We're valuable to the extent that our courses have coaxed people like you to think, feel, care, understand, perceive, question, be curious, be enlightened, and be bothered.

Edifying Discomfort

A quality liberal arts education offers one of the most favorable opportunities we have to reevaluate assumptions, to develop the habit of seeking out what we don't know, and to assimilate a diversity of influences in forming our characters. You leave the comforting world of the familiar, spend four years grappling with the demons of uncertainty and complexity, and return to the world of employment and obligations armed with a substantially greater understanding of yourselves and of your place in the world.

On each syllabus we're encouraged to list our learning goals so that the students have a clear idea of what they should expect to get out of this particular course. For one of my honors literature courses, I present these learning goals that I think might also serve as the learning goals of a proper liberal arts education: Literacy, taste, thought, a desire to pick up a high-quality book when you're over thirty, an eagerness to see a movie not shown at most cinemas, open-mindedness, an enriched aesthetic sensibility, confidence, an appreciation for language, the urgency to repudiate

confidence, an appreciation for language, the urgency to repudiate philistinism. I may not know everything anymore, but I count myself fortunate that, after confronting the mysterious stranger and tearing down my complacency, I could lay myself open to the constructive influences that led me toward these learning goals. I wish on you the same, and I trust that your years with us have set you on track toward becoming people with these attributes of a good liberal arts education.

On behalf of the Phi Beta Kappa members of the faculty, staff, and administration of our two colleges that represent the best tradition of the liberal arts, I congratulate you on your admirable achievement in being selected to join this august society.

Scott Richardson is Professor of Classics.