National Honor Society Address 2010

The last time I was invited to address the induction meeting of the National Honor Society I was given very specific instructions. Speak about character from a historical perspective, be brief, and be inspiring. This time I was given no specific instructions so I have taken the opportunity to prepare an hour long lecture on the Puritan conception of honor with a special focus on the sermons of John Williams as described in *The Unredeemed Captive* by John Demos. Just kidding, instead I would like to speak about the importance of the pillars of the National Honor Society as you prepare for the challenges of the twenty first century.

We are gathered together this evening for the purposes of celebration, commitment and challenge. The celebration part is easy and fully appropriate. First and foremost we celebrate the inductees into National Honor Society for their hard work and tremendous academic success. Second we celebrate your parents for their role in caring for you, tutoring you, encouraging you, and I’m sure occasionally cajoling you toward greater levels of achievement. Also we celebrate your teachers and administrators for their efforts to provide you with the best possible education. Although, I’m sure there are times that you wish your teachers did not push you quite so hard. But also be grateful
that you are part of a district that values both your education and your overall development.

Yet if all that happened tonight was celebration, we would lose the opportunity for commitment and challenge, the chance to more fully embrace the values and pillars of the National Honor Society. I sometimes fear that many students today have embraced a merely instrumental view of education. Classes have value to the degree that they can enhance one’s GPA. Acceptance to the National Honor Society is sought more for the stepping stone it provides to selective colleges and universities than to be transformed into people of honor. College admission is pursued in order to get the next acceptance to a graduate program, or to enter into a lucrative career track. The right career will then pave the way for a life of abundant material possessions, ease, and security. While all of these goals have merit, they fall short of the higher ideals of the National Honor Society.

Many of pillars of the National Honor Society seem quaint in a rapidly changing world. What is the value of scholarship in a society where Google and Bing can answer our questions immediately, and a constant stream of entertainment and media seeks to fill every cranny of our lives? What is the point of service, when one measure of success is the ability to hire others to serve us instead? Leadership seems less
problematic, especially if we can be the type of leader who orders others around and doesn’t have to lead from the front. Perhaps most of all, character appears positively old fashioned. Why work on inner dispositions when I can be burnishing my resume or updating my face-book page? Who cares who I am when no one is looking anyway?

One person who may have learned to care is Adam Wheeler. Last Thursday, May 27th was supposed to be a very special day in his life. Many of his goals would be achieved as he received his diploma from Harvard University. Instead he had been arrested, held on $5,000 bail, and charged with larceny and identity fraud. After being expelled from Bowdoin College for plagiarism, Wheeler was able to falsify his SAT scores, claim an education at Phillips Academy and MIT and get accepted to Harvard. Apparently, no one was tipped off about his antics until he made false claims on an application for a Rhodes scholarship that had to be verified by Harvard Faculty. Even after being expelled from Harvard he continued his scheme with an effort to transfer into Yale. Assuming these allegations are correct, we could see Adam Wheeler as an anomaly.

But if we look at him in a larger context the story gets more concerning. The recent resignation of Mark Souder, Republican congressman from Indiana, for having an affair with his aide with whom
he made an abstinence video is only the latest in a series of scandals rocking both political parties and over a variety of issues suggesting that people are primarily concerned with image. Inner character means nothing: at least until you get caught. Such examples cross over all aspects of modern life from sports heroes caught doping, to CEOs defrauding their investors, and yes even historians plagiarizing one-another’s work and lying to their students about their military record.

But these individual examples may only be symptoms of deeper challenges in modern society. A brief survey of contemporary issues is sobering indeed. The economy has yet to recover its footing and appears to be leaving increasing numbers of Americans behind. Scientists warn about the dangers of our dependence on oil and express concern that we may already be producing peak oil, even while oil continues to spew unabated from the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico. Other scholars and activists are raising the alarm that human induced climate change is doing irreparable harm to the earth’s ecosystem. Meanwhile, the war on terror continues unabated with little evidence that we are actually more secure or have not in fact spawned more terrorists through our aggressive policies to eliminate them. All the while the government continues to cut taxes, spend money, and increase entitlements with seeming reckless abandon, creating a fiscal
time bomb for the rising generation of Americans, if it is not already upon us.

Not long ago when raising some of these issues with some of my students, one asked why her generation was going to be stuck with all of these challenges. I could only respond with the words of Gandalf, that it is not for us to decide what times we live in, “All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.” Nevertheless, I believe there is wisdom in the pillars and values of the National Honor Society that might help to point the way out of these dilemmas. As I mentioned previously some of these pillars may seem decidedly old fashioned, yet nevertheless they present timeless ideals that can inspire any generation to live more fulfilling and useful lives. For each of them I would like to add my own advice on how they can be pursued in the 21st century.

The pillar of scholarship seems self evident in a society of this sort, where a minimum GPA is a prerequisite for membership. Yet, if not pursued in the right spirit, scholarship can become a distraction from the quest for wisdom. Be sure to avoid excessive specialization. While there is no doubt great value is a deep understanding of the Puritan conception of honor as expressed by John Williams – we can pursue the path of specialization so far that we end up knowing
everything about nothing and everything about nothing. To escape this trap pursue knowledge in a wide variety of disciplines, find cross-curricular classes, and maintain a passion for learning throughout your life. Do not limit your learning to strictly academic pursuits. Study drawing. Learn music. Be able to build and repair things with your own hands. Practice the culinary arts, whenever possible with ingredients you have grown yourself or purchased from a local farm. Immerse yourself in the aerodynamic properties of flying discs. And finally, pursue scholarship for its own sake, never merely as the means to some other end.

See within the pillar of service the opportunity to invest in community and relationships. In so doing we remind ourselves that there is great value in contributing to something beyond ourselves. Small towns such as the ones that most of you live in provide outstanding opportunities for this type of investment. As the poet, writer, farmer, and philosopher Wendell Berry has written,

A community is the mental and spiritual condition of knowing that the place is shared, and that the people who share the place define and limit the possibilities of each other's lives. It is the knowledge that people have of each other, their concern for each other, their trust in each other, the freedom with which they come and go among themselves.
As Berry correctly understands, the self limitation that such service entails, is not limitation at all, but true freedom as the concern we have expressed for others returns to us in a myriad of unanticipated ways. When we learn to take care of the needs of those around us, we find ourselves growing in compassion, humility, and community, and the value of interdependence.

Perhaps leadership is the most eagerly sought of the pillars. Yet no one has adequately explained what a nation full of leadership but devoid of followership might look like. We are always happy to have others follow us, yet finding and following strong leaders might be the first step in developing our own leadership gifts. One often overlooked exemplary 20th century leader was Ella Baker, the spiritual godmother of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee. Having previously worked for the NAACP and Martin Luther King’s SCLC she found in SNCC the opportunity to implement her vision of leadership development. Find people with natural leadership gifts, train and empower them. Also remember that everyone is capable of making a contribution. As you lead, especially in a high school or college environment, train others to take your place, or else your contribution will only last as long as your time at the school.
Perhaps the most challenging of the four pillars is character. Many of us have come to accept that public and private morality are separate and need not intersect. Yet there are a few character traits that we must develop if we hope to make positive contributions with our lives. The first is humility. In a world where bold pronouncements and rancorous partisan discord is accepted as the norm, humility would go a long way. Even Gibbs on the popular show NCIS, known for his many rules including, “never apologize, it is a sign of weakness,” recently had to add the new rule 51, “sometimes you are wrong.” As my mother often said, “the more you know, the more you know you don’t know.” Indeed, some scholars have recently suggested that we embrace the virtues of ignorance, recognizing that there will always be more that we don’t know about the natural world than what we know. Such an emphasis on humility forces me to admit that some of my advice may be wrong, but I offer it anyway hoping to share some of what I have learned over the years.

The most pressing character need of our day is learning to live within our means, economically, socially, and environmentally. Every day we are bombarded with images telling us to consume more and live better. If we run out of funds to consume, the financial industry will come up with a plethora of new means of going further into debt to
fuel our consumption. If we refuse, the government will take up the slack either by cutting us checks and instructing us to go spend them, or by spending beyond its means to insure ever increasing consumption. Yet somehow we as individuals and as a society need to live to within our means and save and conserve for the future, instead of spending it all now. Secondly, living within our means requires us to watch our time commitments. Despite all of our modern gadgets to make our lives more efficient, we only have a finite amount of time. The more overcommitted we become, the more pressure we feel to cut corners, and compromise our character. Choose a few things and excel at them, but don’t choose too many. Clearly there is a lot more to character than humility and living within our means, but both are at present counter-cultural and a good place to start in our quest improve ourselves.

What might a life built around the four pillars of the National Honor Society look like? One example might be the character Samwise Gamgee from the Lord of the Rings. Since he begins the story as a gardener, he may seem like an unusual choice. But as the story progresses we learn that he is no ordinary hobbit. Caught eavesdropping on Frodo and Gandalf he is thrust into an adventure accompanying Frodo and the Ring of Power to Rivendell and then ultimately to Mount Doom itself. Along the way he demonstrates the
character traits of loyalty, perseverance, and courage. Toward the end he literally carries Frodo when his burden becomes too great. It is only after the return from the quest that Sam begins to reveal the other pillars of the honor society. In a scene conspicuously missing from the movie, Sam takes the gift of dust that the lady Galadriel gave him and uses it to restore the Shire from the ecological devastation it had suffered in the war. As Sam describes his thoughts, “I’m sure the Lady would not like me to keep it all for my own garden, now so many folk have suffered.” So he begins the careful work of planting and restoration so that the year became legendary for the quality of vegetables and the regrowth of trees and other plants. Such an act of service benefitted not only all of the hobbits, but the very landscape of the shire. While Sam may not be remembered as a great scholar he was entrusted with the task, of finishing the manuscript of the Lord of the Rings. Finally, while Sam may be more of a follower in the main plot of the book, the appendix reveals that Sam took the lessons of leadership he learned from the quest and served for seven terms as the mayor of Hobbiton.

Yet we need not turn to the fantasy world of Middle Earth to see these pillars lived out. We can see them among many of the people gathered in this room. Nashoba students are living out these values in
their daily lives. Countless students apply themselves diligently through long hours of study seeking to learn and grow in as many ways as possible. Your service is truly remarkable. Some of you serve as EMTs, others as coaches and umpires. Some of you tutor and give tours of the school. Many of you have raised money for Haiti relief or for cancer research. You give of yourselves generously and often without thought of reward. Your leadership is also expressed in myriad ways. From captains, to club leaders, to members of Student Council and the student advisory council you provide essential leadership for the school. Beyond that you show initiative, starting programs like composting in the school cafeteria, or traveling to Nicaragua to provide medical services. In terms of character, not only have you demonstrated perseverance in your studies you have often modeled true compassion: bringing *Rachel’s Challenge* to the school to encourage compassion and kindness, leading a campaign to end the use of the offensive “R” word, volunteering to be silent for a day to sympathize with those who are harassed on the basis of their sexual orientation, and planning a memorial service and scholarship fund for a classmate who passed away before his time. In making the above list, I know that I am leaving out many more than I am including. Yet even this short list reveals that there is much to be admired in this generation of students. Take inspiration from one another and goad
one another on to further advances in scholarship, service, leadership, and character. Do this not just because it is the right thing to do, but because the future quite literally depends upon it.

Thank You