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Phi Beta Kappa Initiation Remarks

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Phi Beta Kappa Initiation

May 5, 2007

I am honored to be here at this very special ceremony that recognizes your induction into the Illinois Wesleyan chapter of Phi Beta Kappa. I certainly want to offer my personal congratulations to you, but I also want to acknowledge the support and encouragement provided by the parents and friends who are here to share in this occasion with you. Would the parents and friends please stand and be recognized.

Phi Beta Kappa is indeed a very high honor. Did you know that only about 10 percent of the nation's colleges and universities have Phi Beta Kappa chapters. And, only 1 in 10 arts and sciences graduates of these institutions are selected for Phi Beta Kappa membership.

Here is what John D. Zeglis, former chairman and CEO of AT&T Wireless and native of Momence, Illinois, said at an initiation ceremony like this one: "You are here because you've made a habit of excellence. Occasional brilliance will not get you into Phi Beta Kappa. You are not one-subject wonders. You've established your intellectual credentials in a wide range of subjects. The excellence that brings you here is not accidental. You have chosen to pursue it, and you have earned it. You've broken the code of how to get it done. And that stays with you for life."

Consider those words for a moment. Did you know that 17 U.S. Presidents and six of the nine current U.S. Supreme Court Justices have a Phi Beta Kappa key.

Here are some other members whose names you may know:

- Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon.com
- Eileen Collins, space shuttle commander
- Francis Ford Coppola, film director
- Michael Crichton, author
- Rita Dove, former U.S. poet laureate
- John Hope Franklin, historian
- Brian Greene, physicist
- Peyton Manning, NFL quarterback
- Stephen Sondheim, composer and lyricist
- John Updike, novelist and critic, and Illinois Wesleyan honorary degree recipient

Your selection for this honor reflects several important characteristics:

- You have been consistently successful in the classroom;
- You have shown a love of learning;
- You have established yourself as a leader;

To place these accomplishments in context, I would ask that you consider for a moment some of the important issues facing this country. As we enter what is proving to be a very long and contentious campaign for national leadership, we see a number of conflicting characteristics in the political leaders vying for our votes and sound bites on the nightly newscasts. We see

- The inspiring and the infuriating,
- The honesty and the deception,
- The noble and the regrettable

The rest of the news is no less vexing.

- The seemingly unending and incomprehensible acts of violence like we saw at Virginia Tech
- The increasing divisiveness over our involvement in Iraq
- The emotional debate about our environment and global warming,
- The tragedies of war and HIV/AIDS in Africa, and
- The poverty and hopelessness that grips many parts of the world.

When one thinks about these events and issues, there is clearly the need for scholarship and leadership.

There are many dimensions to these qualities, but the ones that tie them together for me in relation to those of you being honored today are Enlightened Citizenship and Engaged Citizenship.

The Enlightened Citizen

In my mind, the enlightened citizen is one that takes the time to try to understand the dimensions of an issue, someone who reads broadly and reflects critically on what has been read.

In the world in which we live, there is no dearth of information. The challenge is to sort through the mass of articles, news broadcasts, and web reports and make judgments about the quality of the arguments, the veracity of the supporting data, and the implications for society.

Unfortunately, we live in an era in which much of the news is distilled into sound bites; ... i-Pods replace conversation, ...and Web blogs dictate tactics.

You are among the fortunate for whom society has set aside four years in which to grow and develop as individuals and to contemplate how best to spend the rest of your lives.

As you think about the future, I urge you to apply what you have learned at Illinois Wesleyan about critical thinking, effective writing, and thoughtful discourse. We need Enlightened Citizens with well-developed skills in each of these areas.

The Engaged Citizen

The second component is Engaged Citizenship. Regrettably, sometime between the end of high school and the start of a career, many students become self-absorbed and look at what institutions in society might do for them rather than what they might do for society.

This has had some significant consequences for our country and our society. At my inauguration two years ago, I called attention to the work of Robert Putnam, Harvard University public policy expert. His research had focused on the changing lifestyles of Americans over the past 40 years and resulted in a landmark book about these changes.

In that book he revealed that many parts of our nation and society have become ever more alienated from one another and from our social and political institutions, thus threatening our personal, local, and national well being. The book's title, *Bowling Alone*, is a metaphor for important social changes over the past several decades. Putnam documents that many of us in this country, especially those in larger urban areas, are more inclined to go our separate ways, hence bowling alone.

Recognizing their role in preparing students to address the bowling alone phenomenon, many colleges and universities have begun to place increased emphasis on civic leadership and community engagement. We have sought to create more opportunities for our students to devote time to important local, state, national, and international issues. We want to cultivate a commitment to engagement that continues following graduation.

At Illinois Wesleyan one can find many examples of civic and social engagement that make a real difference:

- Habitat for Humanity,
- Action Research Center,
- Promise and Potential at Bloomington Jr. High,
- Sierra Student Coalition,
- Adopt a School at Bent School

Such experiences not only provide a living laboratory in which to test classroom learning but also foster a shared sense of responsibility for the quality of life in this community. The exhilarating feeling of making a difference for those in need underscores the value of being both intellectually and personally engaged as citizens—a value that we hope carries over into your lives following graduation.

My message today to everyone in this room, but especially to those being honored, is to make choices throughout the rest of your lives that allow you to be both Enlightened Citizens and Engaged Citizens.

Winston Churchill captured this sentiment in the following way: “*We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.*”

Congratulations and best wishes.