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## 'I Said to Him, "Well, Lord Russell, What's It All About?" And Do You Know, *He Couldn't Tell Me!*'

John Churchill  
*Secretary, The Phi Beta Kappa Society*

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**KEYNOTE SPEAKER**

**'I Said To Him, "Well, Lord Russell, What's It All About?"  
And Do You Know, *He Couldn't Tell Me!*'**

John Churchill

Secretary, The Phi Beta Kappa Society

The explosive growth in available knowledge, and the ease with which it can be accessed, threatens us, maybe paradoxically, with problems about its usefulness and relevance. As more and more comes to be known, we become less and less certain about which bits matter. We become less secure in presupposing a common matrix of shared understanding, and it can even seem that any contention can be buttressed with some selection of facts, drawn from somewhere.

Once the notion of "the unity of knowledge," assured that all that was or could be known stood, potentially, in some relation, itself knowable, to everything else that was or could be known. But that notion is, to say the least, out of fashion. The age of the expansion of knowledge is an age of differences: different languages and vocabularies, different research programs and methods, and a vastly expanded understanding of the way that the disciplines whose pursuit yields knowledge are themselves historical in nature, cultural artifacts, human projects.

This perspective greatly complicates questions about the meaning and importance of new knowledge. Why does it matter? What does it have to do with anything people care about? What does it *mean*? Unless we address such questions, the relevance of new knowledge will remain, at best, in doubt, or worse, open to unanticipated and unchallenged appropriation in ways we might never have imagined.

John Churchill is secretary of the Phi Beta Kappa Society, the nation's oldest academic honorary society. Founded in 1776 at the College of William and Mary, Phi Beta Kappa has 283 chapters on college and university campuses and well over a half-million living members. Its purpose is to advocate and recognize excellence in the study of the liberal arts and sciences. As secretary, Churchill is the Society's chief executive officer and the head of its national office.

Churchill was born in Hector, Arkansas, and was reared in Little Rock. He was educated at Rhodes College, where he was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa, at the University of Oxford, where he studied as a Rhodes Scholar, and at Yale University, where he was awarded the Ph.D. in 1978.

Churchill was formerly vice president for academic affairs and dean of the college at Hendrix College, where he also served as professor of philosophy and twice as interim president. In the 1970s, he served as assistant American secretary to the Rhodes Scholarship Trust, and has been active since that time in the selection of Rhodes Scholars.

His scholarly interests include the philosophers Ludwig Wittgenstein and David Hume, as well as topics in the history of philosophy, the philosophy of religion, and the philosophy of liberal education.

His publications include several dozen articles in these and related fields in journals in the U.S. and the U.K., book chapters in the U.S. and Germany, several dozen reviews and critical notes, as well as essays and stories in the popular press and college magazines. He has taught courses in the history of philosophy, philosophy of religion, logic, ethics, Wittgenstein, Hume and interdisciplinary topics involving texts from philosophy, literature, religion, history, and the classics. He writes a weekly blog for Phi Beta Kappa titled *From the Secretary*, available on the ΦBK website.

Churchill's professional activities have included membership on the Board of Directors of the American Conference of Academic Deans and the Arkansas Endowment for the Humanities, founding head of the Arkansas Governor's School's Area II, service as chair of the Council of Deans of the Associated Colleges of the South, and editorial work for *The Thomist*, *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, *The International Philosophical Quarterly*, and *Choice* magazine. He was a Danforth Foundation associate, a program review panelist for the National Endowment for the Humanities, and for 13 years a consultant/evaluator and team chair for the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. He is a former president of the National Humanities Alliance and a member of the Cosmos Club of Washington, D.C. Churchill has been married since 1972 to Jean Hill Churchill, and they have three children: Will (b. 1977), Mary Katherine (b. 1980), and Hugh (b. 1982).