

Phi Beta Kappa Induction Ceremony
May 8, 2010
Remarks by President Rock Jones

Living the Good Life: Values That Matter

It is an honor to share this very special occasion with all of you. I join the faculty and parents here today in extending my heartiest congratulations to those of you who today have been inducted into Phi Beta Kappa. As you know, Phi Beta Kappa is the nation's oldest and most distinguished academic society. The society was founded in 1776 on the campus of the College of William and Mary. To this day, Phi Beta Kappa remains true to the values of freedom of inquiry and liberty of thought and expression. The Greek letters reflect the initials of the motto "love of learning is the guide to life." You who have received your Phi Beta Kappa key today have been selected because of your exemplary accomplishments in the liberal arts and because of the potential you hold for lifelong learning that upholds the values of free inquiry and expression. Congratulations on this milestone achievement.

Today I turn our attention to the Statement of Aims of Ohio Wesleyan University, which can be found in the catalog, and to which I think we pay too little attention. In the Statement of Aims, we read that "Ohio Wesleyan considers itself successful when it has accomplished three objectives in its work with students."

The first objective—imparting knowledge—relates to the content of the curriculum. It suggests that there are certain things that a liberally educated person should know. In our curriculum, we achieve this objective by asking students to gain a breadth of knowledge through courses that are generally distributed throughout the curriculum and to gain a depth of knowledge in a particular discipline, known as the major.

The second objective—developing and enhancing certain capacities—relates to our intention to infuse the entire curriculum with activities that prepare students for lifelong learning. We believe students should develop capacities for critical analysis, sound reasoning, deliberate judgment, and aesthetic sensibility. We specify certain skills, such as the ability to write well and to speak persuasively, to engage with quantitative materials, and to obtain fluency in a second language. We state in the Aims an interest in students' learning to integrate theory with practice, a theme that has resurfaced with significant energy in the past 18 months. Collectively, we believe these capacities create intellectual and social dexterity that prepares students for lifelong learning and positions OWU alumni for leadership in every sector of our society.

The third objective—placing education in the context of values—is perhaps the most interesting. I read from the catalogue: "The third objective is to place education in the context of values. Liberal education seeks to develop in students understanding of themselves, appreciation of others, and willingness to meet the responsibilities of citizenship in a free society. It recognizes that trained sensitivity to private and public value issues, grounded in a sound grasp of various cultural heritages, is important for maturation and for living a good life. It accords high honor to intellectual honesty. Consistent with our Methodist tradition, Ohio Wesleyan encourages concern for all religious and ethical issues and stimulates its students to examine their own views in light of these issues."

What does it mean to state that among our aims is the intent to prepare our students to live a good life? And how does that happen? Some might argue that the very notion of placing education in the context of values is inherently contrary to the aims of a society that devotes itself to freedom of inquiry and liberty of thought and expression. Persons taking this position would suggest that the academy is, by nature, a value-free zone where all ideas are given equal consideration and where the acknowledgement of values might have a chilling effect on the free exchange of ideas. A distinguished political scientist at the University of Chicago, when delivering the annual Aims of Education address to incoming students in 1997, argued that “[major colleges and universities in this country] are remarkably amoral institutions” that should not offer courses “where you discuss ethics or morality in any detail,” nor should it see it as part of its mission to help students in “sorting out” the ethical issues they will face in their lives.”

In contrast, the OWU Statement of Aims calls for “trained sensitivity to public and private value issues,” encourages “concern for religious and ethical issues,” and announces the intention to stimulate students “to examine their own views in light of these issues.” The Statement of Aims does not argue that we should prescribe the values by which you live. But it does suggest that there is inherent value in structuring a liberal education in a way that challenges students to consider the moral implications that may accompany the outcome of scientific inquiry, that may inform an analysis of a body of literature or a work of art, that may deepen the understanding of a moment of history, or that may bring light to the study of a particular culture. How does one explore the Holocaust as a value-free inquiry? How does one assess the genocide in Rwanda without some attention to the moral implications of decisions made by individuals in that country and leaders in this country? How do we appropriate the results of splitting the atom or genetic engineering without attending to the ethical implications that accompany these remarkable scientific achievements? Do we really want to study the earth and the cultures that populate the earth without considering the moral impact of the actions of these populations in relation to this planet?

In my inaugural address last year, I called for Ohio Wesleyan University to commit itself to educating moral leaders for a global society. I believe that this is consistent with an education that prepares one to live a good life. You have benefited from an education of this sort, an education grounded in the ancient understanding that every association is defined by a conception of the good. You have benefited from classes where faculty members challenged you first to gain the deepest understanding possible of the content of the discipline, but often then to contemplate the moral implications of the understandings of that discipline. Some of you have participated in service-learning courses that were specifically designed to connect theory to practice by creating a venue for confronting the ethical dimensions of the discipline under study.

Your class has engaged the conscience of this campus about matters of sustainability and the environment. You rallied instantaneously to the announcement that Westboro Baptist Church might visit campus, as you organized the Love Day on the JAY; that response was not an amoral action. Some of you have served on the student conduct board, where every day you are confronted with considerations of the moral implications of actions taken by your peers and responses that are necessary for accountability and learning. Through all of this, you have become better people, and you have prepared yourself to make this a better

world. This is the product of an education set in the context of values, an education that prepares moral leaders for a global society.

Last May, on the occasion of his 50-year reunion and his recognition as a Distinguished Alumnus, Phil Meek, OWU class of 1959 and a Phi Beta Kappa, spoke in Gray Chapel about the impact of Ohio Wesleyan on his life. Following his time at OWU and at Harvard Business School, Phil joined the finance division at Ford Motor Company, where his career enjoyed rapid advancement. A few years into his career he helped host an OWU alumni event in Detroit. Following the event, his history professor, who had made the trip from Delaware, complimented him on his accomplishments in business and then posed this question: “But, Phil, when are you going to do something significant?” Soon after that memorable exchange, Phil was asked by the chairman of Ford Motor Company to step out of his growing role in the finance division and to go on loan to the city of Detroit to help lead an effort to bandage the city’s wounds after the riots. His friends all told him not to do it. It would destroy his career. But in the back of his mind, he could not let go of the piercing question of his OWU professor. “When are you going to do something significant?” He accepted the challenge, and he did the work.

A couple of years later, Phil received the opportunity to become publisher of the newspaper in Pontiac. This opened a career in the newspaper and media industries that ultimately led to his position as head of the publishing division of Capital Cities/ABC. Along the way, Phil served as publisher of the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*. While in Fort Worth, his news staff uncovered and investigated a troubling story that was very disruptive for a major Fort Worth company and for one of the city’s most prominent families. The paper was under immense pressure not to run the story. When Phil went home the night before the final decision, he recalled his days at Ohio Wesleyan and *The Transcript*. He thought about Verne Edwards, a longtime journalism professor and legendary member of this faculty. He asked himself, knowing the answer before he asked, this question: “What would Verne Edwards do?” The following day, he announced that the story would run, regardless of the impact on subscriptions or advertising revenue. It was the right thing to do. It was an act of moral leadership, grounded in lessons learned on this campus, with this faculty. It’s fascinating to learn that the story many thought would destroy the paper won the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service.

More than a half-century before Phil and Nancy Meek arrived on campus, a young Branch Rickey had an experience here that would shape his life and ultimately change the face of American life. In the spring of 1904, the Ohio Wesleyan Methodists traveled to South Bend to play a baseball game against the Fighting Irish of Notre Dame. When the team arrived at its hotel in South Bend, one of the players, Charles “Tommy” Thomas, was told he could not stay in the hotel, because of the color of his skin. Tommy Thomas was devastated, and his coach, Branch Rickey, a recent OWU alumnus, was outraged. Rickey threatened to return the team to Delaware without playing the game. Finally, the clerk relented, allowing Thomas to stay in Rickey’s room.

Hundreds of times in the years that followed, Branch Rickey told the story of his experience that day, of the pain on his teammate’s face, of his own outrage, and of the commitment he made as the team returned to Delaware, saying to himself that someday he would do something more about this. Four decades later, in the spring of 1947, nearly a decade before

the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*, and nearly two decades before Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Branch Rickey opened the doors of Major League Baseball and invited the courageous Jackie Robinson to break the color barrier of America's pastime.

More than a century after Branch Rickey made the commitment that ultimately changed the face of American life, and a half-century after Phil and Nancy Meek finished their time as students, you stand where they stood, on the threshold of your Commencement, prepared for the next step in life. You stand with the benefit of an education that has challenged you and to which you have responded with discipline, enthusiasm, and inquiry. You would not be Phi Beta Kappa otherwise. You also stand with the benefit of an education set in the context of values, an education that is intentionally designed to challenge you to think about the value of the examined life, the reality that there are better and worse ways to order your life, and that with careful reflection on values that matter, you can live a good life, a life that makes a difference, a life that makes the world a better place.

Congratulations on your induction today, and best wishes always.