

## FRIENDSHIP AND ITS POSSIBILITIES

(Phi Beta Kappa Oration, Harvard University, 25 May 2010)

I am honored, indeed, by the invitation of the Harvard College Phi Beta Kappa chapter to deliver this year's Oration. And I rejoice at the opportunity to congratulate the young men and women whose outstanding achievement, originality, and intellectual engagement in their studies at Harvard have won them election to Phi Beta Kappa. My own link to the Society is through its Zeta chapter of Massachusetts at Smith College, and I still remember the excitement I felt when I was elected in 1948. But I am intimately connected to the Harvard chapter through my husband Chandler Davis and his forebears: among them is his great-great-great-grandfather Aaron Bancroft, of the Harvard class of 1778, the same class as the Society's founder, and Bancroft was himself elected a graduate member of Phi Beta Kappa in 1787.

The Oration that year was "On Friendship," one of the three forms of life Phi Beta Kappa was to encourage--Literature, Morality, Friendship, the three stars on the Phi Beta Kappa medal. The star of friendship burned brightly in the Society in its early decades. Members called each other "Brothers" and "Friends," to whom they could express their ideas without fear of exposure. "Here," the president said to the initiates, "you

are to indulge in matters of speculation, that freedom of inquiry that ever dispels the clouds of falsehood by the radiant shine of truth. Here you are to look for a sincere friend, and here you are to become the Brother of unalienable Brothers." To facilitate such feeling, new members were selected by unanimous vote and had to promise to aid every worthy brother in distress. By 1804, three Phi Beta Kappa Orations at Harvard had been devoted to friendship.

Pondering this list not long ago, I wondered what this incitement to friendship could mean. The "encouragement of friendship" is still a goal in the constitution of the Harvard chapter, but I doubt that "the Brotherhood of unalienable Brothers" are the terms in which members, young and old, would now describe their attachment to Phi Beta Kappa. What was signified by this linkage between learning and friendship, not forged between two intimate friends like Michel de Montaigne and his fellow judge Etienne de La Boétie, "[their] souls intermixed and confounded," but affirmed between a select group of men? Does friendship bring additional purpose to learning, and generate fruits beyond the group itself? And does the linkage vary in force and in symbolic meaning as the composition of the group changes? I want to explore with you three moments in the past of Phi Beta Kappa, before reflecting on some different

movements of our own day.

The Phi Beta Kappa fondness for friendship in the exhilarating years after the American Revolution was informed by a long tradition of writing going back to Aristotle, and also by the Enlightenment conviction that ideas had no force unless supported by sentiment. Over in France, in the decades before its revolution, "fraternité," (brotherhood) and "amitié," (friendship) had sometimes been added to the enduring pair of "liberté" and "égalité." For Phi Beta Kappa such sentiment was infused in a sodality: the group was smaller than a revolutionary movement, and also, with its elections and initiatory rites of passage, was more exclusive than, say, the two debating societies at Princeton, which between them incorporated almost all of the students at the University. Indeed, in 1793 a Harvard student complained in the press that Phi Beta Kappa was disrupting the growing harmony of friendship among the students at large by its secretive and "artful" selection.

A strong contrary view was expressed in the 1796 Oration by the young lawyer Timothy Bigelow, who had graduated from Harvard ten years before. Phi Beta Kappa had been founded, he said, not to "attach to its members invidious privileges," but to encourage the free communication of ideas, the expansion of

information, and "the interchange of sentiments." without which book learning was a dead letter. The Society had brought advantage to the university, but it could also serve the community at large, "diffusing knowledge and literature [so] necessary to the preservation of a free government."

But this was possible, Bigelow insisted, only if "the powers of the head were connected with goodness of heart," that is, with the friendship enjoined in the charter of Phi Beta Kappa. "For it is from reciprocal friendship.. that we learn to extend our affections to a general philanthropy, . . . [and] this . . . extension of our benevolence . . . is the most important, the most honorable principle that any fraternity can profess." Bigelow found much to praise in the "benevolence [already] part of [the] American character," as seen, for instance, in "the kindness . . . with which our magnanimous armies . . . always treated their prisoners." Still, he told his Phi Beta Kappa audience, there was much to be done, especially in revising the criminal law and "liberating the unhappy Africans from the horrors of . . . slavery."

Bigelow ended his Oration with a stirring vision of the birth of many new chapters of Phi Beta Kappa which, together with other respectable institutions, "[would] direct the great current of opinion into proper channels. . . instructing the

species in the arts of humanity and the science of universal friendship."

Bigelow's Oration suggests the tone of the opening years at Harvard, when the students elected to Phi Beta Kappa met frequently for "literary exercises" and considered such subjects as "whether the reading of novels be upon the whole beneficial" and "whether the education of males or of females has the most happy influence on society." But Bigelow's grandiose hopes for Phi Beta Kappa's benevolent role in the world were not fulfilled, though individual members of the Society went on to distinguished careers in government, teaching, and letters. By 1820 the student debates had ended. Efforts at establishing a literary periodical were short-lived, and the only publications of the Society during the nineteenth century were the catalogues of members and the occasional Oration. Members no longer promised "life and fortune" to assist brothers in distress, but simply contributed to a fund for that purpose. By the 1840s, as historians of the Society have shown, Phi Beta Kappa had become primarily an honor society, recognizing high scholarly performance as it was judged by Harvard's professors. Friendship remained one of Phi Beta Kappa's mottoes, but it no longer carried the fervent linkage between letters, humane sentiment, and wider reform.

Two voices from the Society in the 1830s provide our second moment and help us understand the stakes in this transition. One is that of John Quincy Adams, of the Harvard class of 1787, Orator the next year, and associated with Phi Beta Kappa throughout his busy public life. In 1831, in the wake of a ferocious attack on the Society for its secrecy, the president of the Harvard chapter proposed that new members be henceforth admitted by a two-thirds vote rather than unanimously, as "a liberal change . . . so as to make [Phi Beta Kappa] a more comprehensive Fraternity." Adams railed against the proposal, claiming that the unanimous choice of members was required for friendship to flourish; if the proposal were to pass, he said with his usual bite, "everything having reference to friendship as being one of the objects of the institution should be expunged [from the charter], leaving it a mere literary society." Phi Beta Kappa should not become more comprehensive admitting "pale-colored candidates of little or no value to literature," but should remain "select." For Adams, group friendship among men of letters was possible only on such terms.

Though Adams' rhetoric technically won the day, the transformation of Phi Beta Kappa into an honor society continued unabated, and unanimous voting was guided closely by university reports on the academic achievement and good conduct of the

candidates. For members, group spirit now sprang from a shared and more accessible distinction, made known to outsiders in the printed Society catalogue of members. Phi Beta Kappa friendship was neither Bigelow's sentimental union inspiring learned reform of the world nor Adams' coterie of young men of excellence, who would one day serve the republic. Rather it was a confident congeniality, expressed at the bonhomie of the annual dinner, at which the intellectual reach of the Society was widened by the Oration, always given to a large public.

One of those Orators, Ralph Waldo Emerson, has left us his thoughts both on friendship and on the life of learning in the late 1830s. His essay "On Friendship" recognized the possibility of a wide benevolence afloat in the world, and characterized services, such as gifts and help in time of sickness, as the start of friendship. But he had little more to say about group friendship, even though he himself was right then at the center of the reform-minded friendship circles of Transcendentalist men and women. Rather he constructed true friendship as a relation between two men, a relation of complete openness, sincerity, and tender love. Only here could affection arouse the intellect of scholars.

In 1837, Emerson addressed the scholars directly as he gave his celebrated Oration on "The American Scholar" to the Harvard

chapter of Phi Beta Kappa. He began with a tribute to the annual Phi Beta Kappa dinner as "a friendly sign of the survival of the love of letters amongst a people too busy to give to letters any more [attention]." He then went on to urge a future education for scholars which, freed from thralldom to European models, went beyond anything his listeners would have experienced at Harvard, an education where Nature and Action served as teachers, and books, though important, were useful only when they inspired. And the duties to which Emerson then called the scholar went beyond anything imagined by Bigelow or Adams for those elected to Phi Beta Kappa. Instead of the current scholar, "decent, indolent, [and] complaisant," Emerson declaimed, he must be "the world's eye. . . the world's heart," a fully individual person, filled with self-trust, inspired by the divine soul.

Emerson's Oration both transfixed and polarized his audience. If he praised Phi Beta Kappa members as "lovers of letters," his American Scholar challenged the criteria for excellence by which they--and he himself in 1821-- had been elected to membership. Still, the Phi Beta Kappa gathering was the setting for his speech and he surely hoped that his message would inspire individual listeners. He ended his Oration calling them "brothers and friends."



In its wake, Phi Beta Kappa settled back into the congeniality of the annual dinner, the fellowship of bestowing scholarly honor, and the intellectual excitement of the yearly oration. Still there was potentiality for growth here-- I'm not thinking so much of growth in numbers, though in fact chapters did multiply, but of symbolic and social growth: widening once again the circle of eligibility for membership, stretching the bounds within which honored scholarship could be linked with friendship.

Let us move for our third instance to the 1870s. Until that decade, Phi Beta Kappa members were all men, even though some universities where there were chapters now had women students. Then in 1875, the chapter at the University of Vermont, where women had recently been admitted as students, elected two women as members along with two men. "In the opinion of this chapter," said the resolution, drawn up by professors of law and mathematics from old Vermont families, "all the graduates of this University should be eligible to membership in Phi Beta Kappa without distinction of sex." Chapters at two other coeducational institutions, Wesleyan and Cornell, followed suit in the next years. The reluctance some men felt to make this move seems to have been less reluctance to acknowledge women's intellectual equality than unease about the

kind of learned sociability that would result. At the first University of Vermont initiation, the men and women were received in separate ceremonies, while a recalcitrant member at Cornell "found it absurd to admit women to a Fraternity . . . the whole tradition and character of the concern make it exclusively a male affair."<sup>i</sup>

In fact, the widening of the circle of scholarly excellence to include women did put some strain on friendship. In 1926, at the celebration of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Phi Beta Kappa, Mary Woolley, President of Mount Holyoke College, talked of how much women had contributed to the "roll of honor" of Phi Beta Kappa, listing literary figures, reformers, and educators, and promising that the roll would grow "in numbers and distinction." Some in the hall shuddered at her prediction. Women were now present in the Society in coed chapters at various universities, in chapters from the women's colleges like Smith and Vassar, and in separate chapters at affiliated colleges like Pembroke and Radcliffe. By 1916, in those coed chapters where election was based on grades alone, they were outnumbering the men. The secretary of the united chapters feared for the Society: "it will be generally conceded" he said, "that a larger share of [Phi Beta Kappa's] reputation must come from its men than from its women members. The way must be kept

open to the men.”

The result was the establishment of quotas: regardless of their grades, women and men were to be elected in equal numbers or in proportion to their presence among the eligible student body. The fraternity of shared scholarly distinction was being threatened by competition.

This storm was ultimately weathered and with success, but it provides analogies to other situations where the ideals of Phi Beta Kappa were tested and the Society was called upon to extend membership to new groups. Reflecting on that past in 1953, at the installation of a Phi Beta Kappa chapter at Howard University, Ralph Bunche remarked “The essence of Phi Beta Kappa is the recognition of scholarly attainment. This recognition must be universal and applied to all alike on a plane of complete equality. What could be more. . . unjust than the erection of walls of segregation and exclusion against achievements of the intellect?” And we might ask, too, what could be more unjust to the friendship that scholars should extend to other lovers of letters?

I want to conclude with two stories of more recent linkage between friendship and circles of learning. Reading Bigelow’s Oration of 1796 recalled for me my own experience of fervent group friendship in the late 1960s and the 1970s, when the new

study of the history of women was founded. Indeed, it was through a scholarly friendship with Jill Ker Conway that I first turned to the field. As colleagues at the University of Toronto in 1969, she told me of her work on the first generation of American women to obtain doctorates and I told her of mine on the artisans and peasants of sixteenth-century France, and we began to imagine a grand course on the social, cultural, and political history of women in Europe and America. Throughout North America such conversations of discovery took place, expanding as graduate students participated and as pre-email networks of communication sprang up from university to university. We rushed to libraries to find sources; we scanned publishers' catalogues to see what, if anything, we could assign; we typed up our syllabi and translation on our Olivettis and sent them out to each other in mimeograph across America. And we met and met, the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians—whose origins went back to Mary Woolley's day — sponsoring our assemblies. I was one of the speakers at Radcliffe in 1974 at a conference where we expected a few hundred and well over a thousand arrived.

Much of this scholarly exchange in the 1970s was infused with friendship. Not that we all agreed as to how to construct the history of women and what we soon also called the history of

gender; arguments were sharp from the beginning. But the debates were carried on within the friendly frame that Bigelow described for the early days of Phi Beta Kappa, though not with the Society's injunction to secrecy. And we, too, hoped that our new scholarship would deepen the understanding of hierarchy, difference, and equality in other fields, and that our comradely style would provide a model for teaching and collaboration in the university at large.

By the late 1980s, this initial fervor had more often settled into congeniality as departments and other academic institutions were set up. Such a moderation in sentiment may be inevitable, but also desirable in increasing accessibility of the history of women to a wider population and allowing the subject matter of women's history to expand more readily in a global fashion.

But the force of friendship can also be a resource in situations of deep and violent cleavage. I am thinking of a circle of friends in Palestine and Israel, which has had the obstetrician and fertility specialist Izzeldin Abuellaish of Gaza and the cardiologist Zeev Rotstein of Tel Aviv at its heart. As he tells it in his newly published memoir I Shall Not Hate, Dr. Abuellaish was born in a Gaza refugee camp not too far away from his family's ancestral property, now owned by Ariel Sharon.

Trained in medicine at the Universities of Cairo and London, Dr. Abuelaish opened a clinic in Gaza in 1991. His collaboration with Israeli physicians began in the next years, first with a research residency in Beer Sheva and later as a staff member of an Institute in Tel Aviv. Continuing to live and practice in Gaza, Dr. Abuelaish made the arduous border crossing into Israel and back once or twice a week, sometimes with his patients.

The friendships born among this group of physicians are based on what they called a bridge -- a bridge of healing practices and of medical knowledge. Against those who would weigh Arab and Jewish lives in a different balance, they affirm the equivalence of both. "I've been delivering Palestinian babies and Israeli babies, for most of my career," says Dr. Abuelaish. "There is no difference between a Palestinian new born and an Israeli newborn . . . My duty is to make sure every child has the same chance for health at birth." Against Hamas rockets and explosive body-belts, against Israeli war-planes and tanks, against checkpoints and security walls, they stand as a model of trust and friendship, speaking truth to each other and even promising to risk their lives to protect each other.

After the shelling by an Israeli tank killed three of Dr. Abuelaish's daughters during the Gaza War in January 2009, Dr.

Rotstein and others rallied round to save the lives of three other children in the family and to demand an accounting from the IDF. Now, a year and half later, Dr. Abuelaish is creating a foundation in memory of his daughters to promote the education of Palestinian women and role of women more generally as leaders in the Middle East. Maybe one day some of those young women will come to Harvard on an Abuelaish fellowship and create friendship circles as Dr. Abuelaish did himself during his year studying public health at Harvard. In such ways, dear sisters, brothers, and friends, can the star of friendship blaze anew, illuminating a landscape that may seem desolate, but can still carry within it bridges of trust, truth-telling, and understanding.

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen Eliza Hamilton, one of the two women Phi Beta Kappa initiates at the University of Vermont in 1875 married Frank Edward Woodruff, one of the two men initiates, eight years later in Athens. Woodruff had gone on to further study at Union Theological Seminary, and then had continued his studies in classical and Christian antiquity in Berlin and in Greece. For many years he taught Greek language and literature at Bowdoin. I have been unable to find detail on Ellen Hamilton's subsequent activities other than her being the mother of the three Woodruff children. Perhaps she too had gone to Europe to continue her studies. At any rate, one wonders what her relation might have been to Bowdoin's Phi Beta Kappa chapter, which had been founded in 1848. Bowdoin was an all-male college; could she have attended events other than those open to the public?