

Phi Beta Kappa Oration
Commencement, May 26, 2015

By Professor S. Allen Counter Jr.
Harvard University

A Thirst For Exploration

May I begin by expressing my appreciation to the members of the Alpha-Iota chapter of Phi Beta Kappa for selecting me to serve as the 2015 Orator. Phi Beta Kappa has for more than two centuries exemplified the pinnacle of intellectual achievement and academic excellence. I have the deepest respect for this venerable organization and its history of honoring scholarly distinction.

I dedicate this oration to my beloved grandmother, Eddie Lee Pettis, who was my prime inspiration throughout my life, and who died in 2012 at the age of 105 years. Let us honor all grandmothers today.

Congratulations to you, outstanding scholars of the Harvard College class of 2015. You are the most talented, most erudite, most culturally enlightened, and best-educated class in the history of Harvard College.

And you are probably very thankful that you are not graduating from Yale. Imagine that.

You are also the most diverse class in ethnicity, culture, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and economic background that Harvard has ever graduated. As Director of the Harvard Foundation for Intercultural and Race Relations, I thank you for helping to fulfill the prescient vision of former Harvard president, Derek Bok, and the late Reverend Professor Peter J. Gomes, to make Harvard College a more tolerant, inclusive, and harmonious community where interethnic concord and camaraderie thrive.

It has been a special privilege for me to serve the students of Harvard University for the past 40 years as resident tutor, advisor, mentor, professor, and administrator. As a professor of neuroscience, and as Director of the Harvard Foundation, I have had the extraordinary opportunity and honor to meet,

and in many cases to befriend, Harvard students of all ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. And I have learned copiously from every one of them.

I am still in touch with many of my former students. They come from all backgrounds: Black, White, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, Native American, Gay and Lesbian, Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Catholic, Hindu, Sikh, and other identities that have transformed Harvard into a community rich with ethno-cultural diversity and social enlightenment. I have tried to share with my students some of the same values instilled in me by my grandmother: integrity, compassion, courage, tenacity, the bond of your word, and a thirst for exploration.

I have always believed that education should not be confined to the classroom, but must encompass real-world experiences if we are to produce learned, caring, and cultured men and women prepared to tackle social issues and to solve global problems.

Beyond the large but sometimes intellectually confined and confining classrooms of the Harvard Science Center and the Harvard Biological Laboratories, where I have taught neuroscience to hundreds of Harvard students over these many years, I have guided students on unconventional field trips, including relief missions in Louisiana following the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina. Students have joined me on medical projects in the Amazon rain forests, and in remote villages in the Andes Mountains. Some have journeyed with me on US Air Force C-141 military planes to Northwest Greenland, on a whaling ship in the Arctic, even onboard a US Navy hunter-killer nuclear submarine equipped with 12 Vertical Launch System tubes for firing nuclear-capable Tomahawk cruise missiles. My students described being in a nuclear submarine as, “awesome.”

In each of these field exposures, I have observed students grow in knowledge and understanding, and empathy; in appreciation of other peoples and their circumstances, in awareness of our similarities and differences, and the vast complexities of the world around us. Some students point to these unconventional field projects as the most memorable experiences of their college career.

I have pondered, what my next field experience for students might be. Will it be a trip to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute to explore strategies for peaceful solutions to world conflicts? Or will it be a deep-sea dive in a submersible with my fellow Explorer Sylvia Earle? Or will it be a climb of Mt. Everest to study the effects of altitude-related hypoxia on brain physiology –

a neuroscience subject on which I have written? God only knows. – And, don't worry students and colleagues, I have not lost a single Harvard student on any of these field-learning expeditions, yet.

Integrity, compassion, courage, tenacity, the bond of your word, and a thirst for exploration!

Twenty-eight years ago this month, I selected a group of Harvard College students to host some unique University guests. Their assignment was to chaperone these visitors around the Harvard campus, to assist them with day-to-day activities, and to help them feel at home in their temporary lodging at Leverett House as guests of House Masters John and Judy Dowling. These Harvard students were Native American, African American, European-American, Asian American, and Latino. They were assigned as hosts not for prominent celebrities or Harvard donors, but for two 80-year-old self-described “Polar Eskimo” Inuit men and 10 of their respective offspring from Northwest Greenland. These Harvard undergraduates also joined me in guiding the elderly Polar Eskimo men and their families on a tour of US cities where their American relatives resided.

The two Polar Eskimo men and their children had come to Harvard from the top of the earth as guests of president Derek Bok and the Harvard Foundation. Harvard welcomed them warmly, and the Reverend Professor Peter Gomes, Plummer Professor of Christian Morals and Minister in Memorial Church, conducted a special Sunday service in their honor.

One of the octogenarians was half-white and half-Eskimo, the other half-black and half Eskimo. Their American fathers, along with four polar Inuit-Eskimo assistants were the first humans to reach the North Pole in 1909, a feat tantamount to reaching the moon in our time.

They were the surviving biological sons of North Pole discoverers Admiral Robert E. Peary, who was white, and Matthew A. Henson, who was African American. These mixed-race Eskimo men were born in secrecy to two indigenous Polar Inuit women in Northwest Greenland in 1906. They were abandoned at age three in 1909 by their fathers, who never saw them again. Left behind at the top of the planet, human collateral of the North Pole expeditions, never to be spoken of and—so the expectation went—never to be found.

I discovered the Inuit sons of Peary and Henson, named respectively Kali and Anaukaq, in 1986 in the northern-most inhabited settlement on earth, just short of the North Pole. I was on a Harvard medical science expedition to Northwest Greenland. Anaukaq and Kali were traditional dogsled

hunters who built and lived in igloos on the icepack, surviving on a diet of only raw meat, including seal, polar bear, birds and whale. When we first met, Anaukaq rubbed my head and exclaimed, “we have the same hair,” from which he concluded that the spirits had sent me to the Arctic to find him. Kali, who looked like a white man with Inuit eyes, thought I was a relative of Matthew Henson and had come to Greenland to search for them. Initially, I was incredulous of their story about being the biological sons of the famous American Arctic explorers Matthew Henson and Robert Peary, but evidence later confirmed this.

After we came to know each other better during my stay in their Arctic settlement, the two men came to my igloo one evening and revealed that all their lives they had felt abandoned, and dreamed of traveling to the land of their fathers’ “just to touch the hand of a relative,” before they died. They believed they would die soon, never having fulfilled this dream, and they asked if I could help. Deeply touched, I gave them my word that I would do all in my power to help them fulfill their lifelong dream. Nothing is more rewarding than helping others fulfill their dreams.

In 1987, following a series of appeals to President Ronald Reagan, I was able to arrange for a military plane to travel to our nation’s northernmost Polar Airbase at Thule, Greenland, and to fly Anaukaq, Kali, and their families to the US to meet their American relatives for the first time, and to lay wreaths at their respective fathers’ graves. They were ecstatic, and the American relatives received them warmly. At my request, President Reagan sent a representative to welcome the Greenlandic Polar Eskimos with a personal letter from the White House to be read at the wreath-laying ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery, that I attended with a group of Harvard College students.

During the ceremony, we discovered an injustice that my students found too uncomfortable to explain to our visiting Eskimo guests, who had no concept of racial prejudice or discrimination in America. We learned that Admiral Peary was buried in the prestigious Arlington National Cemetery with a large white granite monument declaring him “The discoverer of the North Pole,” while the African American, Matthew Henson, who by all accounts reached the North Pole ahead of Peary and planted the American Flag in the ice pack, was buried in a nondescript grave with a plain headstone in New York’s Woodlawn Cemetery. The Eskimo families wondered why this disparity; why the two great explorers who had spent 18 years together in the Arctic trying to conquer the North Pole were not buried together. I promised the Inuit families and my students that I would do what I could to right this historic wrong, to arrange for Matthew Henson to be buried in his rightful place in Arlington National Cemetery, alongside Peary and other American heroes.

I petitioned President Reagan, who issued a Presidential Order to disinter Henson's remains from the common grave in New York's Woodlawn Cemetery and reinter him with full military honors in Arlington National Cemetery, right beside Peary, where I was permitted to place a large black granite monument with gold lettering that declared Henson "co-discoverer of the North Pole." This ceremony took place on April 6, 1988. A group of Harvard College students traveled to the event with me, and the Reverend Professor Peter Gomes joined the US Navy Chaplain in conducting the reinterment service. The Greenlandic Eskimo and American Hensons watched proudly, a dream fulfilled.

As they were about to depart from McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey for the 8-hour flight back to their homeland in Northwest Greenland, sharing a tearful goodbye with their Harvard College student hosts and me, they made one last request. They asked for help in organizing a remembrance for Henson and Peary at the North Pole in 2009, on the 100th anniversary of its discovery. I promised I would help.

Anaukaq and Kali did not live to see their plea answered. But in March 2009, the US Air Force sent a couple of officers to Harvard to meet with me about my proposed North Pole Centennial project. They agreed to provide a plane to fly me, along with members of the Henson-Peary Greenlandic families and a group of Harvard College students, to the North Pole to place a centennial commemorative capsule containing both Inuit and American symbolic items on the icepack in memory of Henson and Peary's discovery of this Ultima Thule in 1909. Unfortunately, just before we were to depart, the US Air Force advised us that because of warming temperatures at the North Pole, the ice was too thin for our large C-130 aircraft to land. Our flight was canceled.

Disappointed but undeterred, and to keep my vow to my two old Polar Eskimo friends, I chartered a small prop plane with extra fuel tank capacity, and with my 16-year-old daughter Olivia and a satellite phone hopped across the Arctic settlements of Canada and Greenland toward the North Pole. It was sad news when the pilot warned us that even with extra fuel tanks, we were not likely to make it to the North Pole and back safely, and that we could possibly go down in the Arctic Sea on the return.

Rather than risk our lives, I had the pilot land in Qaanaaq, Greenland, the northernmost Inuit settlement, to conduct our Centennial Commemorative Ceremony there. But I never gave up on

fulfilling my pledge to reach the North Pole on the same day in April that Henson and Peary had achieved this daunting feat by dogsled so many decades ago. My courageous daughter, who had by now learned to drive a dogsled and who was also dedicated to this mission, recited my advice to her as an athlete rower: "Give out, but never give up--let's go by dogsled" she said. But the trip was too far for our survival on the Arctic trail.

"Inveniam Viam Aut Facium," "I shall find a way or make one." This is the motto of the true explorer.

If we can't get there by air or surface ice, I reasoned, then we will get there under water. I contacted Vice Admiral Melvin G. Williams Jr., Commander of the US Navy's 2nd Fleet, comprising all Atlantic military ships, and requested a submarine to deliver the centennial capsule to the North Pole along with a commemorative letter signed by President Barack Obama. Admiral Williams granted my request and the capsule was brought aboard one of his nuclear submarines in the Arctic.

On April 6, 2009, one hundred years to the day of its discovery, the USS Annapolis, a Los Angeles Class nuclear submarine, broke through the ice at 90° north, the precise North Pole, and ship Commander Michael O. Brunner emerged from the conning tower and placed our Centennial Commemorative Capsule on the polar ice pack to honor Henson and Peary's heroic achievements. A dream and a promise fulfilled.

Integrity, compassion, courage, tenacity, the bond of your word, and a thirst for exploration.

I implore you, most distinguished scholars in the class of 2015 to explore. Explore other cultures, other peoples, and other worlds. I leave you with inspirational lines from the poet T.S. Eliot, Harvard College class of 1909, who wrote in his Little Gidding, Four Quartets: "We shall not cease from exploration - And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started, And know the place for the first time."

Thank you.

*Dr. S. Allen Counter, Jr.
Director of the Harvard Foundation, Harvard University
Member, Faculty of Arts and Sciences
Clinical Professor of Neurology/Neurophysiology,
Harvard Medical School
Harvard University Biological Laboratories
Adjunct Professor of Neuroscience, Karolinska Institute, Stockholm, Sweden*

Cambridge, MA 02138 USA
Tel: 617/495-1527, FAX: 617/496-1443
E-mail: allen_counter@harvard.edu

*[The Polar Eskimo refer to themselves as “Eskimo,” a name meaning “man who eats raw meat,” given to them by other indigenous Arctic tribes with whom they had early contact. Prior to contact with other groups, they referred to themselves as “Inyouish,” which means, “the humans” (a being different from animals). The word “Inuit” is a European derivation of Inyouish.]