

Golden Key National Honor Society
Riff on Excellence

Good afternoon, everybody—parents and inductees alike.

Isn't that a wonderful word?

“Inductee”

It has so many unintended resonances, especially for someone like myself born into the Vietnam draft generation.

And to the inductees, if this turn of phrase has a hint of the draft in it to you, too—as in, Welcome to Paris Island—I mean it. By the time I'm done with you, you may be wondering if this “achievement and excellence” recognition is worth the price of admission.

It's a great pleasure to be here today to address you—really—and a great honor to have been selected to welcome you to Golden Key. It is very seldom that I get the opportunity to address such a uniformly *talented* and *ambitious* audience—and I do a lot of public addressing.

So what to say to you, Golden Key inductees, Rutgers' best and brightest?

Well, I should probably begin by recognizing what you have **already** achieved and the excellence you have **already** displayed. That is, after all, what you think you're here for.

And there's no mistaking either your achievements or your excellence.

In the midst of the tumult of college life with its many—and marvelous—temptations—you have kept your eyes on the prize.

Despite the routinely applied RU Screw and the often alienating size of Rutgers, where students spend more time on buses than in bed, you have persevered—and won.

Cool.

Congratulations.

And I regret to inform you that tomorrow is a new day.

If “Golden Key” has any suggestive significance as a name, it is the suggestion you are being recognized **not** for the past achievements and excellence that brought you here, but for the achievements and excellence we **expect** of you in the future, for the doors we **expect** you to open with your “golden key.”

So I thought I’d take a couple of minutes today to talk a bit about what we expect of you and why.

Let me start with you.

Look around you.

You may not actually know all your fellow inductees by name—but I bet you know them deep down inside. After all, you share a huge amount.

You are our gifted and talented. You’ve always seen more, understood more quickly, reached out further than the others around you.

But it’s not just that you’re smart. Smart is a dime a dozen.

No, you’re also ambitious—I might say driven. You’re overachievers (that’s what “achievement” always means in these contexts).

You are, in a hackneyed phrase, the leaders of tomorrow.

You are the folks who will shape—or rather, literally make—tomorrow.

And this is, or ought to be, a very scary thought.

It ought to set off all sorts of alarm bells, give you pause, make you ask yourself all sorts of really big questions.

But, of course, it hasn’t.

Right now you’re here sitting pretty, rightfully proud of what you’ve achieved, and delighted that now that you have a Golden Key in your bag, the next door ought to be easy to open—whether it’s the door to law school, grad school, whatever.

So let me rattle your cage a bit.

And here I see some of my students in the audience beginning to smile. They recognize this move and know what's coming. Shafer's about to take a perfectly obviously good thing like "achievement and excellence" and make it unnecessarily difficult and complicated.

Hey, I'm sorry. This is what I get paid for!

Let's take the word—or the idea—of "excellence." It's obvious. Everybody understands it.

It's "best."

It's "straight A's."

It's "first in the class."

I don't think so.

Let me ask you three simple questions—and then prod you into thinking about them a bit. These are, I think, the alarm bell questions, the big, scary questions that you ought to be asking yourself, knowing that you—literally you—are going to make tomorrow, whatever tomorrow is: good, bad or indifferent.

And let me add that I don't give a damn how you answer these questions. After all, by the time you've made the world over in your own image, I'll be dead and it will be all yours—for better or for worse.

Remember: I am a professor—a provocateur—not a preacher. You must answer these questions for yourself. I'm here just to make sure that you ask them.

Three questions:

Excellence *at what?*

Excellence *for what?*

Excellence *for whom?*

I would suggest that you have answers to all three—but they're out of date.

They're kids' answers to these questions.

They're the answers that got you here to Golden Key. But they're not answers that do you any good as you go forward in life, as you make your tomorrow.

“Excellence *at what?*” used to be easy. You excelled at school. As the Golden Key brochure you all just got says, the Society’s Mission is “to recognize scholastic achievement and excellence.”

You read the assignments. You went to class. You participated vigorously. You studied hard. You proved to your professor that you knew your stuff. You got an A. You got straight A’s. You were first in your class. You were excellent.

It was short menu of options. You mastered the rules. You excelled.

Well, there’s no such simple course catalog for life. There are no professors to set the syllabus and the assignments, to give you an A, to declare you excellent.

Right now you may be pre-registering for the rest of your life, but the analogy ends right there.

It is time to ask: “To what purpose will I put *my* gifts? To what purpose will I put *my* talents? At what will *I* excel?”

Surely part of your answer will be professional. I don’t mean to suggest that you will give up your ambitions to be the best doctor or lawyer or whatever. But I *would* like to suggest that while important, such pursuits are also the least significant of the many ways in which you might express yourself, and might seek to excel.

Perhaps you might put your gifts and talents to parenting.

Or to singing in a choir.

Or to leading the local school board.

Your answers to “excellent *at what?*” may be public—professional or whatever—or they may be private—who’s to know that you’re an excellent parent?

And as you seek answers to the question “excellent *at what?*” you may find that you cannot be equally excellent at everything, and that you must prioritize. You must sacrifice.

Now, you know all about sacrifice. You surely sacrificed your social life here at Rutgers to get the grades that got you a Golden Key.

But what will you sacrifice in your future? Will you sacrifice professional excellence and recognition—a pat on the back from your boss for effort above and beyond, for example, or the Bar Association’s equivalent of a Golden Key—for excellence in parenting? In community service? In self-expression?

What will you excel *at*?

Think on it. The priorities you set for yourself have implications. As a maker of tomorrow, the priorities you set and therefore how you use your gifts and talents will frame the future. Your choices will structure the priorities of the world of tomorrow.

Will it be a tomorrow with room only for private, commercial success, or will it have room for families? For art and music? For community?

You decide.

Now talk about different forms of excellence and different life pursuits inevitably raises the questions of worth and the measure of worth, as in the question: “Excellence *for what?*”

I mean, until now the measure has been easy—it ran from A to F. You weened, you ground, you pulled all nighters, you lived on No-Doz and Jolt *to get A’s*, because that’s what excellence was all about.

But now you have to answer the question “excellence *for what?*” anew. What goal—what answer to the question “excellence *at what?*”—will drive you now, will keep you up all night?

Are you driven to achieve fame? Public recognition? The adult equivalent of A’s and Golden Keys: A big promotion? President of the local Medical Association? Chamber of Commerce Woman of the Year?

Or are you driven to achieve more personal rewards? Will you stay up all night struggling with a project for your students because *their* getting it is why *you* are driven excel? Will you struggle for weeks—at night, after long hours in the office—to help get an open space referendum passed in your community? What will keep you up all night now?

Think on it. Again, the priorities you set for yourself have implications. As a maker of tomorrow, your motivations to excel—as in “excellence *for what?*”—will also help to frame the future. Your choices will structure the motivations of the world of tomorrow.

And finally, all of these questions come down to the bottom line: Excellence *for whom?*

Again, the old answer was easy: You excelled in part for yourself—for the pleasure of a job well done. But you also excelled for *them*—for the parental or professorial pat on the back, for the pleasure of recognition by the boss. Your success was measured by experts, by folks who know what’s what.

And in the end, it was all *for you*. The point of the exercise was for *you* to win Golden Keys from important people who knew excellence when they saw it.

Now this raises a big problem.

In the world of your future, there are no parents or professors. Oh, sure, you’ll likely have a boss who can pat you on the back for a job well done at the office. But on the big stuff, the stuff that really matters, the priority, excellence stuff, there are no experts, no judges to award blue ribbons and Golden Keys.

So how do you answer the question “excellence *for whom?*” when there are no judges?

You have to ask it differently.

Asking about judges—about parental and professorial surrogates—already answers the question the old way, the kid’s way. It answers the question “excellence *for whom?*” with the selfish and childish “for me.”

It is a common answer.

It is, in fact, the normal answer.

But I would suggest that if it is *your* answer—you, the leaders of tomorrow—then we're in big trouble.

I would suggest that a leader's answer begins in a different place. A leader's answer begins from the understanding that excellence is about giving, not getting.

It begins from the understanding that “excellence” per se doesn't mean anything, that there's no Platonic form of “excellence” in the abstract floating out there in the ether.

It begins with the understanding that “excellence” is realized in the lives of others. Yes, you may ultimately be recognized for what you have done *for* others, but it is what you have done *for others* that matters.

There is no meaning to “excellence” out of context. And as “the leaders of tomorrow” your context is the world you make.

If you choose to answer the question “excellence *for whom?*” “*For me!*” then the world you make will be a bleak place of purely private pleasures and arid public spaces devoid of the comfort of community. And—irony of ironies—you will find that all the recognition you may win will mean nothing, for meaning is contextual and your context will be sterile.

If, on the other hand, you choose to answer the question “excellence *for whom?*” “*For my children!*” or “*For my students!*” or “*For my patients!*” or “*For my country!*” then “excellence” will have a warmer meaning—a meaning that will have meaning in your life, and will give meaning to your life.

So take a moment to congratulate yourself on what you've achieved.

Take a moment to thank your parents.

And, yes, take a moment to think of the professors and other mentors who helped you win this coveted recognition, this Golden Key.

Done?

OK, now it's pay-back time.

It's time that you began your life-long task of passing on the favor to others.

If you do as good a job as we've done with you, then you'll love the world you make.

If you don't, then you won't—and it will all be your fault.

Your choice.

Go.

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