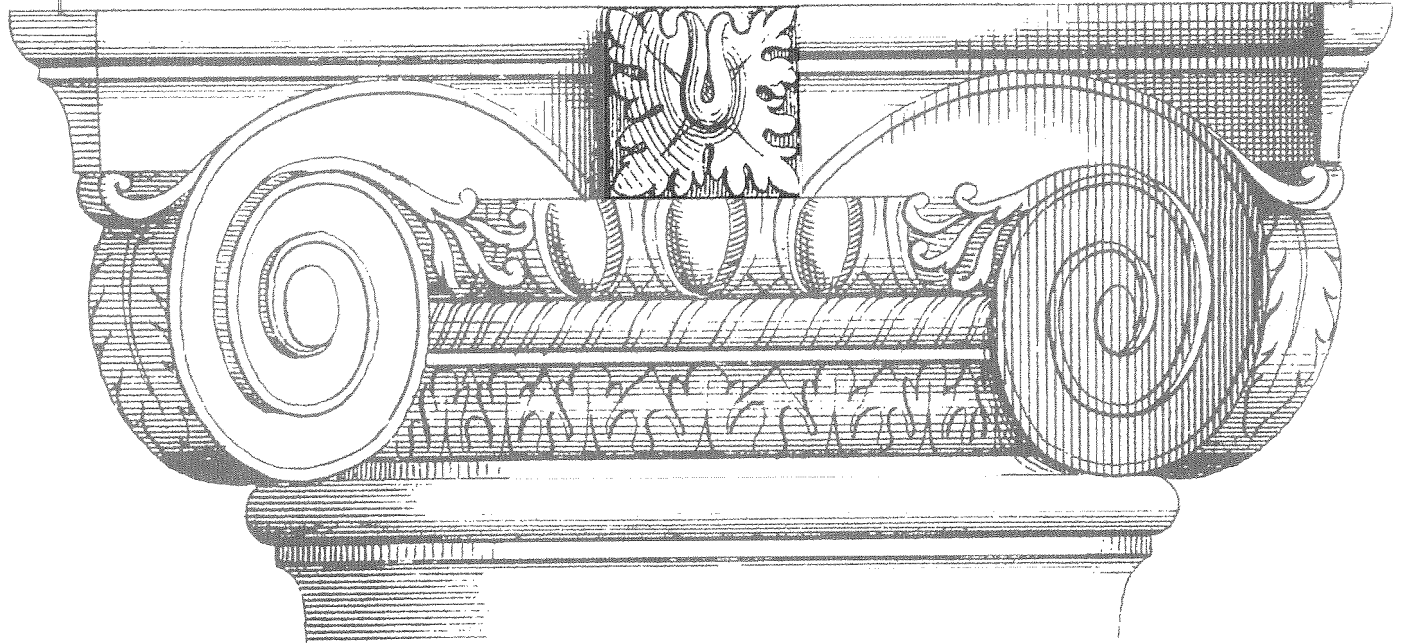

H O N O R I N G EXCELLENCE

A SPEECH FOR ACADEMIC HONORS DAY



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The following is the text of a speech delivered to the honorees at Academic Honors Day on May 31, 1992.

We are here today to honor excellence—academic excellence. You have earned this special recognition through a combination of ability and hard work. No matter what the field, one rarely finds excellence without both these qualities. Natural talent alone is insufficient, for excellence is ability realized through application.

When I was asked to deliver these remarks, I was deeply honored but also somewhat at a loss. “What can I say,” I asked myself, “to these students who have already achieved so much in so many different academic areas?”

As a historian, I naturally thought about my own discipline and particularly about the upper level course I am teaching this quarter: History 444, the European Renaissance and Reformation. During the course of the Renaissance, the western world’s view of humanity and of the individual changed profoundly. There was a new realization of the work or dignity of the human species and a new recognition of the potential of the human spirit to achieve.

The classic statement of this new view is found in a short work by Giovanni Pico, Count of Mirandola, entitled the “Oration on the Dignity of Man.” (Pico wrote before the era of gender consciousness, I’m afraid.) Pico tells us that the dignity or worth of humanity is that one quality that distinguishes us from all of God’s other creatures: our free will, our ability to choose. Neither the stars nor any other external forces control our destinies, he argues; we shape them ourselves. We can choose to sink to the level of beasts, ruled purely by our appetites and emotions, or we can rise to greater heights, guided by our intellect, by learning and by reason. We can make of ourselves and our world whatever we choose.

This Renaissance philosophy, this new realization of the potential of the human mind and spirit, was the driving force behind the greatest achievements of the era from Michelangelo’s art to Shakespeare’s plays. Romeo’s, “The fault lies not in our stars, Mercutio, but in ourselves,” accords perfectly well with this Renaissance notion that we are responsible both for the good and the ill in our lives and our society. Not that Pico and his contemporaries were attempting to assess blame. Indeed, they took a positive attitude concerning our ability to make ourselves and our society better. To fall back on a perhaps overused image,

they saw humanity's marvelous freedom to choose as a "half-full glass"—and one that was capable of being filled to the brim.

This new notion was also the foundation for another Renaissance concept which has become a part of the very fabric of western culture: the concept of the *vita activa*, the active life. The Middle Ages had had a tendency to compartmentalize or stereotype individuals. Society was divided among those who fought, those who worked and those who prayed (the nobility, peasantry and clergy respectively). Learning was confined to the cloister and the university. Men of action had no use for letters. The theoretical knowledge of the scholar and the practical knowledge of the miller or the smith had nothing in common with each other.

Renaissance advocates of the *vita activa* insisted otherwise. In the city-states of Renaissance Italy—and later all over Europe—both scholars and political leaders came to realize that learning without application was of little use to society—that leadership without learning was seldom wise and seldom good. The individual, they asserted, had a duty to develop all of his or her God-given abilities and to put them to use for the benefit of the community. Neither wealth, nor talent, nor learning were meant to be hidden away. They were meant to be employed.

Nobles and wealthy merchants had an obligation to learn about art and poetry and philosophy as well as warfare and commerce and politics. Scholars and artists had an obligation to become involved in the political affairs of the communities from which they drew their livelihoods. Men like Cosimo de' Medici not only amassed fortunes in trade and banking, they put their fortunes to use in the patronage of architects, sculptors, painters and philosophers. Cosimo was an avid collector of books and manuscripts (unlike some collectors, he actually read them), and he could discuss the latest philosophical or artistic concepts with the leading authorities. He was a near perfect example of the ideals of the *vita activa* or what a later age would term a "Renaissance Man."

I have launched on this historical digression for two reasons. One is to remind you that your undergraduate education has been intended to allow you to become well-rounded individuals: Renaissance Men and Women in your own right. From the core curriculum to the provision for minor fields and electives, it has been designed to educate you broadly rather than to train you narrowly; to help you make the most of life as well as earn a living.

Whatever your major, whatever your chosen career, the time will come when you will appreciate your exposure to literature, art or music because they enrich your life; your exposure to the sciences, economics or political science because a knowledge of the basics of these disciplines helps you to make sense of the world around you and helps you to make wise choices.

We have come back again to Pico's main point, the importance of our ability to choose. That is the other reason for my little "history lesson." I would urge you to choose the *vita activa* for yourselves. Develop your talents and abilities and put them to use to make your lives and the society in which you live better.

We face a multitude of problems: economic, social and environmental—local and global. They will be solved only if individuals act and only if they act intelligently. Become involved in your community. Find a cause; find a candidate you can support. Become a candidate yourself, whether it is for student government at KSC or for public office. Exercise your ability to choose. The thinkers of the Renaissance were basically optimists, but they recognized that choice goes hand in hand with action. As one of them observed, "It is not enough to be good. One must do good as well."

A parting word, if I may, to those of you who are graduating—and I hope the rest of you will not entirely forget what I have to say before your turn comes. On Saturday at Commencement, we shall sing the Alma Mater, a song of praise for Kennesaw State. The term Alma Mater literally means foster mother (one who has given you nourishment). From Saturday onward, you will be known as alumni and alumnae of Kennesaw State, her foster sons and daughters. These ancient Latin terms ring true here, I believe, more than they do at many colleges and universities.

Your professors have taken pride in your academic achievements as you've grown, as we have tried to nourish you intellectually and encourage that growth. That is why we are here today. We will continue to take pride in your achievements after you graduate just as a mother takes pride in the accomplishments of her grown-up children. We hope you will take pride in the preparation for life your alma mater has given you. I would urge you to remain concerned for your foster mother and for the sons and daughters who will come after you by becoming active in the alumni association.

Further, I urge you to demonstrate your pride in Kennesaw State by your actions. Remember, as you are leaving KSC for careers or for graduate education, that the college's reputation rests on the quality of its graduates. Ferroll Sams, in his marvelous book about growing up in Georgia in the 1930s, says that his mother's chief concern was that wherever he went and whatever he did, people would know that he had been "raised right." We have a similar concern for you, our academic progeny. Continue throughout your lives your enthusiasm for learning and your capacity for excellence. To borrow, without license, one of President Siegel's favorite phrases, "Continue to do us proud," as you have done thus far. 🍎

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