

FORTY-FOURTH  
DOCTORAL COMMENCEMENT  
ADDRESS

PRESIDENT WILLIAM P. KELLY

THE GRADUATE CENTER  
THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

May 22, 2008



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THE GRADUATE CENTER COMMENCEMENT

May 22, 2008



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Ph.D. 353

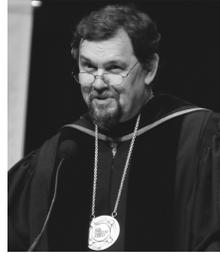
D.M.A. 4

D.S.W. 1

M.A. 54

William P. Kelly, President, The Graduate Center, CUNY

William P. Kelly was appointed president of the Graduate Center of the City University of New York on July 1, 2005. From 1998 through June 2005, he served as the Graduate Center's provost and senior vice president, a tenure that was marked by the recruitment of a remarkable cadre of internationally renowned scholars to the school's faculty.



A distinguished American literature scholar and an expert on the works of James Fenimore Cooper, Dr. Kelly's books include *Plotting America's Past: Fenimore Cooper and the Leatherstocking Tales* (Southern Illinois University Press), and a work in progress, *Exhibiting Nature: Scientific Culture and The American Museum of Natural History*. His numerous articles and reviews have appeared in a broad range of publications including the *New York Times Book Review*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, *The American Scholar*, and the *Journal of Western History*, and he is the editor of the Random House edition of *The Selected Works of Washington Irving* and the Oxford University Press edition of *The Pathfinder*.

Dr. Kelly graduated *summa cum laude* from Princeton University in 1971, where he won the David Bowers Prize in American Studies. He was named Outstanding Graduate Student in English at Indiana University, where he received his Ph.D. in 1976. Dr. Kelly also holds a diploma in intellectual history from Cambridge University and in 1980 received a Fulbright Fellowship to France, where he subsequently became visiting professor at the University of Paris. He was also executive director of the CUNY/Paris Exchange Program and, in 2003, was named *Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Palmes Académiques* by the French Ministry of Education in recognition of his contributions to Franco-American educational and cultural relations.

On the faculty of CUNY's Queens College from 1976 to 1998, he was named Queens College's Golden Key Honor Society Teacher of the Year in 1994. He was appointed concurrently to the faculty of the Graduate Center's Ph.D. Program in English in 1986 and served as the program's executive officer from 1996 to 1998.



**G**ood morning. It's a joy to address you on this happy occasion.

I had intended to say a few words in praise of individualism and the road less traveled, but seeing you all dressed in the same attire makes me question the wisdom of that approach.

Instead, I'll say a few words about commencement in general and this one in particular.

I'll begin by turning, as scholars of American literature almost always do, to Ralph Waldo Emerson.

In doing so I run a considerable risk: citing Emerson in a commencement address is like quoting Ronald Reagan at the Republican National Convention — appropriate, potentially useful, but embarrassing in its predictability.

Indeed, as I was working on a draft of this speech last week, I pulled from my files a commencement address that the former U.S. poet laureate and longtime CUNY professor, Billy Collins, gave at Choate a few years ago. I came across the following, deeply disturbing, sentence: “It is so conventional to refer to Emerson in a commencement address,” Collins writes, “that you get the impression he wrote his essays with the sole purpose of providing speakers with inspiring quotations — often involving the image of a Road.”

While I acknowledge the justice of Billy's remark, what I want to say about Emerson has nothing whatsoever to do with roads and very little to do with inspiration.

Rather, I want to speak about an address Emerson delivered to the Harvard Phi Beta Kappa Society 170 years ago in the First Parish Church of Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Emerson was thirty-four at the time. He had graduated from Harvard sixteen years earlier. He had not been elected to Phi Beta Kappa as an undergraduate. He was a mediocre student; he ranked thirtieth out of fifty-nine in his graduating class. He *was* named Class Poet, but only after six others had rejected the position.

Emerson's failure to distinguish himself may have had to do with his tender years. He enrolled at Harvard at fourteen, an age that even in the early nineteenth century signaled a precocious matriculation. By most accounts, his undergraduate years were unsatisfying. He found Harvard's curriculum alien to his spirit, its social forms uncongenial to his personality.

Emerson's post-Harvard career was, up to the time of his Phi Beta Kappa Address, similarly unremarkable. He filled the pulpit his father had held at the Second Church in Boston and published a handful of essays, poems, and reviews. He was well regarded by his parishioners and by his peers, but few if any anticipated the greatness that was to come.

In 1834, three years before the Phi Beta Kappa Address, Emerson had taken leave from his congregation in hopes of restoring, through travel, his physical and his mental health. His tour took him to Italy where he encountered classical ruins and Renaissance painting, to England where he managed to meet Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Carlyle, and to Paris where a visit to the *Jardin des Plantes* helped reform his conception of the natural world.

Rather than as a fixed system of unchanging classifications — a great chain of being, if you will — Emerson came to see nature, as Darwin would some twenty years later, as fluid, ceaselessly altered and altering.

Emerson's epiphanies yielded a slim volume which he entitled "Nature" and published on his return to Boston. It attracted respectable notice in New England literary circles, but it did not sell particularly well and seemed destined to disappear without producing much of a ripple.

The volume did, however, attract the attention of members of the Phi Beta Kappa selection committee, and when their first choice — the

Reverend Dr. Jonathan Mayhew Wainwright — rejected their invitation, the committee turned to Emerson as a readily available alternate.

Emerson seems not to have been offended by his second-choice status and gladly accepted. For one thing the address would provide a chance to promote his book; for another, it offered a platform from which to speak to the intellectual elite of Massachusetts. The old guard of Phi Beta Kappa alumni could be expected to attend the ceremony in large numbers. Then too Emerson could count on a good turn-out of Harvard faculty, administrators, and overseers, as well as a clutch of local ministers. Most important, he would have an opportunity to address the newly initiated members of Harvard's graduating class, the young scholars in whom Emerson had invested so much hope.

The day of the address, August 31, 1837, was quite warm, but a good-sized crowd assembled at University Hall and paraded with Emerson — and an accompanying band — through Harvard Yard and across the street to First Church. The church was soon filled to capacity; others gathered outside the open windows.

What followed was for American cultural history a watershed. In conjunction with a speech he delivered at the Harvard Divinity School eleven months later, Emerson's Phi Beta Kappa Address established him as the intellectual spokesman of his generation.

In the words of Oliver Wendell Holmes, who was present that day, Emerson's remarks were "our declaration of intellectual independence." James Russell Lowell, also in the audience, described the occasion as "an event without parallel in our literary annals." Friends pressed Emerson to publish the speech, and when he did, under the title "The American Scholar," his publisher sold the entire run within a month.

What was so significant about this address and why does it have resonance for those of us gathered here to celebrate *our* commencement?

Emerson's address had three primary themes, each of which carries us some distance toward answering those questions.

First, it was, at its heart, a jeremiad; a lament for America's failure to achieve the shining promise of the revolution and a clarion call to

recuperate that lost possibility. The fall from righteousness Emerson decried involved for him a failure of mind.

“We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe,” he insists, “The spirit of the American freeman is already suspected to be timid, imitative, tame. Public and private avarice make the air we breathe thick and fat. The scholar is decent, indolent, complaisant. See already the tragic consequence. The mind of this country, taught to aim at low objects, eats upon itself. There is no work for anyone but the decorous and the complaisant.”

Emerson’s second theme invokes one of the most familiar tropes of the European and American nineteenth centuries: the alienation of labor, the fragmentation of man. Emerson argues that “Man is thus metamorphosed into a thing, into many things. . . The priest becomes a form, the attorney a statute-book, the mechanic a machine, the sailor a rope of the ship.” The “state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters — a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man.”

“In this distribution of functions,” he concludes, “the scholar is the delegated intellect. In the right state he is *Man Thinking*. In the degenerate state . . . he tends to become a mere thinker, or, still worse, the parrot of other men’s thinking.”

Emerson’s third theme involves the formation of the scholar as *Man Thinking*. He identifies three influences that shape and empower: Nature, which teaches system and classification; Books, which make present the mind of the past; and Action, which provides the scholar with experience and vocabulary.

Each of these influences, Emerson insists, must be embraced actively. Nature does not reveal her secrets to the indolent. Science must seek “analogy [in nature], identity, in the most remote parts.” “Books,” he argues, “are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst.” A scholar “must be an inventor to read well. . . There is then creative reading as well as creative writing.” Action is “essential,” but the scholar must transform experience into thought, “as a mulberry leaf is converted into satin.”

Having described the formation of the scholar, Emerson defines his role: “The office of the scholar,” he writes, “is to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances.” He “is the world’s eye. He is the world’s heart. He is to resist the vulgar prosperity that retrogrades ever to barbarism by preserving and communicating heroic sentiments, noble biographies, melodious verse, and the conclusions of history.”

“Men,” Emerson continues, “very naturally seek money or power; and power because it is as good as money — the ‘spoils’, so called, ‘of office’. And why not? for they aspire to the highest, and this, in their sleep-walking, they dream is highest. Wake them and they shall quit the false good, and leap to the true, and leave governments to clerks and desks. This revolution is to be wrought by the gradual domestication of the idea of Culture.”

So, my dear friends, there you have it: your task clearly defined. Learn from nature, from books, from action. Transform that knowledge through creative reading and a grasping imagination. Distinguish facts from appearances. Spark and lead a revolution; bring cheer and hope; awake us from our sleep. Domesticate the idea of Culture.

Summarized in this way, Emerson becomes the platitude machine that Billy Collins described at Choate. Sonorous phrases and inspiring words that veer toward cliché. In short, a commencement speech — cut to the recession, lunch to follow, photo opportunities all around.

But reducing Emerson to a pasteboard figure does him and us scant justice. Recognizing the Phi Beta Kappa Address as something other than a series of nostrums worthy of Polonius demands the kind of creative and transformative reading Emerson defines as the hallmark of Man Thinking.

How do we make Emerson’s Address new? How do we reclaim the vision that so inspired his audience? For starters we need both to resituate Emerson’s remarks in their time and to liberate them from that frame.

In the months before and after Emerson delivered the Phi Beta Kappa Address, the United States had plunged into a monumental depression.

Historians call it The Panic of 1837. Not until 1929, and maybe not even then, did the country experience so catastrophic a fiscal unsettling.

The movement from a property- to a market-based economy that began in North America in the mid-eighteenth century reached a point of extreme volatility in the decades following the war of 1812. Unrestrained speculation, mounting debt, and unsecured financial institutions produced a series of failures and resultant panics which culminated, in the spring of 1837, in a nationwide crash. Banks suspended specie payment; merchants were ruined; workmen displaced. Mobs formed in the streets of major cities; the New Orleans Exchange was burned to the ground; foreclosures, bankruptcies, sheriff's sales, and westward migration were the order of the day. Emerson was, of course, keenly aware of these developments. He described the wide-spread unrest as a series of "loud cracks in the social edifice." "The land," he wrote in his journal, "stinks with suicide."

Emerson's decision to take up the mantle of Jeremiah was, then, no academic or metaphoric gesture. Like most of his countrymen, he thought the nation was in crisis and bereft of effective leadership.

At the same time, he was fully aware of the marginalization of scholars, poets, and artists. He speaks to that point in his Address. Scholars ply, he argues, "the slow, unhonored, and unpaid task of observation." The "so-called 'practical men' sneer at speculative men, as if, because they speculate or see, they could do nothing."

The plaintive tone of those remarks is terribly poignant. Indeed, Emerson's call for scholars to march in the vanguard of revolution is, for me, reminiscent of Shelley's description of poets as "the unacknowledged legislators of mankind." The stress, of course, falls heavily for Shelley — as it does for Emerson — on "unacknowledged."

Emerson's longing for engagement, for a role to play in the midst of cultural crisis would be ineffably sad were it not for the consequence of that desire. While Emerson and his transcendentalist friends can not be credited for reforming the U.S. banking system, their capacity for affecting cultural change was profound. The myriad reform movements

of the antebellum period — abolition, women’s rights, child labor, penal reform, and a hundred other measures — sprang directly from the work of the scholars Emerson envisioned in his Address — Men Thinking, actively engaged in the world.

Here we flirt with “relevance” and the Collinsesque platitude. My point is not that scholars can change the world — though they can and do. Rather I’d point us toward Emerson’s injunction to read creatively, to capture and refit for our own purposes the work of those who precede us. How, in other words, might we, through Emerson, avoid becoming “a mere thinker, or, still worse, the parrot of other men’s thinking.”

One way, I would submit, is to attend to the first sentence of Emerson’s address: “I greet you on the recommencement of our literary year.”

Why “recommencement”? Why not simply “commencement”?

There’s a simple way of accounting for Emerson’s usage. In his day, Harvard celebrated its commencement on the last Wednesday of August. The Phi Beta Kappa Address was traditionally delivered on the following day. By describing the Phi Beta Kappa festivities as a *re*commencement, Emerson marked the passage from commencement as the closure of one academic year to the Phi Beta Kappa installation as the inaugural event of the next.

But one must be careful of the literal in reading Emerson. His language is deeply textured and highly self-conscious. There is more at stake in this usage.

For Emerson, and I would propose, for us — scholars gathered at a commencement — the difference is significant. Emerson’s conception of what we learn from nature, from books, from action — the formative elements of the American Scholar — is fluid. Nothing in his world is static; truth is always in play. In “nature,” he writes, “there is never a beginning, there is never an end . . . but always circular power returning into itself.” Books circulate, ideas are reshaped and remade.

Action and relation are similarly contingent. We understand each other through approximation. In our most intimate relations we move

two steps forward and one back, we come ever closer toward a recognition that is simultaneously a deferral. Our social lives are a series of imperfect translations.

To say that we possess truth, love, or knowledge is a contradiction in terms. We hypothesize, we tack, we reformulate.

That's the mandate of Emerson's Address: recommencement. Begin again.

That message, I would submit, is particularly appropriate for this gathering.

First, because of who we are. This is not an undergraduate exercise in which the faculty bids hail and farewell as students set off on unpredictable journeys. You are neither finishing nor beginning your work. Your dissertations have been submitted, but they await revision. The scholarship that undergirds them will continue. So too our relation with you. The connection you have formed with your mentors is enduring; its maturation marked by advice and counsel, by updated letters of reference, by the exquisite pleasure taken in a student's professional success.

You and we are bound in an endless process of recommencement, which is the true form of scholarly practice. That is to say we are involved in a genealogical undertaking. We are the heirs of others' work, we make our contribution, we pass the torch. We rejoice in the promise of a connection unbound by time, by the extension of centuries of scholarly exchange.

Today's ceremony is also a recommencement in a broader sense. Collectively, you will pursue many professions: scholars, writers, teachers, policy makers, business men and women. What you have in common is a commitment to knowledge. You understand its power and you know that it is a process not a possession, that today's formulation is inadequate to tomorrow's challenge.

Emerson's conception of an *American Scholar*, for example, has limited resonance in an age of globalization. But Emerson's method anticipates obsolescence. By insisting on the importance of analogy and root,

Emerson collapses the boundaries that separate the me from the not-me. In so doing, he presses us toward an expansion of empathy, toward wider and wider circles of connection.

In the words of Emerson's great contemporary Herman Melville, "Genius all over the world stands hand in hand, and one shock of recognition runs the whole circle round."

Embracing an endless process of recommencement is by no means an easy task. I often think how nice it would be to settle rather than to perch.

Happily, there are models to guide you along the way. I think of your mentors, the books you read, the colleagues with whom you work. I also think of the three scholars whose work we honor today. In different ways, each has devoted his life to revision, to rethinking, to reformulation, to bringing his work closer to Omega. That is why we've invited them here today.

But finally, whatever difficulty recommencement entails, that struggle is offset by the surpassing pleasures of the life of the mind. But then you know that. That recognition brought you to the Graduate Center and has sustained you in the long journey to this moment.

Godspeed, my friends, do good work.

Begin and begin again.

**The Graduate Center** is the doctorate-granting institution of the City University of New York (CUNY). An internationally-recognized center for advanced studies and a national model for public doctoral education, the Graduate Center offers more than thirty doctoral programs as well as a number of master's programs. Many of its faculty members are among the world's leading scholars in their respective fields. A recent Academic Analytics Faculty Scholarly Productivity Index placed ten of the Graduate Center's Ph.D. programs among the top ten in the country, and six were ranked in the top five. The school currently enrolls over 4000 students from throughout the United States, as well as from about eighty foreign countries, and its alumni hold major positions in industry and government, as well as in academia. The Graduate Center is also home to thirty interdisciplinary research centers and institutes focused on areas of compelling social, civic, cultural, and scientific concerns. Located in a landmark Fifth Avenue building, the Graduate Center has become a vital part of New York City's intellectual and cultural life with its extensive array of public lectures, exhibitions, concerts, and theatrical events. Further information on the Graduate Center and its programs can be found at [www.gc.cuny.edu](http://www.gc.cuny.edu).

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