

Last Hurrah: Doing Honor

Michael P. Wolfe
Kappa Delta Pi

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Good Evening Colleagues of Honor.

When Diane Selby, ACHS Vice President, called to invite me to present the final banquet address I said, “Oh dear, Diane. What could I possibly say or do that I haven’t said over the years?” Anyway, I am packing up the boxes to transition my life to retirement and other pursuits. “But,” she said, “don’t you have perceptions of ACHS gleaned from years of active involvement that would be valuable to share? I’ll call you back.” Well, I had some dreams about how some people over the years dealt with ACHS keynotes.

Five Dangerous Assumptions Speakers Make about Listeners

1. If audience members are looking at the speakers, they must be listening.
Reality: Many listeners fake attention. Through years of conditioning and experience, they’ve learned to manifest the correct facial expressions to appear as if they are listening.
2. Audience members will remember the points the speaker thinks are most important.
Reality: In most cases, listeners remember only 50% or less of the information given in a 10 minute speech. Odds are low that members remember all points in the speech.
3. Audience members finish listening when speakers finish talking.
Reality: Audience members can tune out at any time. It may be after the opening sentence or 30 seconds from the end.
4. Audience members process information in the same ways speakers do.
Reality: Most speakers believe audiences prefer information present in the same way they do. Actually, what works for one person may not work for another. Some want “just the facts;” others want the “big picture.”
5. If audience members understand and agree with the information presented, they will apply the principles to their jobs.
Reality: Motivation is the key to this assumption. If the audience is highly motivated to apply the speech’s principles, the assumption isn’t dangerous.

Diane called me back. I said, “OK. I can do it but I’m a senior citizen.” The group is getting younger, and I gave her some examples. How many people in this room were born after 1945?

When I received the first set of conference materials from Dorothy Mitstifer I discovered my name was inserted in the correct space on the program but there was a different title. I gave Diane the title “Doing Honor” since my life at KDP and ACHS has promoted the “doing” part. Then I saw “The Last Hurrah: Doing Honor.” Gosh, another quandary and another search for the meaning of the “last Hurrah.” To my surprise, again we are faced with multiple definitions.

Hurrah – A shout of joy or cheer—excitement, fanfare.

Last Hurrah – A final appearance or effort, especially at the end of a career. I found the *Last Hurrah*, a novel by Edwin O’Connor. Spencer Tracy, in the *Last Hurrah*, discussed campaigning with his nephew.

On the third call, Diane said, “Would you do us the honor of being the banquet speaker?” So, I first needed to determine what she meant: do us the honor.

Honor

What does that mean? Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr were defending their honor in that fatal duel.

- To show high regard or appreciation for; pay tribute to; honor your father and your mother (Exodus 20:12)
- To confer a distinction upon
- Outward respect or admiration (A dinner in honor of . . .)
- A special prerogative; privilege (I have the honor to inform you)
- A person of superior standing or importance (It is a pleasure to meet your Honor)
- One that is of intrinsic value; asset (He is an honor to his profession)

Honors

- Social courtesies or civilities (Mike did the honors.)
- An academic grade, distinction, or award conferred upon a superior student
- Chastity, purity, virginity
- One's word given as a guarantee of performance
- The privilege of playing first on the tee—because he won the last hole

After I figured out that with honor having so many definitions, I believed I could probably make some sense of this. So, here goes: I am honored to be in your presence.

What's my purpose here this evening?

I am one of you, so this is truly a collegial conversation. I want to talk with each of you as brother and sister. Much of the talk has been started on many occasions during the past 16 seasons and never completed. So, this evening, esteemed colleagues, it continues. Our conversation is about purpose, meaning, and actions of an honor society and its members—about **Doing Honor!** I want to include ACHS and each individual society.

Bil Johnson, in the President's Opening Address on February 20, 1997 in San Antonio, said that "associating with honor may be considered not only as a descriptive term but as a prescriptive one. It defines who we are then tells us what to do. We not only create honor societies but we define what it means to do associating with honor." He continued, "To associate with honor means to act honorably, to do honorably, and to be an honor kind of person." Act—Do—Be

In my remarks to this group in 1998 I said that the scenery for honor societies was changing (i.e., virtual universities, generation gaps, information technology) and we needed to plan for an uncertain future. I used ROI—return on investment—when talking about members who question the value of belonging. This also stressed: To act—To do—To be.

John Warren in the 1998 meeting in Nashville concluded his remarks with the following: honor societies must take the lead in affirming what it is to be a truly educated individual. I ask you, "How do we do this in ACHS?"

There is a scholarly article and book titled *Doing School* by Denise Clark Pope of Stanford University. She described how today's high school students succeed in school. They are busy at what they call "doing school." They know that they work in a system where achievement depends more on doing—going through the correct motions—than on learning and engaging with the curriculum. Instead of thinking deeply about content, the students focus on managing workload—honing strategies that will help them achieve high grades. They learn when to raise their hands, how to please the teacher, some feel compelled to cheat. One student said, "People don't go to school to learn. They go to get good grades, to get to college, to get a high-paying job, to be happy. Grades are where it's at!" Competition, workload, sleep time—all lead to the grade trap: this narrow definition of success. How many of our honor society members are "dong honor" like the students in Pope's study. "Joining an honor society

is simply a line on a resume, and I don't have to do much else" is the phrase I hear far too often from new initiates.

Phi Beta What? Appeared in the Wall Street Journal on November 4, 2005. "It's name is shorthand for smarts . . . it's a club not everyone wants to join. People do not know what the society actually does or what the fees really pay for. There is other competition from sound-alike societies with lower requirements." I was incensed. Several ACS societies exchanged emails, a letter was sent to PBK and to the WSJ as a response to the article. Thank you Keith Sanders and Dorothy Mitstifer.

So, let me take us on a short journey this evening and speak to you as members of ACHS and as leaders. We have challenges; we've made some progress. Yet, there are deeply ingrained perceptions that still block the path of progress.

One way to look at this is suggested by marriage and family therapists, who for years have used the phrase "elephants in the living room" to describe weighty issues that we all know about but nobody wants to talk about or take any action. So let's look a few elephants in the ACHS living room. They also exist in our individual societies.

First, what is honor?

My colleague Karen Allen has written *What is Honor? . . . Common Misconceptions about Honor*.

We believe honor is mystical....so we search for it.
We believe honor is productivity....so we work for it.
We believe honor comes from an opportunity....so we wait for it.
We believe honor comes from recognition....so we strive for it.
We believe honor is an event....so we schedule it.
Honor is a privilege and homage. It is noble.

Someone of honor very well may be noble and devoted to noble causes, yet hold no ranking of nobility whatsoever. Honor is not necessarily a position bestowed but an earning of respect, though it certainly can be bestowed. Recognition of that respect via awards, opportunities of leadership, dedications, and special acknowledgments is external identification by others. It is public credit for efforts most likely motivated intrinsically. We bestow honor.

Honor represents integrity and good character, and is worthy of deference. Yet honor is subjective and somewhat situational. What is an honor to one person may make no difference to another. Michael Wolfe values honor in education and would undoubtedly like the honor referred to in the definition: first to play from the tee. Less enthusiastic golfers may be just as honored to be the last to tee.

Honor comes in various forms, even in education. Early in their educational lives students become aware of the honor roll. Whether or not they achieve it or even care about it, they are aware. But that's for another speech.

We see evidence of the public's perceptions of honor through bumper stickers:

Your child may be an honor student, but you're still an idiot.

My kid sells term papers to your honor student.

My child beat up your honor student at recess today.

There are schools of honor, honors programs, honors education. Most classrooms operate on an honor system, meaning what's on or in a desk remains at that desk. It is understood students will do their own work and not seek answers from others on tests. That form of honor can be quite fragile. High schools and universities dispense honor and honorary degrees, not to be confused with one another. They aren't equal. The first is earned, but the latter is awarded.

Then there are honor societies, which recognize both types of honor. Students must earn the status for nomination and then must be asked for membership. This pathway recognizes incentive and initiative, as well as motivation, grade achievement, and sometimes being in the right place at the right time.

Nevertheless, being asked to join an honor society has signified a status achieved. Membership in honor societies can represent everything from the cream of the crop—noteworthy individuals recognized for their achievements—to elitists who have forgotten the humility of idealism and service to others. When that is the case, the fault usually lies with the member, not the organization.

If honor is, indeed, worthy, noble, and a privilege, then a society of honor must always have honor as its foundation. Integrity and respect for the pursuits of education and its facilitators must be the underlying principles for the honor society. On that foundation it should stand, serve, and support its members. But I ask, “Have we defined the universal principles making up our moral compass?” What if families, preschools, churches, or communities are not doing this? Should we be reinforcing the principles of honor? We’ve never truly focused on these principles of honor, and we must.

I studied the ACHS mission, ends, and role on the Website and read words like encourage and honor superior scholarship and leadership achievement. We are a coordinating agency, define our membership categories, cooperate, and maintain standards. I love the word “certify” as one of our roles—that has been needed for a long time. But all of this isn’t enough!

I ask you, brothers and sisters, have we truly taken the notion of honor beyond a narrow definition of GPA? What is a student of honor? What do students of honor share in common? Can we define this? We MUST. For if we choose not to do so, I believe we all may appear in the Wall Street Journal because we haven’t defined the WHAT! Perhaps we will all one day disappear into mediocrity—to nothing unique and distinctive. The credibility of an honor society page on the ACHS Web site includes minimum scholastic criteria, governance, chapters, and Website. There is nothing stated about what a society does beyond how members are selected, how it is governed, how chapters initiate, and the Website. Do we not publish scholarly journals, hold meetings, do webinars, debate issues, mentor new professionals, help find jobs, prepare for graduate school, tutor elementary kids, raise funds for Katrina, send groups to volunteer, work in nursing homes, and award hundreds of thousands of dollars in scholarships?

If our response to the Wall Street Journal included these facts and others I obtained in the survey as part of my preparation for this presentation, there would be not question or controversy about the value of ACHS and its member societies. Do we have in our association societies who take fees from initiates and do nothing besides hold a ritual? Is this the extent of *doing honor*? **I believe we do not provide a big enough return on investment.** I wonder if some of us constitute a recognition-only honor society.

My point here is: What else do we reinforce in our honor societies other than a ritual and public recognition. Is there a commitment to do honor, to act, and to be honorable? What should we do to increase our relevance and value?

Character

Some of you will remember the great debate of 1998 when “four characters from ACHS” participated in a panel discussion at the Annual Council Meeting. We fell short! We had fun poking holes in the dilemma ACHS faced by including character as a general requirement for membership in an honor society. I admit today, publicly, I was wrong. I argued against using character as a requirement for membership for assessment reasons. Times have changed, and so must I.

Ethical decisions have consequences, and one long-term consequence is to make individuals into a person of character. But what is character? It is the sum of one’s distinctive traits, qualities, and predilections; it amounts to one’s moral constitution. What are the principles making up our moral compass? Has ACHS defined these principles? Everyone has a character of some sort, but not everyone has **character**. *Having character* is shorthand for having *good* character, and that means being a person who is admirable because of his self-assured, ethical behavior. Character is ethics in action.

“One’s character is one’s habitual way of behaving,” according to education scholars Thomas Lickona, Eric Schaps, and Catherine Lewis. We are what we habitually do. If we make honorable commitments and keep them, if our word is our bond, we are becoming a person of honor.

Honorable people not only do honorable things, they do them with honorable motives. The more honorable we are, the more we positively affect those around us.

Character is not the same thing as reputation. Character is what you are. Reputation is what people say you are. Abraham Lincoln likened character to a tree and reputation to its shadow.

The conduct of good character is virtue. Virtues such as justice, honesty, and caring are held to be good human qualities. Recent books have identified universal virtues—wisdom, fortitude, self-control, love, positive attitude, hard work, integrity, gratitude, and humility. These are affirmed by nearly all philosophical, cultural, and religious traditions. Why not by ACHS?

Aristotle said, “Virtues are not mere thoughts but habits we develop by performing virtuous actions.” To act—To do—To be.

Where does character come from?

No one is born with good character. It’s not hereditary. Yet everyone, regardless of background, enters the world with the opportunity to become a person of exemplary character. Character has to be developed.

“Building character” refers to the process of instilling within a person positive, ethical traits based on principles that can be expressed many ways. For reasons of convenience and ease of recognition, they are summarized as the Six Pillars of Character: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship [Licona, T., & Mathew, D. (2005). *Smart & good high schools*, Templeton Foundation].

Helen Keller said, “True happiness is not attained through self-gratification, but through fidelity to a worthy purpose.” Albert Schweitzer said, “One thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve.” These observations should remind us of the potency of peace of mind and sense of value one can get from devoting oneself to a worthy cause.

A PERSON OF HONOR

Is a good person, someone to look up to and admire.

Knows the difference between right and wrong and always tries to do what is right.

Sets a good example for everyone.

Makes the world a better place.

Becomes a champion of honor.

Lives according to the Six Pillars of Character: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship.

Demographics

What are the demographics that have an impact on honor societies?

- Generation X (born between 1965-1975) is just as likely as baby boomers to join our societies. Our goals must be different for these groups. The Millennials are even more flexible and demanding.
- Intergenerational differences lead to disagreement on goals and tactics of serving members.
- There will be 40 million 10-19 year olds entering the workforce in the next decade. So how do we bridge the gap?
- A 13-year old is playing a video on his handheld with a 10-year old, and I ask, "How can you make choices at lightning speed? Why that tree and not a rock?" They say, "Duh! How can you miss it?" In their world, only oldies like me don't know how to navigate multidimensional matrices and beat the game, all in real time.
- In the "now generation," authority flows from merit and consensus, not from position, protocol, and an anointed head. Open source, blogs, Wikis, on the fly, instant messaging are new terms.
- One size doesn't fit all—we need to respond to generations or we may dwindle into irrelevance.
- A future without college—that's the title of an editorial column by Froma Harrop of the Providence Journal. She quoted Peter Drucker who described the modern university as a relic that will disappear in a few decades. He noted that Herman Melville said that "a whale-ship was my Yale College and my Harvard" because all he needed to do was read and spend time in the world. Drucker's message to high school graduates was to work for at least five years so that when you go on to college it would be as a grown-up.
- Our members demand content at high speed—called learning velocity—podcasts, audio-streams, real-time blogs—all member generated.
- How do we communicate with thousands of members in 48 states and 20 countries instantly? Distance learning.
- Personalization and self-service. Use Web more for services to members, who say, "Give me only what I need, now, in my own style, and only when I'm personally invited."
- Status quo? or eventual irrelevancy if we can't connect.

What specifically can ACHS promote throughout its huge chapter network?

Stewards of Honor—a transformative process and my CHALLENGE

- In ancient Greece there flourished a company of scholars whose goal, stated in general terms, was the pursuit of the good, the true, the beautiful. Among the rich symbolism derived from this ancient culture we find the figure of the youthful relay runner bearing a lighted torch, which has come to signify the transmission of knowledge from generation to generation. A great school, who was an even greater educator, has spoken of this concept: "The race itself signifies the element of tradition: the receiving of wisdom from our forerunners, the keeping of it alive, and the passing of it on to posterity. The torch signifies not merely the handing on of the knowledge of the past, but since it is a lighted torch, knowledge illuminated by imagination." You now carry that torch as a member of honor. Hold it high; carry it proudly?
- The moral leadership we provide when (to draw upon Walker Percy's phrase at the end of *Moviegoer*), "we hand one another along."

People join organizations for

1. Affiliation (access to best practices and forums)
2. Active engagement (learning)

3. Identity (how your society relates to its members)

Those having torches will pass them on to others.

--Plato, *The Republic*

- Each initiate becomes a “Champion for Honor” within the circle of influence, in the home, school, and community—a steward of honor.
- ACHS, the Honor Community Coalition, committed to ethics and honor. This ought to appear in our Directory and on our Website.
- ACHS best practices Website—honor societies “doing honor.” Why can’t we show the best practices of our representative societies?
- Hold campus-based workshops with other societies—ethics, literacy. Literacy is on the decline on campus, let’s attack. The honor community could address this issue.
- Promote public school programs (tutoring, volunteering, adopt a club or school)
- How can we pull together to make it clear that ACHS cares about doing Honor, Ethics, and Character? Who in this room will champion this cause?
- Can we produce a Code of Honor common to all societies?
- Like Katrina, can we mobilize volunteers in a host of community service projects?
- Can we recruit, educate, and retain high quality faculty advisers and counselors and advocate for more on-campus recognition for this role?
- Can we produce one position paper each year focusing on honor and excellence? It could be published and distributed throughout ACHS societies as the ACHS theme for the year.

Can we focus on how we can “act honorably, do honorably, and be an honor kind of person”? I say HURRAH for making this happen.