

**FIRST YEAR INDUCTION CEREMONY**  
**Sunday, August 24, 2014**

**CARL'S LIFE OF SAMUEL JOHNSON**

First year Blue Jays, from the proud Class of 2018, welcome. You have already accomplished a great deal in your lives. Many of you have impressive academic credentials. All of you have incredible academic potential. All of you are going to participate in some way in clubs, teams, organizations, projects, and a host of other activities that will help you develop as leaders, as contributors to the College and, eventually, to society as a whole.

And, some of you, perhaps many of you--let's hope it is just some of you---are going to do some really stupid things. How do I know that? Well, because I did some stupid things, when I was a college student. I had some impressive academic credentials by the time I left college to go to graduate school at the University of Chicago. I had also been a student senator, an orientation mentor, and the editor of the college newspaper. I had even helped create a non-profit student housing cooperative. But I did some stupid things, too.

Let me tell about just one of those things, and what I learned from it. It was the summer of 1971. I had finished my first year of college in Michigan. That summer, I painted houses. During a break between painting jobs, I decided to take a vacation. An older guy named Paul from my hometown invited me to come visit him in San Francisco and stay for free. So, I packed my knapsack, had a friend drop me off at the nearest highway, and started hitchhiking.

This was one of the stupidest things I have ever done. And, just to be clear, never, ever, ever hitchhike. I stand before you today for one reason. I have a guardian angel. Fortunately, all of you, too, have guardian angels. Otherwise, none of us would get saved from the consequences of the stupid things we do. Blessedly, I came back home after two weeks of traveling and seeing California. I went back to painting houses.

There was only one problem. This is another of the stupid things that I did. I had not told my parents that I was going to California. Can you imagine how heartsick they were while I was gone, not knowing if I was safe, and if they would ever see me again?

Recognizing how much I had hurt them, disappointed them, and not appreciated their love for me was one of the hardest things that I have ever done. It took years to repair our relationship.

Fortunately, there were a few more life-giving lessons from my trip to California. Packing, I had looked for a book to read on the trip. I figured I only had room for one book. It made sense to take a book that I had never read before. Since I had about two weeks and 5,000 miles to travel, I should take a big book. And, since I had to carry it, I wanted a paperback.

On an impulse the previous spring, I had bought a volume at a used book sale whose title I had heard from one of my high school English teachers. He said it was one of his favorites. I had never read it, it was big, and it was a paperback. So I stuffed it in my knapsack.

The book was James Boswell's The Life of Samuel Johnson. I was not very far west of Chicago the first day when I thought I had made one of the stupidest mistakes of my life. I had two weeks and 5,000 miles ahead of me, and the only book that I had to read was a stuffy Englishman's biography of a weird eccentric whose major claim to fame was that he wrote a dictionary. What had I been thinking? But, I kept reading. There must be some reason, I thought, why people had been reading this book for two hundred years, and it had never gone out of print. Somewhere, west of the Rockies, I found myself reading it even when I was taking breaks at night in truck stops or in the back beds of pickups when people gave me rides. By the time I got to California, I was hooked.

The book was not an easy read. It was written in typical eighteenth century style, with long, complicated sentences. Parts of the book were simply letters that Boswell and Johnson wrote each other. There were references to "King and Country," Latin proverbs, and place names that made no sense to me. And, Samuel Johnson was not easy to like. Johnson was an arch conservative. He even opposed the American Revolution. Although, I had to admit he was right to about Thomas Jefferson and George Washington's hypocrisy. This is vintage Johnson: "How it is that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of the negroes?"

But as difficult as it was to read Boswell's life of Johnson, to force myself to read it stretched my mind, forced me to get into another's person's world. Boswell was not a famous writer, except that he had become so fascinated by Samuel Johnson that he wrote what is one of the great biographies of all time to capture his friend's genius, his eccentricities, and his struggles.

Johnson indeed struggled. His family lost their money, he was orphaned, he was only able to study for one year in college, and he was arrested several times for debts that he couldn't pay. A large man, often overweight and ill, he had poor eyesight, not a good thing when you are trying to be a writer. Worse, Johnson also was overcome with strange jerks, tics, and seizures. He probably had what we would call Tourette's syndrome. Many people found him almost repulsive. He was also opinionated, at times abrasive. He was a dazzling conversationalist, but he often fell into depression. A deeply religious person, he struggled all of his life with doubt. Boswell wrote that Johnson "felt himself overwhelmed with a horrible melancholia, with perpetual irritation, fretfulness, and impatience; and with a dejection, gloom, and despair, which made existence misery." Johnson himself said it even better. When Boswell challenged Johnson with how he could say he was miserable when he delighted others with his words, Johnson replied, "Alas! It is all outside; I may be cracking my joke, and cursing the sun. Sun, how I hate thy beams!"

Yet Johnson compelled himself, by sheer force of will, to write. He never became the novelist or poet he dreamed of being. But he wrote the first real dictionary of the English language, one of the masterworks of world scholarship. Johnson included a staggering 114,000 quotations from literary works to define words in his dictionary—all of the quotations culled by hand, without even the use of a card catalog. The dictionary is still used by scholars today.

Johnson could lash out at those who snubbed him. But he could be amazingly generous. Boswell tells us that Johnson one night found a woman lying in the street, exhausted and unable to walk. She was a prostitute. He carried her on his back to his house, had her nursed back to health, and tried to find her a job.

Thanks to Boswell, we have some of Johnson's best lines, since he himself often found it difficult to write. "Hell is paved with good intentions." Johnson said that. When you're forcing yourself to write those papers for your courses, remember this advice from Johnson: "The greatest part of a writer's time is spent in reading, in order to write; a man will turn over half a library, to make one book."

Johnson was an ardent loyalist of the British king, but he savagely criticized his government's policies when he thought they were wrong. He had no use for those who substituted flag waving for rational argument: "Patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel."

Johnson, who had a difficult relationship with his family when he was young, even had some insight for me, as I was hitchhiking: "There must always be a struggle between a father and a son, while one aims at power and the other at independence." I learned some lessons from my trip and from reading Boswell's Life of Samuel Johnson.

Lesson number one: Don't do stupid things. Don't make your guardian angel work overtime. She, too, needs a break once in a while.

Lesson number two: If you do stupid things, take responsibility for them. When you do stupid things, don't let them get in the way of relationships with the people who love you. Your parents, your family, your friends, are the most important support you can have. Blessedly, especially if you take responsibility for what you do, and often even if you do not, your parents and family will still love you. I know mine did. And I was reminded of it powerfully just before I moved to Elizabethtown three years ago. When my wife and I were packing up our books in Williamsburg, Virginia, where we were living, I grabbed a book off a shelf. It was a paperback, it was big, but I had read it before. Forty years earlier, in fact. In the back of the book was a letter from my father sent to my friend Paul's address in San Francisco in the summer of 1971. My father was a man of few words, but he spoke volumes by simply writing, "Naturally was surprised to hear that you took off. Not much else to say. Just hope and pray you get back ok. Love, Dad." He forgave me. Although it was difficult, he taught me to take responsibility for what I had done and learn from it.

Lesson number three: It is not just about you. As I became involved in student organizations in college, I often got exasperated with other people, their apparent selfishness, individualism, and stubbornness. And, then, I had to take a deep breath and look at myself. I had been exactly the same way in taking off on my trip without caring what my family would feel or what would happen to me. If I learned anything in college, and I hope and pray that you learn it, too, it is that you can accomplish incredible things by working together, accepting others for who they are, and putting away your own self-centeredness. As a college graduate from Elizabethtown College you will be looked to as a leader someday, on the job, in your community, and as a citizen. Learn here, on your residence hall floor, on your team, in your club, in a student organization, in working on a class project, what it means to get a group of people with all of their diverse talents and needs and desires to work together to accomplish something. You will be learning what you need to be a leader. And learning to lead means learning how to serve. For over a century, Elizabethtown College has had the motto, "Educate for Service." If there is one phrase that every E-town student, every alumnus, every staff and faculty member, and even many parents and community members know, about Elizabethtown College, it is "Educate for Service." Serving someone doesn't help only the person served. It helps you who are doing the service to know yourself, to learn about what the rest of the world is like, and to know what is most important about life.

Lesson number four: Read books that challenge you. Books that have stood the test of time do so for a reason. They will teach you about that most precious gift, wisdom. Insights into why we act the way we do, into human folly, morality, frailty, and our capacity for goodness as well as evil—these are what you can learn from the great books. Ask your professors, coaches, student life staff, resident assistants, and friends, what are the books that have shaped you? Read them, even if at first they are challenging or difficult. The very act of wrestling with a complex text written for a different audience than you will teach you a great deal.

Lesson number five: Be ready for new experiences. The College brings you influential speakers every year. I will mention just two, both of whose books you should read: Donna Hicks from Harvard University has written a powerful book called Dignity on how we should treat others; she is speaking here on Wednesday and Thursday, November 5-6; another is Nicholas Kristof of the New York Times, author of, among other books, Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide, who will speak here on Monday and Tuesday, April 13-14 2015. While you are at Elizabethtown College, if at all possible, study abroad, join a service trip, and do internships anywhere in the world you can. And, when you do any of these experiences, the more you put into them, the more you will learn. Johnson again: “So it is with traveling; a man must carry knowledge with him, if he would bring home knowledge.”

You have a precious opportunity over the next four years to begin to shape your life. You will learn how to take responsibility, to serve, and to lead. It is an honor to be able to join you on that journey.

Thank you.