Anyone who stands to address a Phi Beta Kappa chapter stands in the place where Emerson stood to deliver his great lecture *The American Scholar*, delivered to the Phi Beta Kappa graduates of Harvard on August 31, 1837. It would hardly be in Emerson’s spirit to be daunted by that reflection. One of the great lessons of that lecture was that to be intimidated by the great works of the past is to mistake the purpose for which they were written. As Emerson said of an earlier set of daunting precursors:

> Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon have given, forgetful that Cicero, Locke and Bacon were only young men in libraries when they wrote those books.

In citing Emerson’s words with respect, am I acting in an Emersonian way or not? The possibilities are endless: be yourself because Emerson told you to? Or maybe: conform to the first dogma that presents itself to you, because that’s the only way you can resist conforming to Emerson’s iconoclasm? I’m reminded of that episode in Monty Python’s *Life of Brian* in which the protagonist, endlessly pursued by a crowd who believes he is the Messiah, confronts them and tells them, “You must think for yourselves!” and they recite, in unison, “we must think for ourselves.”
Underneath that joke is of course a serious question about what learning is. Indeed, Emerson’s speech is informed by a skepticism about learning that might have startled those who heard that skepticism uttered at a college commencement. The thought on the wing which shapes the great books of the past is something for which Emerson has high praise:

The scholar of the first age received into him the world around; brooded thereon; gave it the new arrangement of his own mind, and uttered it again. It came into him — life; it went out from him — truth. It came to him — short-lived actions; it went out from him — immortal thoughts. It came to him — business; it went from him — poetry. It was — dead fact; now it is quick thought.

But no sooner is the thought caged on the page than something dreadful happens to it. Those of you who may have caught a rainbow trout have noticed that as soon as you land that lovely fish it begins to lose its beauty. Emerson notices that something of the same kind happens to ideas so soon as they are put into words.

The sacredness which attaches to the act of creation, — the act of thought, — is instantly transferred to the record. The poet chanting, was felt to be a divine man. Henceforth the chant is divine also. The writer was a just and wise spirit. Henceforward it is settled, the book is perfect; as love of the hero corrupts into worship of his statue. Instantly, the book becomes noxious. The guide is a tyrant. We sought a brother, and lo, a governor! The sluggish and perverted mind of the multitude, always slow to open to the incursions of Reason, having once so opened, having once received this book, stands upon it, and makes an outcry, if it is disparaged. Colleges are built on it.
Notice that that last thing is the the worst fate that can happen to a book: Colleges are built on it. What Emerson has in mind here is how all real truths turn false as soon as you begin them with a capital letter. When an idea is snatched from the living changingness in which it moves, when it is transferred from the category of Becoming to the category of Being, when it is transferred from a live, first-person urgency to a third person proposition, from something beheld to something seen, it insulates us from the truths it appears to summarize.

Now exhibit A of what Emerson had in mind when he thought of truths that falsify themselves through routinization is the truth of religious experience. When Emerson made precisely that point to another graduating class at Harvard the next year, in the speech we now call the *Divinity School Address*, he made much of his audience very angry indeed, and wasn’t invited back to speak to Harvard for another three decades. But Emerson is hardly the first to have had this thought. Certainly the prophets Amos, and Isaiah, and Ezekiel, and Jeremiah, while concerned with the concrete abuses of power and privilege they saw among their people in high places and low, were also concerned with the stale and played-out quality of the tame court religion they denounced. Even that oldest of beliefs shared by Jews, Christians and Moslems, the hostility to images of the divine, is motivated by a sense that whatever the divine is is not something that is to be exhausted by the understanding. Whenever you think you have someone’s number, you have already begun to despise him, and that is at least as true of the divine as it is of people. Those who continue to matter to you are those whose stories are not over for you, those whom you may know better and better but are never tempted to say you know all the way through, those whom you always know with unknowing. The prohibition against images is a way of attesting among believers that whatever else you know about the divine that knowledge is not the divine, does not
capture the divine, does not exhaust the divine. But this is not to say that the divine is a vacuum or a nothingness in those three traditions. It is only to say that with the divine knowing is always in a delicate dance with unknowing, that knowing the divine is a matter of first person intimacy, not a matter of third person information, that it is the kind of knowing one has of persons, what in Spanish one would use the verb *conocer* to describe, not the kind of knowing one has of fact, what in Spanish one would use the word *saber* to describe.

Milton argued in the *Areopagitica* that one can “be an idolator in the truth,” which is to say, that one can cling to propositions that are true with a dogmatic death-grip which turns that truth to a falsehood, an idol constructed of propositions as an earlier generation of idols was constructed of wood and stone. One becomes an idolator in the truth when what ought to *become* instead merely *is*, when what ought to flow continually, instead, in Milton’s phrase, sickens into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition. (Notice how many authorities I cite to prove the point that one ought not to be too reverential about *auctors*.)

Truth becomes an idol when you learn from it the wrong kind of thing. The right way, Emerson says, is to see in it the light it casts upon hitherto unimagined possibilities for living, to illuminate with its help a way of being that one would not else have seen, but which, having seen it, one instantly recognizes as somehow inevitably one’s own. The key word here is not cognition but recognition, not assimilation but transformation. I learn from learning not how to be like the person I learned from, but how to be someone neither that person nor I could have imagined beforehand, not how to be what I already am, but how to be a better self, a never before known self. Kant says of the great artists that the lesson that later artists learn from them is not the artists’ subjects or even the artists’ techniques but the artists’ *freedom*, fraught as it is on both sides with hard and necessary discipline and hard won and easy-to-falsify spontaneity.
Knowledge, for Emerson, then, has the following aspects: it adheres to becoming rather than to being; it is instantly falsified once it is grasped; it is as much a matter of unknowing as of knowing, it is immediate and first-person, a part of intimacy rather than a part of information, it is experienced only in a transformed habit of life, and its method is as much recognition as cognition.

All this is rather high flown. But I think it has certain humble and specific consequences which ought to matter to recent college graduates. Emerson opens The American Scholar by complaining about the division of labor. (You’ll just have to forgive me for quoting in what follows Emerson’s use of the word “Man” as his subject. Now of course his immediate audience was indeed all male. But whether the phrase “Man Thinking” refers only to males is another question. I don’t think it does, even for Emerson, but we’ll have to argue that out some other time.)

It is one of those fables, which out of an unknown antiquity, convey an unlooked for wisdom, that the gods, in the beginning, divided Man into men, that he might be more helpful to himself, just as the hand was divided into fingers, the better to answer its end.

The old fable covers a doctrine ever new and sublime; that there is One Man, — present to all particular men only partially, or through one faculty; and that you must take the whole society to find the whole man. Man is not a farmer, or a professor, or an engineer, but he is all. Man is priest, and scholar, and statesman, and producer, and soldier. In the divided or social state, these functions are parcelled out to individuals, each of whom aims to do his stint of the joint work, whilst each other performs his. The fable implies that the individual to possess himself, must sometimes return from his own labor to embrace all the
other laborers. But unfortunately, this original unit, this fountain of power, has been so distributed to multitudes, has been so minutely subdivided and peddled out, that it is spilled into drops, and cannot be gathered. The state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monster, — a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man.

Man is thus metamorphosed into a thing, into many things. The planter, who is Man sent out into the field to gather food, is seldom cheered by any idea of the true dignity of his ministry. He sees his bushel and his cart, and nothing beyond, and sinks into the farmer, instead of Man on the farm. The tradesman scarcely ever gives an ideal worth to his work, but is ridden by the routine of his craft, and the soul is subject to dollars. The priest becomes a form; the attorney, a statute-book: the mechanic, a machine; the sailor, a rope of a ship.

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

Now of course one of the things that Emerson is complaining about is the way we are sometimes eaten alive by our jobs, even good ones. I’m not talking about spending too much time at it, but about allowing ourselves to be summarized in their terms. You have already had the awkward but repeated experience of being at a party with strangers and having no entry into a conversation other than “what’s your major?” In later years you will notice how often an early question people ask of strangers is “What do you do?” The question is awkward because it treats the information it asks for as if it says more than it possibly can.
“Now I know what I need to know about you: you sell ocean-front condominiums in Reno.”

I’m always a little bit skeptical when I hear people talking about the necessity of catering to the whole person. When the advertisement of a boy’s boarding school says that “We educate the whole boy” all they mean by it is that they have a football team. And when coworkers say that they want to bring wholeness into their lives, what they usually mean is that they need a vacation. What’s wrong when the priest becomes a form or the attorney a statute book is not that they need to do other things as well, but that they have lost sight of the meaning of what it is to be a priest or a lawyer. If they did it the right way, they would be whole doing it.

One way to read this complaint is to see it as turning on the difference between a job and a calling. Now of course Emerson does believe that even the humblest task can be calling, so long as it is pursued in a way that opens one to the influx of undeniable experiences, what he calls “the inexplicable continuity of this web of God.” But I think it is precisely those things we are most likely to think of as callings that are most treacherous, because they appeal to our virtues in ways that turn them into vices, and because it is through our virtues that they reach us that we are least able to defend ourselves against them. I think of the way some people who do what they do with a certain greatness are both fulfilled and destroyed by what they do — think of what so often happens to great doctors, or great rabbis or great politicians, who internalize the beyond-human-endurance demands of their professions.

Even at the more workaday level, how many of the liberating techniques of our professions are also imprisoning. I have in mind here not the endemic vices of particular professions (the brusque doctor, the zealous but amoral attorney, say), but the habits of mind that creep up on practitioners as they become socialized in their craft. It is not for nothing that Doctors often believe that they are better able to bear the fact that human bodies are fragile and
mortal than other people are, but it is a conviction with a price. Or think of the way we Professors all too often think of every other line of work as a little bit sordid, as if our work, and only our work, is the pure contemplation of the absolute. Think also of how often our disciplinary habits replace genuine thinking. How often, for instance, when you read a news story, has the reporter tied the significance of the story to the interests of some political group or to the fate or machinations or ambitions of some political figure, only because the story, to be a story, requires an angle of that kind. Do you ever have the suspicion, when you hear a story about some policy issue and the reporter cites what “critics” say, but doesn’t say who they are, that the critics the reporter cites are just the other reporters in the briefing room?

We academics are perhaps most easily imprisoned by our disciplinary superstitions, because we think of them as the keys to our method, as the things that make us knowledgeable. In my own discipline, for instance, it has been necessary to tie the interpretation of literary works or other kinds of cultural product to the urgencies and unconscious compulsions and collective self-mystifications of social and political life, to ideology, to use the ugly word. Every book is either complicit, perhaps in thoroughly unconscious ways, with the really bad things that make the world the way it is, or else it subverts them. Subverts is of course the talismanic term of praise, and whenever we write it, even if we are only in the library or in the office when we do so, we feel a little thrill of pleasure at the thought that maybe we are daring transgressors and risk takers after all. Now of course the real charm is to be able to show that some book that somebody else thought was subversive was in fact complicit (that will fix somebody’s wagon, count on it – to be caught out in complicity with somebody else’s complicitness is the last thing we want to be). But of course the real reason we find a book to be complicit or subversive, or some mixture of the two, is that we don’t really have an
article until we can make the claim, and that’s the kind of claim you have to make to have an article.

Concepts like “ideology” are magic solvents, because they are immune to confutation. One can never meet the challenge to “find me a non-ideological text” because the standard of proof of that kind of interpretation (that I can make up a plausible story which ties this text to that interest) is low enough that it’s hard to imagine any text not meeting that standard. Indeed, since you haven’t begun interpreting until you have discovered the ideological agenda, what the test measures is not the text but the interpreter’s highly flexible methods of interpretation.

Many disciplines have magic solvents of their own. The concept of adaptation in biology often works as a magic solvent, for instance, especially when the concept is deployed in order to discover the real meaning of some other concept, as, say, one does when one argues that ethical principles are merely part of the adaptive apparatus of the highly intelligent animal species *homo sapiens*. The concept of price in economics also works sometimes as a magic solvent, as for instance when it is argued that the meaning of an ethical commitment is what we’d be willing to give up in its behalf. Most disciplines probably have their magic solvents, which explain not only everything within the discipline but everything outside of it as well. That is why arguments between practitioners who are thoroughly committed to different magic solvents sometimes seem so pointless: each believes he has penetrated behind the other’s thinking and discovered the real rationale behind all things. It’s as enlightening as having a humidifier and a dehumidifier duking it out with each other in the basement (to quote Steven Wright).

Fortunately, most disciplines are not the prisoner of their own magic solvents. Indeed, it’s fair to say that it’s only the sophomore who is thoroughly committed to the methods of
his or her major and who will defend it to the death in the late-night bull session (and that’s why they call them sophomores). The professional is someone who has some distance on the techniques and disciplinary superstitions of his or her craft. This detachment, far from being a sign of a lack of commitment to the discipline, is a precondition of that commitment, in just the same way that one does not really love one’s spouse until one has a thorough acquaintance with his or her vices and limitations.

What seems to make a profession is not only a body of disciplined knowledge, but also a practical sense into which one can be initiated but which is resistant to summary and instruction. We all know the difference between knowing a lot of chemistry and thinking like a chemist, between knowing a lot of medicine and being a skillful healer. Aristotle’s word for this second capacity is *phronesis*, a word which sometimes means “wisdom” and sometimes means “smarts.” But whatever it means, it means also the kind of knowledge which you only gain at first hand, the kind of knowledge that becomes, the kind of knowledge that comes from an intimate life of practice, the kind of knowledge you can show, but can say little about that is to the point. Phronesis is not knowledge but knowing, and like all true knowing it is in some ways mysterious, in some ways unknowing. In every practice, the part of it where it is practiced most deeply is the part where knowledge has already trailed off into shadow, and where wisdom rather than knowledge has to be the guide, where what I am and what the world is are both a bit uncertain, yet somehow intimately linked with each other. This is what underlies that ecstatic hymn to knowledge which I think is at the climax of Emerson’s “The American Scholar”

“The world, — this shadow of the soul, or other me, lies wide around. Its attractions are the keys which unlock my thoughts and make me acquainted with myself. I launch eagerly into this resounding tumult. I grasp those hands
of those next me, and take my place in the ring to suffer and to work, taught by
an instinct that so shall the dumb abyss be vocal with speech.”