These days, people who ask me to talk often expect reminiscences about what Davidson used to be like. What they generally get from me is precisely that – whether it’s what they wanted or not. After all, I’ve been around Davidson for a while -- as the invitation to this event pointed out for those of you who can subtract my class, 1961, from 2011. So I’ll engage in tales from the distant past before getting to the comments about leadership that the occasion of induction into the Davidson Circle of ODK would seem to demand.

Way back then, Omicron Delta Kappa was here along with, for instance, Who’s Who Among Students in American Colleges and Universities, Phi Beta Kappa, and an array of other honorary societies – although not as many as there are now. I suppose you guys excel at more different things than we did. We also had other customs, some of which are long gone. Saturday classes mercifully disappeared in 1968. Chapel three days a week – by then more an assembly or a common hour than a chapel service – disappeared about the same time. The two floors of the wing of Chambers directly above us were then an auditorium large enough to seat the whole student body of a thousand. Junior and senior attendance was predictably highest on the day when members of ODK added to their number, going through the assigned seats in the audience and tapping new members on the shoulder, vigorously and loudly; and anyone with even marginal hopes of being recognized as a leader would be there.

We can treasure customs in many ways, of course. One of them is parody; and by the early 1960s another organization held a tapping ceremony, with a speech by a faculty or staff member praising the attributes of the organization and of its new members. In an unsubtle nod to Who’s Who, that organization went by the name Who’s Nothing. The members of Who’s Nothing had little in common except serious individualism; indeed, it was hard to think of them
as willing members of any organized group, but they got tapped on the shoulder anyhow. I suspect you could quietly and privately think of some candidates among your fellow students. The person who, if there were a merit badge for partying, would have won several. The guy who is always late for class, and not just at 8:30. I could create better examples, but this is a dignified occasion. You get the point, no doubt; candidates for Who’s Nothing are those whose contributions to campus life may appear to be slight at best and unsuited to lists of accomplishments – but everybody knows them, despite their carefully avoiding ordinary paths to recognition. When Who’s Nothing held its tapping ceremony, typically a large portion of the inductees would have cut chapel that day – as they had lots of others.

I can vaguely remember some of the Who’s Nothing speeches from the mid-sixties, when I returned to join the faculty. The College Archives even dug up one of them, although not the one I most vividly remember: it pointed out, astutely, that a well-rounded student body is not the same as one filled with well-rounded students – and that the most well-rounded character is, after all, the zero. There’s nothing wrong with being well-rounded – but like any good thing, sometimes enough is enough. We should also cherish the angular individuals – the candidates for Who’s Nothing.

Perhaps that’s enough excavation of the past. Who’s Nothing, unfortunately, joined long ago the list of organizations that have quietly disappeared. It was inevitable; those eligible for designation as honored Nothings do not go about inserting notes in the Crier seeking to create new groups or reinvigorate old ones.

For several years now, I’ve had the pleasure of being an interviewer for some of Davidson’s scholarship competitions. Reading applications, I’m always impressed. The candidates are young people who not only create new organizations, but who have done a great
deal of good in their communities, understanding community as both local and global. A short list of examples would not begin to suggest the magnitude of their accomplishments. Alongside these lists of service endeavors, often with an account of how many “service hours” they consume, we find data showing stellar SAT or ACT scores, high grades measuring learning, long lists of AP courses capped off with top AP exam scores, and even longer lists of books read. Essays about the Davidson Honor Code and about potential contributions to the Davidson community all say just what we would expect them to. Those fistfuls of paper sum up, in careful detail, young people who are talented and accomplished students, servants to those about them, and leaders in their schools and communities. Rarely do subsequent meetings in person disappoint; they are – you are – the sort of people we want to have around and to be around.

A column by David Brooks in a recent *New York Times* noted a poll showing that seventy per cent of high school students view themselves as leaders. Annoyingly, Brooks offered no reference, no citation, to the source of the poll. Equally annoyingly, I have no reference or citation for something else I read recently: a broad generalization of the sort that my students know I allow only to myself, not to them. The writer commented that recent centuries have moved from an age of belief, to an age of reason, to an age of authenticity, and now to an age or a culture of visibility – an age in which the image we present to others dominates our aspirations, an age in which the political, broadly viewed, overshadows the transcendent. Our expectations of our society are that its workings will be visible to us; our expectations of ourselves are that we will be out front, will be leaders, will have others see and hear us with respect. And we all want dossiers and résumés as impressive as those I read every year. In T. S. Eliot’s phrase, we devote considerable effort “to prepar[ing] a face to meet the faces that [we] meet.”
A few weeks ago, I attended a regional conference of registrars, admissions officers, and enrollment management specialists. Such conferences generally begin with a motivational talk about the qualities of leadership; this year was no exception. A dynamic young woman spent half an hour talking about leadership and success, largely her own. What friends and I took away most vividly was her repeated comment that she had won a grand total of $200,000 in scholarship aid from various sources, including prize money from the Miss America pageant, from a highly competitive national fellowship, and from one of the country’s top law schools. She had earned the right to talk about accomplishments; they were impressive. But she kept reducing them in her narrative into two hundred thousand dollars. She had a list of named achievements and a number, a quantity with five zeroes in it. Very well rounded.

Of course, she obeyed the commandments about conference presentations: they must rely on PowerPoint, with brief points that can be listed; and the brief points, for a truly elegant presentation, must feature a list of alliterative nouns. I’m not sure who makes these rules, but they must come along with the motivational speaking license.

I don’t recall all of her brief points about the attributes of leadership, but they included courage, commitment, communication, character, and a few other attributes beginning with “c.”

The conference official introducing her put on her glasses to read the introduction, because “it was sent over by [the speaker’s] agent.” There’s nothing wrong with that. But the speaker’s thanks to the conference organizer for her warm introduction illustrated that she missed an important attribute for a leader, possibly because she didn’t get from the “c” that stood for several things to the “l” that stood for one big thing: listening. She didn’t listen enough to realize the audience knew that she was, in effect, praising an introduction that she evidently had written herself.
Back to our Davidson College scholarship applications: I confess that my praise for the accomplishments in those scholarship applications isn’t without some reservations. It’s striking how many of the organizations created, or initiatives led, take one form: getting a group of people together to accomplish some indisputably good end: feeding the hungry, raising funds for the sick, sheltering the homeless. Of course they are good and generous and important things to do – but they require very little reconciliation of different views even if a variety of people participate; it’s not hugely difficult to get a group of people to share an unambiguously good purpose. Doing so seldom requires the challenge of serious listening.

But who’s developing ways to engage others – to listen respectfully to others – when the very difference is the object of the group’s attention, when the objective is neither small and unambiguous nor large and abstract? Who’s leading in the art of listening?

Those among you who took Humanities know of my fondness for Isaiah Berlin, in particular for his insight that the most formidable challenge in life is between good and good -- not good and evil, or good and bad, or even good and better, but between good and good. It’s the challenge of choosing when there are no obvious guides or criteria except for the most fundamental of principles and the most respectful dedication to listening to the views of others. It may be, as well, the challenge of distinguishing essential principles and substantial moral beliefs from constellations of opinion that have hardened into ideologies. (I would suggest that the glib confusion of ideology with principle has infected our political life in profoundly damaging ways. As Thucydides observes in regard to Corcyra, but really implying Athens, contempt for moderation and compromise can be fatal to a society.)

I very deliberately used the words “essential” and “substantial” in that last paragraph. To the philosophically minded, the words suggest Aristotelian categories – and words like
“substance” and “essence” suggest the deep, not accidental, core of being. And while there’s no reason you would have noticed, previous paragraphs used some other words: “round” and “circle,” suggesting shape; “quantity” or “measurement,” suggesting dimension or extension; and words like “visibility” that allude to what one can perceive, to external qualities. Words of that sort suggest not essence or substance, not the core of being; they suggest material objects or things. When we view others, and even ourselves, by measurements -- lists of activities, GPA, or $200,000 in scholarship funds -- we reduce others, or ourselves, to things.

We need to fight the many pressures to define ourselves by grade point average, by lengthy résumés, or by lists of skills. We even need to resist the pressure to join seventy per cent of high school seniors and define ourselves as leaders. We need, along with leading, to learn -- and to remember that we learn in large part by listening to others.

We need, more than anything, not to define ourselves by measures of accomplishment, but by an essential core of character and principle, by the substance from which we as individuals are formed.

So my challenge to you is to become worthy of not just ODK, but of Who’s Nothing -- or, pronounced differently, Who’s No Thing. Things are measured; substance, essence, and principle are not. But they make us human as we find and treasure the no-thingness in ourselves and in others; we need to keep mere visibility in suitable perspective.

Welcome not merely to ODK, but, I trust, to Who’s Nothing.

Hansford M. Epes
April 2011