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Keynote Address at the National Society of Collegiate Scholars Induction Ceremony 2017

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This keynote address was given at the new member induction ceremony of Trinity University's chapter of the National Society of Collegiate Scholars on Sunday, October 8, 2017.

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My name is Michael Hughes. I'm a Trinity alumnus, class of 2005. I'm also a professor, and librarian to the departments of history, philosophy, and communication. I teach in the university's first-year experience program where Anna Wallack, one of today's inductees, works alongside me as peer tutor. I'm here today at her invitation, and I'm grateful for the opportunity.

Let me take you back to the moment when Anna asked me if I would share some remarks at this ceremony. "Give a keynote for NSCS!," she urged. I stared at her blankly. NSCS? It took me a moment to follow the initials to their corresponding words, because librarians gorge on an alphabet soup of acronyms. Inside my head, NSCS jockeyed with OTN and ARL and ACRL and, well, you get my point. Even so, shouldn't I have caught on quicker? After all, I was a Trinity student once, and a good one at that. I earned top marks, graduated with honors. Why hadn't I joined the National Society of Collegiate Scholars?

The truth is, I was not a joiner. Not a participant except with the greatest reluctance. This recalcitrance had its roots in many factors, probably. Introversion, for one, or the way I jealously guarded my free time. Look, *The Legend of Zelda* won't finish itself, people. But the chief reason for my nonparticipation was a single-minded fixation on grades to the exclusion of important aspects of the undergraduate experience. Organizations like this one, for example.

See, I was convinced that I didn't have time for other commitments, despite all evidence to the contrary. That if I gave even a moment to extracurricular pursuits, my GPA would suffer as a consequence. That that isn't true is one of the few regrets I have about my time as a Trinity undergraduate.

So I won't talk to you about grades. After all, you are here in part because you've attained a 3.4 GPA at minimum. You're in the top 20 percent of your class. Your grades are good and they're likely to stay that way. Instead, I want to talk about service.

You are familiar with Adam Smith's "invisible hand," the idea that by pursuing our self-interest we may benefit society more than if we undertake to help it directly. The idea has come to mean that free markets work best without government interference. Instead of a hand that guides, then, or one that distributes the wealth of a nation to its citizens, the hand is raised as if to say, "Stop!" Or else its fingers curl tightly in the act of taking.

In this, at least, one hand should know what the other does. The writer Rebecca Solnit argues that Smith's invisible hand is met by a countervailing force. She writes:

"Another system, another invisible hand, is always at work in what you could think of as the great, ongoing, Manichean arm-wrestling match that keeps our planet spinning. The invisible claw of the market may fail to comprehend how powerful the other hand – the one that gives rather than takes – is, but neither does that open hand know itself or its own power. It should. We all should."¹

Solnit was writing about the "tens of thousands of volunteers" who organized to repair the damage of Deepwater Horizon, the catastrophic oil spill in 2010, but I submit that this other hand, this open hand, includes all of you as well. Each of you is a muscle fiber, capable of only so much alone. But the National Society of Collegiate Scholars is a medium through which your individual works will coalesce into real strength. It is easy sometimes to feel that our individual acts of compassion and generosity are without meaning. That they do not, cannot, go far enough to address the deep and complicated problems of the world. This feeling is further aggravated by our fixation on issues at the national or international level, rather than the ones in our states, our cities, our neighborhoods, our places of work and worship. The places where our participation, our influence, is most directly felt and most readily recognized.

So I'm asking you, as NSCS members, to consider: what does Trinity University need? What does San Antonio need? Supply the answers to those questions. I'm asking you to use this opportunity, to use the potential strength in this room to do good works. To work on another's behalf without expectation of reward, knowing that however small the effort, the outcome, when taken together, translates into a world-shaping force that we would all be much poorer without.

¹ Solnit, Rebecca. "Iceberg Economies and Shadow Selves: Further Adventures in the Territories of Hope." *TomDispatch.com*, 21 December 2010, <https://goo.gl/Xs2vDM>.

In the years to come, after you've landed a coveted job, or once you've been admitted to graduate school, your grades, your GPA, and the honors therefrom will lose their luster. I say this not to diminish or to discourage your scholastic achievements, but to sharpen their contrast with service, that other pillar on which NSCS rests. After all, a grade is just a number, a symbol that explains, to a greater or lesser extent, your mastery of a given subject. But works of service don't need an intermediary. They speak for themselves through the help and relief and love they engender. This is a difference that each of you can make, and every place you go will benefit as a result.

Know yourselves. Know your own power. Thank you, and congratulations to everyone being inducted today.