

THE TRUE GENTLEMAN

The creed of Sigma Alpha Epsilon by John Walter Wayland:

"The True Gentleman is the man whose conduct proceeds from good will and an acute sense of propriety, and whose self-control is equal to all emergencies; who does not make the poor man conscious of his poverty, the obscure man of his obscurity, or any man of his inferiority or deformity; who is himself humbled if necessity compels him to humble another; who does not flatter wealth, cringe before power, or boast of his own possessions or achievements; who speaks with frankness but always with sincerity and sympathy; whose deed follows his word; who thinks of the rights and feelings of others, rather than his own; and who appears well in any company, a man with whom honor is sacred and virtue safe."



The True Gentleman: Outmoded or Immutable?

By G. Robert Hamrdla

For many decades, Σ AE pledges have recited “The True Gentleman,” and no other words, save perhaps those of the ritual of initiation, have more nearly represented the ideals of Sigma Alpha Epsilon. It may be that few members have ever been able to exemplify all the attributes set forth in the statement, but it does capture the perfecting objective of the Fraternity.

Many years ago Judge Walter B. Jones, past Eminent Supreme Archon of Σ AE, came upon “The True Gentleman” and printed it in an Alabama Baptist quarterly, which he edited. He sent a copy of the magazine to John Moseley, who was powerfully struck by the elegant words which accorded with his own philosophy of gentlemanliness. Moseley started using it in the Leadership Schools in the 1930s, and it caught on quickly in chapters all across the land. Although John Moseley never claimed authorship, many came to believe that he had composed “The True Gentleman.” Because Σ AEs had no idea who the author was, *The Phoenix* indicated that the piece was simply “anonymous.”

In the 1970s *Phoenix* editor Joe Walt discovered that “The True Gentleman” was also printed in a manual used at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis and that its author was John Walter Wayland. It turns out that many years ago *The Baltimore Sun* conducted a competition for the best definition of a true gentleman. John Walter Wayland’s submission was the winner. Thus it was printed in the Baltimore newspaper and was repeated in many publications thereafter.

No matter who the author, “The True Gentleman” reflects a major part of the substance of the ritual of Sigma Alpha Epsilon. Pledges memorize it and are asked to recite it. Awards are given to brothers who are thought best to exemplify it. Why do we regard it so highly, and what’s in it for you as members-to-be of Sigma Alpha Epsilon?

Every organization is strengthened by tangible forms of a ritual. Athletic teams have mascots; churches have written rituals. Commercial enterprises have slogans, and countless private organizations of individuals, who have chosen to belong for

any variety of reasons, have statements of philosophy that define and express their beliefs. Not only does “The True Gentleman” remind each brother and pledge of his Fraternity’s code of behavior; it also serves that same function for non-members. And since it is something every member and pledge of Sigma Alpha Epsilon have in common, it helps bond us, providing part of the glue that holds us together. After all, gentlemanliness is the starting point and the indispensable quality of lasting friendships.

That’s a major part of the reason we memorize it, to keep that bond in the forefront of our vision. Memorization, though, has a danger; the better we know the text by heart, the less inclined we may be to remember its meaning. If “The True Gentleman” is to remain a living and guiding bond for you, take time now and then to think again and again about its meaning.

For one thing, “The True Gentleman” is a virtually infallible guide for dealing with other people, whether members of Sigma Alpha Epsilon or not. It suggests that every person has a dignity and being that are to be acknowledged and respected by each of the rest of us. And it makes clear that we cannot count on that respect from others unless we are willing to give it first. To gain insight into how “The True Gentleman” asks you to relate to others, read through its phrases carefully. Even more importantly, if any of the guidelines makes you uncomfortable, ask yourself why, and don’t be content until you’ve answered the question. If you need some help understanding what “The True Gentleman” is trying to tell you about your relationships with others, discuss it with your pledge educator, or another brother in your chapter whom you respect, or an alumnus.

At the same time, “The True Gentleman” is a powerful guide to our own behavior as



John Walter Wayland (*standing*), author of “The True Gentleman.” *Courtesy of the Fredd Barr Collection, Stewart Bell, Jr. Archives Room, Handley Regional Library, Winchester, VA.*

individuals when it may not pertain directly and obviously to our relationships with others. It helps us establish guideposts for how we act. It encourages us to define our individuality on the foundation of good habits and traits rather than trendy and transitory ones. Read through its phrases carefully again, concentrating this time on finding guidelines for individual behavior.

You may well have said to yourself in the course of these two readings that “The True Gentleman” seems old fashioned or simply outmoded, overtaken by the times or simply irrelevant to the life of an undergraduate in the “modern” world. Wrong. In fact, one of the major virtues of “The True Gentleman” (and many other guidelines) is precisely its timelessness. Think about it. Are the various religious creeds and codes any less

relevant to believers today than when they were written? No. And “The True Gentleman” isn’t either. We may find it more difficult to observe all of its suggestions in times when society seems to have fewer enforced norms for individuals. By the same token, however, we should reflect on the fact that fraternities are being called to account as they rarely have been in the past for behavior that society finds improper. The major constituencies with which undergraduates and pledges have traditionally been closely associated — our collegiate institutions, our alumni, and our officers and Supreme Council — are coming down on us harder than they have in the past.

“The True Gentleman” is a major help in that respect, too, for it is just as relevant to problems in our society — for example, the use and abuse of alcohol and drugs as well as relationships with women — as it was to those of the time in which it was written (actually, the problems then were much the same, but they may not have been looked at in quite the same way as they are now).

For one thing, “The True Gentleman” tells us to be temperate. Moderation is the mark of virtually everyone whom you respect, isn’t it? It is more than that; it is the mark of any and every genuinely intelligent human being. Moderation is the avoidance of extremes in thinking and behavior or, as the original Greeks called it, the “Golden Mean.” The ideal of moderation is the direct antithesis of the modern “let-yourself-go” philosophy. Temperance means neither denial nor excess. It means simply that a man should be moderate in his habits.

The consumption of alcohol, as few other of life’s challenges, involves pitfalls and calls just as much as any other behavior for moderation and understanding. Some would assert that the way to prevent alco-

hol’s creating a problem lies in moderate social drinking. The admonition to “drink like a gentleman” has been repeated so often that it is trite. Is moderate drinking the answer? Clearly he who drinks moderately is less likely to have or create problems than the person who doesn’t do so. That fact is impossible to deny and is enough in and of itself to keep our drinking moderate.

Secondly, the brother or pledge who observes “The True Gentleman” will go beyond mere moderation and give his support to the freedom not to drink. The freedom to drink has been established. Those who are of age are free to drink nearly everywhere and at nearly any time. The freedom not to drink is not so fundamental in the society of students. Many pledges are misled by others, even by other pledges and actives, to look upon the non-drinker as both socially unacceptable and holier-than-thou. He is left out of some gatherings as if he had the plague. The idea that the abstainer is socially uneducated or inept, or that he is dull or lacking daring, is as widespread as it is false. (It should be remembered that Billy Levere never drank an ounce of alcohol.) The abstainer merely asks for the freedom not to drink and the right to be accepted as a normal person. That’s what he is — a normal person who doesn’t want to drink. If “The True Gentleman” means anything to you, you will give him that right with respect — and perhaps even admiration.

And what about drugs? Whatever one’s views toward them, there are realities one must face. Drugs are around and relatively easy to get. No matter what the user’s or seller’s or purchaser’s age, the drugs — all of them from marijuana to heroin — are illegal. One may disagree with the appropriateness of the law, but, whether one likes



it or not, the handling or use of drugs can subject one to legal penalties. Secondly, it should be clear to anyone that drug abuse can cause serious physical and mental damage. Finally — and this point is crucial to our theme — one can hardly be self-controlled or “equal to all emergencies” when involved in drug use.

What does “The True Gentleman” say about our relationships with women? Since women are human beings just like men, it really doesn’t say anything different about women. But in these days of sexual harassment, date rape, acquaintance rape, and so on, your Fraternity would be doing you a disservice not to ask you to examine your attitudes and behavior toward women.

Furthermore, Sigma Alpha Epsilon stands firmly and unequivocally on the side of treating women precisely as all human beings should be treated: with respect. Members and pledges of Sigma Alpha Epsilon who subscribe to “The True Gentleman” do not treat women (or men) as dehumanized objects. It’s that simple. The corollary is equally clear: if you don’t treat women with respect, you don’t abide by “The True Gentleman.”

“The True Gentleman” also calls upon us to remember three things that are often lost in the shuffle of life at the speed we live it. First, use common sense. There is little in “The True Gentleman” that every college or university student could not derive through



common sense anyway. Very few of us do not know in our heart of hearts what is right and what is wrong. “The True Gentleman” encourages, indeed admonishes us to follow the dictates of that common sense.

Second, our signature and our vows have meaning. How can a man who does not live up to his word be a brother? He cannot be one in the sense of fraternity or “The True Gentleman.” It insists that there are conditions under which it is necessary to humble another or to be humbled ourselves. That is a part of life among brothers. But this point is one of the least observed. For example, when you are initiated into full membership in Sigma Alpha Epsilon, you will take a vow to pay your bills on time. Every brother has taken the same vow. Why is it, then, that some don’t pay their bills on time? For the same reason that some broth-

ers do not offer women appropriate respect — human nature is such that we don’t always live up to standards we set for ourselves or, worse yet, we deny that standards are appropriate and thereby unilaterally excuse ourselves from them for personal convenience and self-indulgence.

Much more mysterious, though, is the reluctance of so many members to call their delinquent brothers to account. Chapter after chapter subsidizes brothers who have not paid their bills by not demanding that they do so and not enforcing a demand when it is finally made. Not only do those delinquent brothers disregard their vows; they get away with it because others in the chapter are unwilling — out of some misguided sense of loyalty or brotherhood — to suggest to them that their conduct is improper and unacceptable. The desire not

to be a tattle-tale and not to appear holier-than-thou is so strong among many students that it literally blinds them to the simple fact that they're missing the point.

The point is that, if a brother does not honor his signature or his vows, he does not deserve to be called a friend, much less a brother. He deserves to be held to account! It is not he who should be angry with us for disciplining him; it is we who should be angry with him for putting us in the position of having to do so. No one who is a friend or brother, and certainly no one who observes "The True Gentleman," puts others in the position of having to humble him, for that is one of the most unfriendly and unbrotherly acts one can commit.

Third, how does one respond to someone who says that "The True Gentleman" isn't worth memorizing or worrying about? That person's argument often is based on the notion that it isn't worth striving for something one cannot attain. Certainly no one of us can ever expect to live up to the demands of "The True Gentleman" in every instance. Then why bother at all?

Not to bother is a flagrant cop-out, the classic example of taking the easy way out. The person who thinks that way says that it is hypocritical to promise to try to live by

standards that human beings with their imperfect natures cannot consistently observe. He cleverly exempts himself from trying and at the same time belittles those who do. He is satisfied with less than his best. And because he never tries to improve, he doesn't. Chances are his life will be characterized at best by mediocrity. Think about it. Is that how you want to live, held back by a self-imposed unwillingness to strive for the high ground? Do you want to be known as someone who is satisfied with less than his best?

No. If you were in that category, you wouldn't be joining Sigma Alpha Epsilon. You wouldn't be reading this book, and you wouldn't be adopting "The True Gentleman" as a guideline because you wouldn't want to bother with any guidelines that take effort to observe. "The True Gentleman" has a special place in the life of Sigma Alpha Epsilon. If you take it seriously, living it rather than just mouthing it, the rewards of your pledgeship and membership in Σ AE will be all the greater. And your life will be all the richer as a man with whom honor is sacred and virtue safe.

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