It is an honor for me to be invited to speak to you this evening at this spring dinner of the Phi Eta Sigma Honor Society.

The title of this talk—“On Becoming Who One Is”—contains a philosophical paradox, if not a problem, that has bewitched philosophers from philosophy’s beginnings. The title speaks both of becoming (“On Becoming . . .”) and being (“. . . Who One Is”). Things of this world, including human beings, seem to be a mix of being, that is, what does not change, and becoming, that is, coming into being or going out of being, change, process, flux.

On the one hand, we human persons have unique on-going identities. When I was a young professor here, before joining the Dominican Order, I was working in Mullen Library one day and a woman came up to me and apologized for not remembering my name and said that she had taught me in second grade (I had been taught by a Franciscan sister in a full-habit; this woman was in jeans and a Notre Dame sweatshirt). I was skeptical at first, but it turned out to be true. I asked her how she recognized me and she said: “You look just the same.” We are identifiable over time as the same persons that we are.

On the other hand, I did not look “just the same” that day as I did in second grade. We all change, growing or shrinking, physically, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, every day—indeed, every minute (consider the stream of consciousness scenes in Virginia Wolfe’s To the Lighthouse where the swiftly changing attitudes and feelings of characters are nicely revealed).

We are a mix of fixity and flux. But why is this a paradox?

The early Greek philosophers Heraclitus and Parmenides thought on logical grounds that being and becoming exclude each other. Heraclitus, as he is commonly understood, argued that everything is in constant flux. Parmenides, as he is commonly understood, argued that being must be changeless and undifferentiated in any way. We cannot go through their arguments now, but while Parmenides’ arguments are not that easy to refute, we find them hard to square with our ordinary experience. Indeed, recent philosophy is more likely to side with Heraclitus and say that we are subject to constant and unrelenting change and that by the exercise of our freedom we constantly make and remake our being (the existentialists in the twentieth century talked about how existence precedes essence, that is, how we are without a fixed nature until we use our freedom and become something of our choosing).

The truth, I think, is that things of this world, including us, are a mix of being and becoming, of identity in difference. Let us stick with the human case, with us. We have a definite and unchanging human nature. To have a nature is to be a certain way and to discover oneself to be that way rather than choose to be that way (a nature is a fixed way of being that defines a thing; it is discovered rather than invented or chosen; we may like it or not like it, but we cannot change it). And the best way to express what our human nature is like, apart from considering the specifics of human biology and physicality, is to talk about knowing and loving. By nature we are ordered to truth (this is where learning and knowing come in) and to the good (this is where yearning and loving come in). We are unhappy, even miserable, if we lack the truth or if we are not loved and in love. The orientation to and the need to know and to love is permanent, unchanging, and natural in every human being.
As human beings, however, we also, and by nature, do change and are open to change—both growth and decline—in many directions, not least with respect to knowing and loving. We have our freedom and can direct, to a considerable degree, the course of our knowing and loving. I say “to a considerable degree,” because, for example, we do fall in love sometimes, without choice. The ancient Greeks recognized *eros*, passionate love, as bittersweet, for they were aware that it is a longing that befalls us, sometimes when we least expect it, and that it can even enslave us. But, while we may fall in love without choice, we do not stay in love without choosing to commit to a relationship.

Moreover—and this is a point of great importance—not only can we direct how we change, what we become. The choices we make in turn to reinforce each other, so that we end up *being* one way or another. This is what Aristotle calls habituation. We get to be a certain fixed way, for better or for worse, by how choices and practices as they accumulate and reinforce each other give us a new way of *being*, a way of being with relative permanence (habituation can be reversed, but not without much effort). We see this, for instance, in learning to play a sport or a musical instrument (we work hard to develop a good golf or tennis swing; once we develop a bad one, it is real work to change it). There is that magic moment in learning another language when we think and speak it without effort, and even dream in it. If we tell lies regularly, we become settled liars, that is, we will lie even when we do not feel we have to; our lying becomes automatic. This is what Aristotle means by habituation. Habituation toward the true and the good is called virtue. When we are virtuous we find the truth and do the good easily, readily, and with pleasure or joy. Habituation toward ignorance and falsehood and toward evil is called vice.

Let me illustrate this business of habituation in two ways.

[1] One of my favorite cartoons from the *New Yorker* shows a squirrel on the analyst’s couch and the analyst saying to the squirrel, “Well, you are what you eat.”

[2] Once in a homily I was preaching about the fact of becoming in the spiritual life, about how in our spiritual lives we are never standing still but either getting closer to God or farther away from God. I mentioned how I had just been to the wake of a person who had been consistently rather negative and critical about other people and about life in general, and that even the undertaker could not get the frown off her face (it was true, she was there in the coffin with a frown). An elderly member of the congregation was quite upset with me and said that I “shouldn’t be so morbid.”

But thus is the fact and the power of habituation in human life. In our freedom and by our choices we become who we will be.

Your membership in Phi Eta Sigma testifies to your early achievement in university studies. Your early success did not happen at random. It shows the good habituation of your grade school and high school education and the choices you made in accordance with it (admissions counselors now say that high school grade point averages are the best indicators of success in college). One of the chief purposes of Phi Eta Sigma in honoring freshman achievement at the university is to encourage and intensify this good habituation in learning and knowing.

As Phi Eta Sigma at Catholic University does this again tonight, let us acknowledge the good habituation of learning and knowing in all the various areas, fields, and disciplines that has happened in each of you through your studies here and gauge too where the lost opportunities have been. This is something that one should never stop doing in life (it is itself a matter of habituation—habituation with respect to habituation). It is something your professors should be doing too (check to see how much dust can be blown off the notes as a professor begins a lecture).

Let us also not neglect the other type of habituation, not just habituation to what is true and to always growing in knowledge, but habituation to the good as people built to love and be loved and as people built to do what is right. Genuine love is a habit, the result of good habituation, and not merely an emotion. Our time spent in the university should be a time of forming friendships that last, with each other and with God. Our time spent at the university,
while a time of growing independence and adulthood, should be a time of deepening love for our families, especially for parents and others who work and even sacrifice to make this education possible. Our time spent at the university should be a time of practicing to be good and upright. Knowledge in the hands of the immoral and the unethical ruins what is in itself good and beautiful (consider computer hackers and designers of illegal addictive drugs).

This is the great adventure in life—becoming who one is. It is a paradox of human life, that [1] we are uniquely who we are and need to discover and clarify our underlying true selves. As Socrates said, “the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being”; the scholar John Rist in Real Ethics says that we have multiple selves (we are different people at home, with our friends, at work). Thus the task of life is to become one’s true self and to be oneself, rather than a phony. And yet [2] we also choose who we become. We give ourselves new levels of being, for good or for ill, by our repeated choices. We become who we are.

College years are excellent years, a prime time, to realize this paradox of human life, of one’s own life, as a mix of being and becoming, and to make the most of it.

Thank you.