Much is transient. The falling into and out of fashion is a process marking most things in our world. From bandwagons to fads, from soft serve to Dip N’ Dots, we are reminded that not much springs eternal (other than maybe hope, ala President Obama). For better or worse, not just things, but ideas and values often prove similarly transient. One can calmly recognize, whether in disgust or appreciation, the unraveling of sexual restraint made possible by cheap and available birth control or the ebbing of the freedom consensus of the 19th century for the acceptance of the safety net of the welfare state in the 21st. The only thing more certain than our momentary understandings is the realization they are not immutable. Seeing the clear trajectory of the historical record in favor of ‘progress’ of all varieties, one would seem foolish to, as William Buckley once urged conservatives, “stand athwart history, yelling Stop!”

Yet, amidst the ever-changing tides of human affection, I propose that one human value, honor, ought to endure the bracing erosion of shifting desire. But, let me be precise. Some marks of humanness have and will endure. These desires include love, friendship, an innate desire to be free, and many others. But, I want to argue not for the endurance of such passive markers of humanity, but for an active one. By this, I mean to argue for honor as something that requires a certain kind of human choice if it is to endure.

This article has two tasks- to define honor and to provide a reason to reach for it. In this 100th year of our student honor code, it seems like a task worthy of our attention.

One definition of honor comes from Socrates. He relates it to truth, much as our own code of honor does. His view of honor demands the joining of what we project with what it is we actually are. Davidson’s conception of not lying, cheating, or stealing reflects Socrates’ definition quite well. Lying is a misrepresentation of reality as we know it, cheating a misrepresentation of our knowledge, and stealing a misrepresentation of that to which we have possession. It seems, then, that Socrates’ definition is a good start.

To it, I would add more intuitive conceptions of honor, however. When I think of honor, I think of the young men of Normandy (“the boys of Pointe du Hoc”), who were willing to cast aside their own interests before the altar of duty. Their actions are enshrined in the stately white crosses that still adorn the cliff overlooking those beaches. Their sacrifice, and those of many others engaged in the same cause in other theaters, proves lasting because they acted not merely on behalf of the freedom for people they knew and loved, but also for many they would never know and many yet unborn. That identification of a cause greater than one’s self-interest, and the burden of history it entailed, seems to me to reflect a piece of honor. While honor certainly does not demand sacrifice of one’s life, it does seem to entail identifying some code, idea, or directing force which provides a purpose outside of one’s self.

Finally, a lesson from ‘Cinderella Man’, a boxing movie based on a true story from the Great Depression, completes my conception of honor. Having lost his boxing job and with a family to feed, James Braddock buries his pride and applies for government assistance. He receives it, and, in Hollywood fashion, makes a comeback that puts him back in good financial standing. He then
does the unexpected. He returns to the government every dime of assistance he received. When asked by a reporter why he did so, he replies “I believe we live in a great country, a country that's great enough to help a man financially when he's in trouble. But lately, I've had some good fortune and I just thought I should return it.”

The honor of his gesture completes my definition of honor. To honesty and a greater purpose this gesture suggests the idea that we owe something to someone and, even when they’re not asking for our share, we’re providing it. Such a conception is one of duty.

Understanding what honor is doesn’t argue for it. Defining honor is not enough, however. To conclude, why should we pursue honor? We would not do so merely out of self-interest. While it is often in our interest to be honorable, it is often in our self-interest to be dishonorable. An admission of guilt often includes a consequence with undesirable effects.

Further, why exert the strenuous effort to live the ‘honorable’ kind of life? Holding onto a restraining conception of honor seems vexing and difficult. After all, it requires a lot of us. It requires fortitude of conduct and expression through a plethora of changing personal circumstance. In short, the price of honor consists of endless demands and infrequent rewards.

The reason we pursue honor must, then, be something bigger than our interest alone. I argue we should pursue it because it is nature’s highest task for us. If it is true that to whom much is given much is expected, nature has placed before us a quite a mission indeed. Humanity, despite its capacity for grave misdeeds, is a breed of life uncommon in its potential for reason, compassion, and restraint. This makes us unique in our world. Most of all, it enables us to live by actions and values with more long-lasting meaning than our momentary desires.

In this possibility, in this choice, we see the foundation for all the potential encased in human action. The timeless words of John Steinbeck best echo this decision. Steinbeck stirringly ends his classic “East of Eden” with the simple dictum “Thou mayest.” In this fitting climax to his perennial work, Steinbeck shows that, for humanity, the power of choice contains within it the sum potential of our race. And so, because the sum of what we are is encased in the choices we make amidst life’s monotony, why wouldn’t we place the bar for ourselves at the height honor demands? It would seem there could be no greater calling than to aspire to a conduct of human excellence which does justice to our uniquely human character.