

A Pseudo-Last Lecture

First of all I want to thank Tom Landy and Bill Shea and everyone else connected with the Center for Culture, Religion, and Ethics and with the Lily Grant for inviting me to participate in this “Last Lecture Series.” I also want to make it clear that this is just a simulation of a last lecture. It’s not actually my final lecture. I imagine this will come as quite a let-down to some of my students. Let’s hope that most of them will get over it.

As I thought about what to say in this simulated last lecture, I went over some of the possibilities that come to mind for the format of a last lecture.

- 1.) Don’t even show up. After all, what can they do to you? Nominate you for the Supreme Court?
- 2.) Be a real professional and finish the course you have been teaching all semester. Of course, you may be so far behind in your course, as I usually am, that you have to talk really fast and go way past the time when the lecture is scheduled to end.
- 3.) Take the opportunity to tell off those people one has always wanted to tell off—this is a huge temptation for me but I have to remember that this is only a simulated last lecture. I’ve got to come back here tomorrow morning.
- 4.) See it as an opportunity to talk of things one never has had the opportunity to discuss in public because they aren’t a part of one’s discipline.

I’m going to take this last option, although I must add that I’ve been blessed with numerous opportunities to stray from the standard offerings of the physics department. Among these opportunities I include teaching several times with a variety of interesting colleagues in the First-Year Program, teaching in the honors-program’s human nature seminar with Jody Ziegler and Chris Dustin, and teaching last semester in one of the sections of the Knowledge and Reflection course that a number of us taught in.

A curious thing is that each member of the faculty could adopt this last option any day that we teach but we very, very seldom avail ourselves of this freedom. It’s surprising to me how rare it is for a faculty member to speak formally to a gathering of his or her colleagues about something outside of that person’s area of professional expertise. Here, at HC, there *are* a few such opportunities—the Rodino lecture, the outstanding teacher award speech, and this lecture series. So far, I’ve been lucky enough to participate in two of these three platforms. Perhaps after I finish my talk, we’ll all understand better why there are so few opportunities for this kind of lecture.

In this last lecture, I’m going to give a small series of reflections about the curriculum and how we teach our courses in it. I hope these reflections are not too disconnected. In keeping with our being at a liberal arts college and in keeping with my desire to step somewhat outside of the confines of my own discipline tonight, I’ll preface my remarks

with a few lines from a Bob Dylan song—*It's Alright Ma, I'm Only Bleeding*. Here is the verse I'm interested in:

*While preachers preach of evil fates,
Teachers teach that knowledge waits;
Can lead to hundred-dollar plates.
Goodness hides behind its gates,
But even the president of the United States
Sometimes must have to stand naked.*

I'm not going to comment on the line about preachers although my experience suggests that preachers don't preach of evil fates as much as they used to. I'm particularly interested in the lines about teachers....

Do we teach that knowledge waits? That knowledge is out there waiting to be discovered or just picked up? It seems to me that many of us accept our disciplines as they are presented to us in college and in grad school without reflecting on the presuppositions from which they rise. Thomas Kuhn, in his somewhat over-rated book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, says that physics courses and, I might add, most science courses are usually taught with a heavy emphasis on convincing students of how effective the particular science is. It seems to me that this is true for all the disciplines. In science classes there is seldom any time spent in class bringing to students' attention what the limits of science are or how weird it is that there is any order at all in the world, much less that some of this order is apparently a mathematical order of a rather sophisticated kind. Even less do we draw students' attention to how strange it is both that there is *anything* rather than *no-thing* and that that anything apparently exists not as a unity but as a multiplicity. It seems to me that science and many scientists accept the presence of everything—us, the things we study, the mathematical order we find—without any reflection or gratitude.

Here is a minor example of what I'm trying to get at. In a book by Richard Feynman, *The Meaning of It All*, he speaks passionately about how important it is that scientists can never be certain that their theories are correct. He contrasts this with what he imagines to be the certainty of religious people. He concludes by emphasizing, with no apparent irony, how certain he is that uncertainty is a good thing.

The Dylan line that knowledge “can lead to hundred dollar plates” might at first glance seem to be directed at some departments more than others--particularly departments that start with the letter *e* and end with *nomics*. Nevertheless, more and more parents seem to expect those hundred dollar plates to follow quickly and directly from their sons' and daughters' increasingly expensive liberal arts educations. I'm not so sure that we can present a very convincing counter argument.

The other part of the Dylan quote that concerns me is the line that “goodness hides behind its gates.” In our often uncritical acceptance of the value of critical thinking, do we squeeze goodness behind its gates? Have we too cavalierly separated truth from goodness? Should the sciences offer a course that examines critically the scientific concept of truth as a correspondence between this and that? Martin Heidegger speaks of truth as being fundamentally a revealing. What he means, in part, by this is that you can’t have a correspondence between this and that unless you first have a *this* and a *that* and then you have to have the possibility of *this* and *that* persisting long enough so that any kind of correspondence at all could be established. The contingency of everything we encounter in and out of science and the contingency of any kind of correspondences should be paid attention to before we become busy searching for correspondences. I’ve heard of hunter-gatherer tribes in which the hunters pray to their prey for forgiveness before they kill the prey. Perhaps we should offer a course for all science majors in which we try to get the students and ourselves to consider offering such a prayer daily before we begin doing science.

Related to all this is the way in which *chance* has evolved from being a *description* of some of the characteristics of certain phenomena to being an *explanation* of those same phenomena. I’ve taught quantum mechanics a few times and chance phenomena are at the heart of this subject. I’ve never felt that saying these quantum phenomena are chance in any way explained those phenomena. Instead, their so-called chance nature seems to bring to the fore the mystery that permeates all phenomena. I worry that the way we often teach science with our unthinking acceptance of our presuppositions and of chance, with our narrow view of truth, and with our unreflective belief in progress makes us complicit in furthering the nihilism that seems to me to lurk in the background of much of higher education.

In another part of the same song, Dylan wrote

*Disillusioned words like bullets bark
As human gods aim for their mark,
Make everything from toy guns that spark
To flesh-colored Christs that glow in the dark.
It's easy to see, without looking too far,
That not much is really sacred.*

This passage suggests to me our obsession with and our addiction to technological devices and how the illusion of control that these devices offer us can make us feel like gods. The line that says *not much is really sacred* brings to my mind how odd it would be to hear the word *sacred* spoken in a course here at HC outside of the Religious Studies department or outside of an occasional anthropology course. We should be more

concerned with and more willing to ask ourselves and our students what is sacred in our lives.

Getting back to the “toy guns that spark and the flesh-colored Christs that glow in the dark”: In his essay *The Power of the Powerless*, Vaclav Havel writes of what it was like in 1978 to live under the communist regime in Czechoslovakia. He speaks of the need for each person living in such a society to stop living a lie, to start living in the truth, and to live in a manner that is consistent with what he calls the aims of life. Seventy-nine pages into this eight-seven page essay, he makes a rather startling statement. He says

Our attention, therefore, inevitably turns to the *most essential* matter: the crisis of contemporary technological society as a whole, the crisis that Heidegger describes as the ineptitude of humanity face to face with the planetary power of technology.

In this quote Havel speaks of the “planetary power of technology”. He’s not saying that it’s a problem confined to the Soviet Union. I don’t have the time here to go into the details of this crisis. It extends far beyond problems of pollution or problems of getting technology back under our control. Martin Heidegger in his essay *The Question Concerning Technology* addresses this crisis. He speaks there of the challenging that technology presents to all of reality. As an example of this challenging, I’d like to tell a story. A few years ago a group of doctors decided to do an experiment to test the effectiveness of prayer. They formed two groups of patients with the same illness. They arranged for one group of patients to be prayed for without those patients’ knowledge by people who didn’t know them. The second group of patients had no group praying for them and, I suppose, no one else who was praying for them. The idea was to see if the first group improved significantly faster than the latter group. When you ask students about this experiment, most begin to criticize the construction of the experiment. Very few question whether such an experiment should even be done. Most students fail to see that this experiment challenges God to present herself to us in a particular way. This is akin to the kind of challenging that is involved with modern technology.

In a somewhat less profound but related way, Albert Borgmann, in his book *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*, examines the insidious ways in which technology shapes the way we live today. He addresses the damaging impact that the devices of technology have on our communal life and considers the manner in which modern technology has tended to trivialize the aims of life in modern democracies.

It seems to me that our curriculum should have some *required* courses that deal with this crisis in contemporary society. A crisis that drives the sacred and the good into hiding, that makes us obsessed with the illusion of controlling our lives, and that challenges the

earth and everything on it to present itself to us in a particular way should merit our attention and should be worth our paying attention to it in the curriculum.

These are some of my thoughts on issues that I think are crucial in higher education and that we should incorporate into our curriculum. Unfortunately, the curriculum at any liberal arts college no longer has room to consider such issues in more than a haphazard way. I hope we can learn to do better.

I'd like to conclude my talk by making a few proposals which are tangentially related to the issues I've just addressed. The link between these proposals and the first part of my talk is kind of tenuous. John Anderson suggested to me that I have all of you split up into groups of four after I finish my talk and assign you the task of connecting the first half of my talk with the second. I think I'll leave that as an assignment to be done at home.

I'd like more of my colleagues to have the opportunity to discuss in public issues that go beyond particular disciplines. First, I wish that the opportunity to participate in something like this "last lecture" series could be available to faculty that are really about to retire. It seems to me that we should take advantage of the resource that these people are by presenting them with the opportunity to share with us their thoughts on education and life as they really do approach their last lecture. We could call it the Real Last Lecture Series.

I'd also like to propose that there be a lecture series in which faculty who have gone outside the United States for more than a weekend speak to the college community about their experiences in the country they visited. I'd like to hear not about how the trip affected their research but about how their experience of the culture and the ambience of the place they visited affected them.

I first had this idea after I visited one of my daughters in Spain where she was spending the spring semester of her junior year. While I was in Spain, I was struck by how much slower and saner the pace of life was there. In a restaurant you always had to ask for the check. It seemed to be assumed that you would take at least three hours to eat your meal. No one seemed that interested in a fast turnover of clientele. I saw very few really obese people and the few that I did see looked like tourists. I saw more olive trees than I thought existed on the planet. In addition, I was one of the taller people in the country. I'd like to have had the chance to discuss all these impressions with my colleagues from other departments.

Later, Joe Lawrence of the philosophy department ran into me after he had spent a few weeks in New Zealand. He was struck by how much New Zealand reminded him of the US in the 1950s. I thought it would be interesting for others, especially students, to hear about such reactions. I think that the more we can experience one another as complete

individuals, the richer we all will be. I believe that such a series of lectures could be a step in that direction.

Lastly, I'd like to propose that the college institute some policy that encourages each faculty member to sit in as a student for an entire semester in a course far outside of that faculty person's discipline. Perhaps there could be some kind of stipend offered to any faculty member who proposes to do this.

I offer this proposal based on my own experience. For six years I taught in a two-course sequence with Clyde Pax who was a philosopher at the College and a most profound one at that. In this sequence we would each attend the others class as a student in that class. Clyde always spent time discussing Martin Heidegger's philosophy. If you haven't read any of Heidegger, let me tell you that his writing is very deep and very difficult. It was a humbling but good experience for me to be a student again and to struggle again with new, difficult material. It was also very worthwhile to watch someone else teach. It made me rethink how I taught and the kinds of decisions I was making in the classroom. Lastly, the profound issues that Clyde addressed in his class helped me to reconsider what science is all about. If there is anything worthwhile in the first part of this talk, it's there because of what I learned from Clyde.

My rationale for these proposals is varied. I think we need to hear more and to think more about the curriculum as a whole. I also think it would be good if we could reveal more about ourselves to one another and to our students. As I said, the travel lectures could be a step in this direction. Lastly, I think we need to find some way to help one another develop as teachers, to see our own disciplines in a new light, and to recall what it's like to be a student. My own experience has been that sitting in on a course far outside of my discipline was instrumental in this development.