

**Black-Backed Gorilla Males and The Arts and Sociality of A Lifetime of  
Teaching:  
*If Only Everyone Could Be So Lucky***

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Sheedy Award Ceremony

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Good afternoon everyone and thank you for coming to share these few wonderful moments with me. I am, of course, at once extremely honored, greatly humbled, and to be honest a little embarrassed. But I am happy to be embarrassed. To be told in this way that you are doing well at something for which “doing well” means just about everything, is quite the indulgence...

No doubt you know that it is so much easier and enjoyable to publicly express one's genuine admiration of others and to recognize the spectacular accomplishments of colleagues and friends than to hear about yourself. I think that for whatever the reason while we would perhaps not be altogether human if we did not secretly wish for these kinds of moments at the same time it reflects the best of us that simultaneously we come to imagine that we probably don't really deserve it...at least as long as others equally as good but in different ways, perhaps, are denied that same recognition.

But I thank you, Dan, so much for constructing such a kind, heartfelt and generous interpretation of my contributions to my beloved Notre Dame, and it is clear that your own abundant intellectual gifts helps explain how you could so deftly craft a portrait of me in such laudatory terms.

And to the committee and my wonderful students some of whom took the time to write letters on my behalf and to all my students I have been privileged to teach, I remain so

grateful and appreciative. I want to acknowledge my remarkable anthropology colleagues, too, for their collegiality and the value they place of collectivity, as we all operate under the motto, and I quote “we think better together. I want to compliment my colleagues on the *Esprit de Coeur* they display every day that could not make for a better learning and teaching environment. Surely, the extent of the impact anthropology is having on the college and university including teaching more students per faculty than any other arts and letters department would simply not be possible if it were not for their dedication.

As regards humility, which is tested in these moments, let me just say: don't worry! Please recall I had the privilege of sitting on the Provosts Advisory Committee for six years and seeing first hand the singular talents and achievements of many of you in this room. Let me tell you, it was a remarkable experience but it was not without its downside. I am referring to the intimidation factor, and, no, I am not referring to intimidation by way of my esteemed fellow committee members applying necessarily too high a bar for promotion; rather, I am referring to the lasting effects of learning of specific faculty achievements from department chairs and external reviewers and viewing the tiles of their publications, books, and noting with pride their grants, discoveries, distinctions, awards, external institutional affiliations, and overall community contributions .

Yes, I know my place.

This award is about teaching, of course, and hence it is appropriate to share some thoughts on our joint enterprise about life in the classroom. I realize that my own observations and impressions are very personal and not necessarily the same as yours. But one way by which I can more comfortably express them is to understand that such discussions serve some larger purpose and they speak to the larger social values and ideologies that bind us. Surely, these kinds of ceremonies as any anthropologist happily will point out act to validate our personal and professional lives which for those of us lucky enough to participate in the life of the academy quickly become one and the same.

I suppose much of what I have to say about teaching reflects the fact that I have been doing it for quite some time now. I have had the honor to come to know thousands of students through the years having started my full time teaching 34 years ago at age 25. Put another way, I have been teaching longer than I have not been teaching. My wife Professor Joanne Mack and I are starting our twelfth year here at Notre Dame, and previous to this we spent 20 years teaching at Pomona College. Two years previous to that I began my career at UC Berkeley as a visiting assistant professor with my two-month old Ph.D. in my back pocket.

Speaking of Berkeley, I surely did not feel very secure when much to my horror I met my first university class... all 1000 students assembled in a gigantic, sub terrain lecture hall-- a baptism by fire to be sure . One problem was that I looked 15 years of age, and every TA was older than me by at least five years! They instantly hated me. It was not especially welcoming nor relaxing. But I survived and, to my amazement, even under those circumstances...the material taught and the reactions of my students proved that I was luckily beginning a most privileged career.

Have you ever been asked “what your secret is” as regards teaching? It’s hard to know what to say. To actually answer the question it implies that you accept the characterization that you have unique access to something denied others which would hardly be comfortable to accept in the first place. And I have to confess I never found it particularly interesting nor necessarily helpful to talk about and especially read about how to teach. Teaching is such a personal experience in the sense of what feels so fantastic and appropriate for you (while teaching) may not feel or even be right for someone else. It reflects so obviously on ones unique personality with all its flaws, imperfections but also one’s special characteristics. For me, teaching is not at all a science but a unique art form, with each one of us creating our own artistic renditions ...our own teaching genera.

The main challenge as a teacher, then, is to find your own niche within which first and foremost you are able to express your own personality, your strengths, and your passion, and feel somewhat relaxed in the context of sharing what most gets you excited intellectually. Surprisingly, excellent teaching need not be defined so much by its comprehensiveness, as it might be by being effectively discriminating...by providing great exemplars or powerful examples of “ways of thinking and knowing”, that give rise to good questions, good models and good methods for solving problems.

Insofar as the actual process is concerned I think that when at our best our teaching should reflect how the learning process is a bit unpredictable. The process of teaching and the “doing of it” involves some risk-taking... and relishing in it, of not being afraid to trust your students with your vulnerabilities, and to explore what wasn't originally planned, and to “give in” to where a class wants or needs to go. We surely encourage our students to take risks in their scholarship so surely we should be willing to do the same.

I have recently come to believe that what students will respond to most powerfully, in the classroom, is something about you, when your personality becomes one and the same with the words, precepts and concepts you are supporting and acting out...it is a magical transformation. And here is where our own unique personalities lead the way, as our unique nesses become reflected in our pedagogies, which must be internally and behaviorally consistent. Such a reality makes assessments of “quality of teaching” based only on grade distributions..or preconceived notions of what constitutes a good grade distribution (of A's...) a useless if not dangerous exercise. To know how many A's a teacher gave out communicates nothing about what a professor-teacher actually accomplishes in his or her classroom, what the grade actually means in its context and this knowledge is critical.

Reflecting further on my own approach, personally, I think that I best achieve my own teaching goals more fluidly when I am more closely able to approximate my way of “being” and “interacting” outside the classroom, and where I can pretend not so much to be teaching to a “class” but to be speaking to one person, as if having a conversation. In

this way it seems possible not to entirely changing my mode of interaction or transaction in the classroom but rather to keep it contiguous with the manner of communication and interaction I feel most comfortable with, outside the classroom, at least as much as size makes possible.

It amuses me, too, that I have come to the realization that the many skills required for effective teaching are those required for good early parenting, especially a sensitivity to nonverbal cues and behavioral signals i.e. reading correctly the emotional responses as judged from facial expressions of your students while you are lecturing. How odd it might seem that lecture adjustments might well be based not on what you think the students might abstractly need intellectually, but to a degree...what you sense that they actually are perceiving and are coming to understand...i.e. what they can hear. Empathy and perceptual capacities and looking for what resonates both intellectually and emotionally may not at first glance sound relevant but looking carefully for the effects that your words are having and having the courage, if necessary, to change abruptly, *abandon ship* so-to-speak, when things are not working out is critical. Such shifts can suddenly infuse the classroom with renewed energy and excitement, making a huge difference in what your students will suddenly be willing to do next to renew them and to re-engage.

Most critical of all, I must emphasize, is making your students know you really care about them, personally, and that you truly care about what they learn because you just know that it will genuinely enrich them. If anything, teaching is a social transaction and regardless of how many students may be in a class every student sees them self as an individual first and foremost in relationship to you. My opinion is that regardless of the size of the class the more you are able to transcend anonymity, to personalize, with your passion, enthusiasm and concern for each and every student the more they feel connected to you and, hence, the more they will accept your invitation to be taught. Making them want to learn is three quarters of the challenge. One student put it this way: “ I really didn't want to like anthropology, Professor McKenna..nor did I feel like studying it so

hard but I simply had to, because it meant so much to you, and you love anthropology so much I did not want to let you down”. Ahhh.. Catholic guilt does still work in mysterious ways.

Speaking of how irrelevant class size can prove to be as long as excellent teaching takes front and center...let me describe three of my own major intellectual epiphanies which took place in huge lecture halls at Berkeley where I sat amongst hundreds of other students but so riveted was I to the incredible new ideas and challenges I was listening to it was as if the room was empty except for the professor and myself. I recall sitting in my Introduction to Physical Anthropology class along with 700 other first year students at Berkeley in the Spring of 1967. Professor Vincent Sarich was showing us slides of the fossil history and prehistory of human beings, and while heretofore it seemed perfectly sensible to understand the evolution of horses, dolphins and elephants I had no idea that evolution in no trivial way applied equally as well to human beings. But what about God, I thought? That was a moment.

Nor will I forget one beautiful Wednesday afternoon when Professor Bill Simmons introduced us to the Bandayranke of Central Africa. While listening to him describe their complex religious system and beliefs I dutifully distanced myself from it until suddenly it seemed, my pen wouldn't move, I was like paralyzed. He said simply “Well, you know they believe without a sliver of doubt that they are right...that this is THE religion.. and, of course, “they have every reason to believe so.” They even feel that western religions are silly, much too simple to possibly be true. He explained that the Bandayranke people felt ever so sorry for us western peoples who believe in such empty religious precepts. I was paralyzed because for the first time ever I realized that other human beings had just as valid a claim for the absolute legitimacy of their religion...as did I.

One moment before I was sitting contentedly enjoying the security of my own ethnocentrism thinking how strange their religion was, and seconds later when it occurred to me that my own claim of religious legitimacy (and superiority) could very well be no more than a historical accident, I needed therapy. It was yet another profound moment.

But the great teachers just kept *a comin*. Consider Professor Phyllis Dolhinow, who in her mid-twenties went to India and followed troops of hundreds of Indian langur monkeys around leopard and tiger infested regions of North and South India...by herself. This was the late 50's and early 60's not exactly a period or time friendly to young women doing explorations of monkeys in the wilds of India. In another huge 700 student enrolled class..she kept using a phrase "enduring social relationships" that allegedly characterized the types and frequencies of interactions between members of nonhuman primate societies and she applied it especially to the relationships between infants and their mothers. The term "relationship" as applied to animals was a huge surprise applying it as she did in such a strange domain of animal life, or so I thought. How did animals have "enduring" lifetime relationships with one another? How could the behavior of some nonhuman species NOT be dependent on genes simply expressing themselves, in the form of behavior but instead be based on learning. And get this, she said only in the context of on-going meaningful social relationships could learning occur! Sound familiar? I was shocked.

Well, I can only say to those who dismiss or question the possibility that meaningful learning and transformations cannot take place in large classes, I beg to disagree. I was not alone on those occasions as hundreds of my fellow Berkeley classmates were transfixed then transformed under the spell of an incredible teacher who changed just about everything.

But university level classes are not the only places where quiet intellectual epiphanies occur when special teachers have their way. I must mention Mrs. Masimina Rose, my forth grade teacher, my very best teacher, ever. I hope you all had a Mrs. Rose! She first showed me what a superlative teacher can do and how good teachers can make their students feel about themselves. Truthfully, I probably model my own teaching (without the kisses, of course) after her. She taught in what can only be called a "euphoric-ebullient" style...practically singing with enthusiasm about California Indians and/or the human body or any topic in the curriculum. And, she loved each and every one of us, and

she told us so, and we loved her. She lined us up before class and kissed and hugged each of us, and whispered a message in our ears as to how sure she was that today would be our best day. “Throw your shoulders back, children, and let the world know how proud you are and how happy you are to be alive”. I can still hear her and see her beautiful smile, and we happily did exactly as she said. It was in her class that I first encountered that truth about teaching that I espouse to anyone who will listen, a truth scientifically validated, if you will recall, by Professor Dolhinow in her field studies of monkeys and apes...and that is that the best and most enduring learning always occur within the context of those with whom we have a meaningful and trusting social relationships.

Finally, and I leave the best, or is it the most entertaining, for the last and hope you will not mind especially at this late point a small amount of irreverence as I offer it only because I think it can be very, very useful. It is a rare thing for me to say what NOT to do...as I favor as no doubt you can tell a very open approach, if anything, to defining what constitutes excellent teaching believing as I do that excellent teaching comes in as many flavors and forms as their are teachers.

But I will on this happy occasion violate my own preference and argue for one unwavering rule of thumb: no matter what, and are you listening? Never, never, ever show a dvd, video or film you have not pre reviewed. My “lesson learned” came on one fine Tuesday morning minutes before teaching my Primate Social behavior class at Pomona College. A member of the class, a young woman, caught me right before. She told me excitedly that her mother, a prominent filmmaker with National Geographic had flown in a film in for an exclusive class viewing, raw footage she had just taken of a troop of Lowland Gorillas, in Eastern Uganda. The reel was both unedited and not narrated which, of course, added to its appeal. With great excitement I told the class of our unexpected good fortune. What a privilege. I whipped out the old projector and I hurriedly wound the tape through the portals and turned it on. It was amazing. The lush green colors were vibrant and we found ourselves literally in the middle of a gorilla troop, as if walking behind two beautiful black –backed males, with females and young all around. With the movie frame covering every inch of the 60 foot screen that luckily

graced the room, we thought we were all in the field. It was incredible. My student's mother, the photographer, had positioned herself in and between the whole group moving forward... But then, she came to focus exclusively on two beautiful black-backed males, older teenagers in Gorilla years who ventured off by themselves. We turned and headed with them on what seemed like an independent foraging trip. Their grunting and movements and sounds all distinctly made us feel, again, we were all right there.

And then it happened. In a clearing that had a depressed circle of earth in the middle we watched as the males entered the depression and one of them lay on his back. The other, in very clear view, kneeled down beside him and began to perform oral copulation on him, a behavior I had not even known was either possible for Gorillas, or part of their "normal" behavior. Well, if the visual images were not big and graphic enough, I can't begin to describe the sounds...the seemingly relentless moans of, what we can only presume to be pure gorilla joy.

Sitting as I was at the top of the class facing the central focus of activity..I began to sweat profusely totally soaking my shirt and hair. With my cheeks burning with embarrassment, I prayed, "please God, please God, make it stop, make it stop now"!

God was not listening to me that day. It went on it seemed forever but finally having finished, I whispered: "Thank you, God"! How premature of me. I guess there is such a thing as reciprocation after all even amongst black backed male Gorilla. Yes, my friends, we were entertained to yet another sex session, moans and all, for about 10 minutes, going on a day! I only prayed there would be some filler time and space between the scenes so I could recover. There wasn't. When the sex ended so did the film. I had but no choice but to reach for the lights. I stood up and the class took one look at me and broke into collective hilarity. My hair has completely matted against my red face. My shirt and pants were wilted with nervous sweat...and, somehow the class all could identify complete and utter embarrassment. Of course, they loved every minute of it. For me it remains one of the most vibrant teaching experiences I have ever had.

So, you see, teaching DOES involve some risk-taking, though at times the magnitude of the risks are... more clear in hindsight? But these moments, the humanizing moments, of embarrassment, hilarity, and error can be as important, and sometimes are more important, than the eloquent lecture. It is the social relationships and the contexts of lessons learned that make for good teachers, good students, and lasting memories, intellectual or otherwise... and it is as a social being and caring person that I hope to be remembered as a teacher and a colleague.