

Some Lessons Learned, Some Commitments Kept

Thomas F. X. Noble

Sheedy Award Remarks

September 15, 2011

Standing before you this afternoon, I am honored and humbled by the recognition you have conferred upon me. You have inducted me into a remarkably diverse and talented group of people who share a commitment to teaching and whose commitment has been acknowledged and appreciated. I am especially delighted to count as friends a number of those who have preceded me to this podium. It is more than a little presumptuous to stand here and speak about teaching in the company of so many outstanding teachers. I doubt that I will say anything new, or anything you don't already know. But I will try to offer a few reflections on the art of teaching as I have practiced it over a good many years now.

After Jo Ann DellaNeva called me with the news, as pleasing as it was unexpected, that I had been chosen as the 2011 Sheedy Award winner, I was asked several times what I do that is innovative. It did not take me long to realize that the only honest answer I could give to that valid and serious question is "Nothing at all." I suspect that I am about as old fashioned as anyone can be. In large classes I lecture. In small ones I listen. If I have not been innovative, I have at least been attentive. I have paid attention—to my own teachers, to my colleagues, to my own heart, and above all else to my students.

2011 marks for me the opening of my thirty-seventh academic year. I taught for about ten years before I ever saw a course evaluation. It was during those years that I learned, perhaps I might say taught myself, how to teach. As a result, I have always been rather skeptical about

course evaluations. Let me add that there is not the slightest hint of sour-grapes in that last remark. Ever since I came under the regime of evaluation, I have fared well. My skepticism arises from a conviction that the regime of evaluation cannot really measure what matters most in the long run. The system is by its nature ephemeral. It produces snap-shots not motion pictures. Henry Adams said that teaching was the greatest of callings because it touches the future. At the end of a semester, one can barely glimpse the morrow let alone peer into the years ahead. The students I taught in my first year are now, more or less, fifty-five years old; they are eligible for membership in the AARP. That is, of course, not true of the students I taught last spring. But what matters most to me is all those futures I may have touched, and how I touched them, and with what consequences. I have taught more than 7,000 students. I do not remember them all and I dare say that most of them have probably forgotten me. But I remember many of them and it has been my good fortune to remain in contact with at least a few dozen of them over quite a long time now. The first student who ever wrote an honors thesis under my direction is now a chaired professor in the Harvard law school. Years ago we used to correspond in the old fashioned way. In more recent years we exchange occasional emails. It is to me the best of all teaching evaluations when a student like that one, or many others too, write and say that something they just read, or saw, or heard reminded them of something I once said in class, or that we discussed in my office, or talked about over a cup of coffee or a glass of beer. It would be presumptuous of me to say that I deserve the Sheedy Award. But I can say that I have accumulated a lot of evidence that I have continuously touched an unfolding future. That makes it all worthwhile.

So one thing I learned, or taught myself, a long time ago was to take the long view. Let me share a few other things that I have learned.

Sometime in the winter of 1974, while I was writing my dissertation, I got bored or distracted pretty late in the evening and turned on the television. The set came on to reveal Dick Cavett interviewing Sir Laurence Olivier. That seemed more interesting than the footnotes I was writing, so I sat down to watch. At one point, Cavett asked Olivier what he thought of the younger actors of the day. He said that he felt they did not pay enough deference to the craft of acting, they took too much for granted, they did not work hard enough. He spoke about how he and the actors of his generation began in regional theater. The people who attended performances were ordinary people, often working class. They put on their best clothes and spend real, hard-earned money to see a play. They deserved, Olivier said, the show of their lifetime. Olivier did tell a few stories about the carousing that he and his contemporaries were famous for but he said that, as he saw it, sheer professionalism demanded that the actor put everything out of his mind when the curtain goes up.

Olivier's words stuck in my mind and have never left. The lecture hall is my stage and I have always tried, every time, to give the students the greatest show that it is in my power to give them. I have a certain facility with language—that's a fancy way of saying blarney—and a shameless histrionic streak. I am not above telling a joke to make a point. Indeed, I have told some of the same jokes, in the same place, in the same lectures, year after year—some of them going back a good thirty years or more. After all, I never have the same audience twice! But I can say with utter conviction that I have never winged it; I have never mailed one in. I leave at the door to the lecture hall whatever else may be on my mind and concentrate exclusively on the lecture, on the show if you will, that is at hand.

So passion is another thing I have learned. I love what I do and I do it with great joy and energy. I think that is important. But I have also learned that passion's essential companion is preparation. Teaching is like acting, or like performing music, or participating in an athletic contest. It is all the countless hours getting ready that make the brief moment before the lights count, and work, and matter. To fail to prepare is to betray the craft.

Preparation has to do with establishing some control over a body of information. I am a medievalist. What I prepare is the subject matter of medieval studies. Interdisciplinarity has been much talked about for some years now. As a medievalist, I have always been, by necessity, interdisciplinary. There is an old joke to the effect that interdisciplinary means an English professor with a slide projector. That joke hardly works anymore because for our students and younger colleagues slide projectors are historical artifacts like typewriters or rotary phones. But you get the point. My kind of "interdisciplinary" simply means that I work comfortably in a variety of disciplines. I have both taught and published in history, art history, theology, philosophy, and political thought. I work comfortably in several languages. In part, I know and do these things to be effective as a medievalist. But lurking behind necessity is curiosity. For as long as I can remember I have had a voracious curiosity. At some level almost everything interests me. I believe that the capacity to be curious about a wide array of subjects has helped me to be curious about the different students I have encountered, to be open to them, to be interested in them. I have also found ways, more or less subtle depending on circumstances, to mix preparation and curiosity in such a way as to draw students into my world, my subject, my passions, my interests.

Whenever I am asked what I do, I always say, “I teach.” Inevitably, people will ask, “What do you teach?” I always say, “It’s not what, it’s who. I teach students.” I suppose that I am being deliberately playful, or difficult depending on how you look at it, and eventually I always admit that the subject I teach is history. But I am trying to make a point by answering a familiar question in this way. History, at least sometimes, is in a sense the language I speak in my classroom. But I am speaking to and with students. I need to be curious about them and to prepare myself to teach them. Who are they? Why are they in my class? To that question I have had all sorts of inspiring and also disconcerting answers over the years. What preparation do they bring with them? I have opened thirty-seven school years, as I said. I always kid my freshmen that the system is cruel, for every year they are eternally eighteen and I am a year older. It has been an inestimable privilege to spend my entire adult life teaching, but actually learning from, bright, engaging young people. I like them. I really do, and always have. I think they know that. When my award was announced last spring, there were several very nice, cheek-reddening stories. The one quotation that really touched me said that I have an “unwavering faith” in my students. I do. I have had many students over the years who had no idea how good they are, or how good they could be. Helping, inspiring, perhaps prodding those students constitutes some of the best teaching I have done. And that teaching had little or nothing to do with history or medieval studies. It had everything to do with teaching students.

Preparation and curiosity bring me to scholarship and to a few things I have learned about the relationship between teaching and scholarship. I believe that these are like the two sides of a coin. Neither has value without the other. To teach without simultaneously adding some digits to the sum of knowledge is forever to be a schoolmaster, to be a person who merely hands on in increasingly desiccated fashion the accumulated knowledge of the past. Constantly learning new

things, or learning old things in new ways, keeps one fresh, vital, and engaged. Our students do not know our disciplines the way we do, and they rarely have any idea why any sensible person would want to know the things we know. But they can surely detect engagement, hard intellectual work, and the excitement that comes from approaching or even crossing a boundary of knowledge.

When I was in graduate school, I happened to read in a seminar on the Roman Empire the *Epistulae Morales* of the first-century Stoic philosopher Seneca. One brief line stuck in my head and has never left. Seneca said, “I take no joy in learning anything if I alone am to know it.” Lodged in my noggin right next to that tag from Seneca is another from Chaucer. His clerk of Oxenford said, “Gladly would I learn and gladly teach.” So it has always been for me. When I learn something new in my study, I cannot wait to bring it to my classroom. Research feeds my teaching; it does not get in its way. I have repeatedly discovered that I only really master new things when I figure out how to explain them to someone else. I am absolutely convinced that the craft of teaching has made me a better writer just as, in turn, careful attention to writing has made me a better teacher. Careful, critical reading in my study translates into more careful and effective discussions with my students. Paying close attention to the insights my students develop has encouraged me to think harder and in new ways about my own work.

Passion, preparation, curiosity, and commitment to students I learned early and pretty much on my own. Another set of valuable lessons came to me over the course of my career. To speak of a connection between teaching and scholarship is hardly surprising or original. Indeed, these are the fundamental criteria on which we are all evaluated year after year. But there is a third category, too—service—and much less attention is customarily paid to it. If teaching

represents a commitment to one's student and scholarship a commitment to one's discipline, then service represents a commitment to one's institution. To serve an institution, and especially to do so over a long time and in a variety of capacities, is to learn a great deal about how that institution functions, about the people who lead it, about the ideals they pursue, and about the community comprised of administrators, faculty, staff, and students. I actually think that I have become a better teacher and scholar over the years as I have learned to be a better academic citizen. I used the image of a coin before. It won't work now. I need a stool. A three-legged stool that is missing a leg falls over—every time. I suppose that this image is inexact for the purposes to which I have put it. Few people would say that the three “legs”—teaching, scholarship, and service—are equal in length. I am inclined to think that they do tend to even out, or that they should do so, over the course of a career.

Just one more point: I believe that I am immensely lucky to do what I do. Now it is true, as John Milton said, that “Luck is the residue of design.” Fair enough, I designed to be a teacher. Nevertheless, I think it makes a difference to be grateful every time you enter a classroom. It is a privilege whose value cannot be measured any more than one can measure the beauty of a spring morning or a child's smile. No, it is a privilege to be cherished. And that I have always done.

I am a little sheepish to be talking to you about teaching today, for I am, in fact, on leave. That is, I am not teaching. But I am trying to fill up my head with all sorts of new things to share with my students next year. For the last eleven years, I was an administrator. Last spring, John McGreevy noted that I had never been “just” a professor at Notre Dame. I look forward with eager anticipation to being, for the first time in a long time, the only thing I ever wanted to be.