

Richard Pierce acceptance speech

Sheedy Award September 2009

Some years ago, after listening to James Mckenna's presentation during Junior Parents Weekend, I vowed never to follow him to the podium. I was reminded of the sagacity of that insight while listening to his gracious introduction. Thank you, Jim, for your kind words and your generosity.

Jim actually represents much of what is the challenge of receiving the Charles Sheedy Award. I do not mean to say that I have been burdened. It is a wonderful honor but it places one among a cohort of faculty, many of whom have long been my mentors and exemplars of how to be effective professors. In my mind, the recipients of the Sheedy constitute the College of Arts and Letters Hall of Fame and while I am honored to be selected, I am also humbled and slightly embarrassed by my inclusion. The whole enterprise runs the risk of being self-congratulatory. The College of Arts and Letters is justly known throughout the university as the loci of fine and dedicated teaching. In this College, the bar is quite high and, to be honest, I have spent most of my time here just trying to be worthy of my place. I just wanted to do my part.

There are many in the auditorium that I should acknowledge. To do so, however, would be risky because I would invariably leave out some deserving folk. Nonetheless, I must acknowledge my first teacher, my mother, who is here to celebrate with me. She

has taken her share of credit for my place before you, as I suspect is a parent's right to do, but if this talk goes horribly off-track, and you are compelled to offer some critique, please remember that you may be in earshot of one of my relatives. Something like that happened at one of our football games where a fan was loudly criticizing one of our student-athletes when, finally, a woman three or four rows from me stood up and shouted at the heckler, "that's someone's baby out there." So, be careful. I also would like to acknowledge one of my current teacher's, the Reverend Doctor Timothy Rouse who provides lessons on a weekly basis. And my most enduring teacher, Leigh Hayden. But most of all, I want to thank my colleagues and students, current and former, that nominated me for this award and, more importantly, provided a rationale to do what I so enjoy doing.

The instruction before me is to speak on some aspect of teaching. I had an additional guideline; be brief. I am all that stands between you and what I've been told is a wonderful reception. I began my preparation for these remarks by doing what I think most researchers would do, I located and read the speeches of former Sheedy winners. In doing so I learned much and was inspired by the insight and eloquence of my colleagues. When I had finished I realized, somewhat fearfully, that there was little left for me to say. They had seemingly said it all. I was tempted to summarize their talks and present them to you today as a colloquium where the former addresses served as texts. In other words, my first impulse was to share what I had learned. I realized, somewhat reluctantly, that to merely provide a summary would be unfair and, in the end, for me, a bit unsatisfying.

In modern times, it is common for newly minted Ph.D.'s to create a teaching statement or philosophy to include in their application materials. Until this moment, I have never had to articulate my teaching philosophy and I remain uncertain as to whether I subscribe to a pedagogical school of thought. In the spirit of this place, however, I do have a series of confessions. The first is that I have never seriously read a teaching handbook. I have never created a power point presentation. I cannot recall ever bringing food treats for my students. So if any of those confessions resonate within any of you, and you have not yet won a Sheedy, I'm here to tell you that there is still hope. I have one additional confession. When I am in the classroom there is nowhere else I would like to be and nothing else I would rather do.

In the intervening months since I learned that I won the Sheedy I have given a lot of thought to my teaching. Certainly more thought than I had ever given before. I was reminded of Allen Iverson, then a guard for the Philadelphia 76ers in the National Basketball Association, who in 2002 was suspended by his coach for missing a practice. Iverson was an all-star and was the leading scorer in the NBA. In a press conference, Iverson famously questioned the usefulness of practice in a tirade that lasted just over 3 minutes and during which he uttered the word, practice, 26 times. It was not practice that was important, Iverson reasoned, it was the game. It was games that mattered. But Allen Iverson was wrong.

Physicians commonly call their profession a practice. The same is true for lawyers. The implication is that practitioners of medicine and law work in a world where the precepts are ever evolving. Physicians accept that while they know much there are still mysteries to the human body for which many questions remain. And lawyers, while working from a canon, acknowledge that the law is ever expanding and incorporating new events into the body of existing law. Doctors and lawyers, then, practice a craft that they know they will never completely master.

Professors practice, too. We are in the practice of teaching. And those of us at the collegiate level are in the practice of both creating and disseminating knowledge. We seek answers to questions of our own forming and to which we may never find. It is a privileged space and one that can induce both fear and egoism. Many can attest to the fear that accompanies the prospect of a new semester where you will engage a group of students over the course of fourteen weeks where the expectation is that you will present something informed and vetted at every meeting. Many professors share the same nightmare. It's the one where you are rushing towards class, unsure of the building or room, only to find yourself before a group of students and you have nothing to offer. You're there. Empty. I suspect that there are some in today's audience that have had that dream. For some, the pressure that accompanies such a scenario is stultifying, but I love it. I wish that I could say that my lust is driven by some desire to empty myself of all the facts and figures at my disposal, but it's quite the opposite. I get excited at the start of the semester because I am greedy to learn what my students will offer. You see, I am a fellow traveler. It is similar to taking a trip to a familiar locale or reading a book for a

second or third time. You know how to get where you are going or how the book ends, but along the way, you notice things that you did not on your first trip. Students want to see our wonderment in discovery. When students notice that a familiar text brings additional lessons, they will understand the true meaning of lifetime learning. More importantly, they are more likely to add to my knowledge with their insight. I wish that I were more altruistic, but really, in the end, I'm greedy.

One of the features of teaching that is too infrequently mentioned is that this is one of the easier jobs to do poorly and one of the more difficult jobs to do well. The research university setting only exacerbates the calculation because too often faculty believe that research is the only meaningful endeavor. Such a view is certainly not the currency at Notre Dame where the expectation is that teaching and research are co-equals. That is as it should be for in the best of worlds, research informs our teaching and, as Daniel Weiss the president of Lafayette College recently attested, "faculty revitalize their teaching through research." So our practice of teaching must include research and a deep immersion within our field. The potential for egoism comes because within our classrooms, when improperly employed, we have the power to direct discussion away from areas where we are uncomfortable and to intimidate those whose ideas are not yet fully formed. And if we cow students with our presence or overwhelm them with questions designed to display our superiority, then we've done worse than taught poorly; we've committed malpractice.

There has long been a debate as to whether teaching is an art or a science. Whether there was a methodology, a pedagogy, which would ensure success or whether a successful artist was at work before the class thereby intimating that the variant was the skill alone of the teacher. It is a false debate. For those of us of faith we believe that the ability to teach is one of God's gifts. But a gift undisturbed is a gratuity gone to waste. The world is well stocked with those that have abused or wasted their gift. I may have been blessed with the gift of teaching but if I am not better at this craft today than I was five years ago or that I will be in five years hence then I am neglecting my gift through a lack of attention and practice. No matter our starting or resting point, we must be better tomorrow than today. In all things we do there must be an honor to our labor. If so, the labor itself brings honor not only to us, but also to our family, and ultimately to our God. Seeking to do or be better is the thanks we give to God for the gift.

To this point, I've spoken mostly about myself and that realization is discomfoting. I need to speak to the student within us all. Every once in a while I hear or read that students are customers and we are the purveyors. I never accepted that concept because students, unlike consumers in a retail environment, are not always right. Students at university somehow form a norm by which they and their professors know will be the de facto standard. Not the standard for greatness, I fear, but the standard for acceptability. Notre Dame students and faculty are not immune from the practice. While I suspect that our standard for acceptability may be higher than at other places, we nevertheless have a tacit agreement regarding normal expectation.

It is easy for professors to fall victim to expect only average work from students, erroneously substituting our expectations with a standard. We then reward students accordingly. In that calculus, fulfilling the norm becomes “A” level work; falling slightly below becomes “B” level work, and so on and so on. It seems to me that both students and faculty must resist that temptation. Mediocrity is not greatness no matter how much we would like for it to be so.

It is so very easy to teach facts, formulas, and method, but it is so much more difficult to teach students to be creative. So often creativity is defined and marked by performance: a virtuoso musical performance, a new twist to an old painting style or an athlete who brings beauty to an old form. But academics can also be creative. It’s the marriage of knowledge, insight, and courage. The ingredients are simple enough but the mixture is maddening.

It may be unrealistic for someone to expect greatness when the performer is still learning to master the instrument. But that will come. Students will learn the form, in academia or in professional life. But it is not enough to know the form. It simply is not enough. Most people are trapped by their limitations to know merely the technical aspects of their endeavor. It is the difference between a nightclub singer and Sarah Vaughn or Whitney Houston. While each may sing the same song, we know who is merely singing the words and who has inhabited the song. It is the difference between someone who works with wood and a carpenter. While they both use the same medium, even the untrained eye recognizes artistry.

If you remember the formula, you'll recall that insight alone isn't sufficient. Nor is knowledge supreme. Both must work in concert with courage. It's safer to run with the herd. It's easier to be anonymous within a group. Each of us must manifest the courage to follow our insight and judgment. It's risky to do so because those that stick out are sometimes ridiculed and maligned. That is why I mentioned the tacit agreement between students and faculty. We can remain in the group by paying heed to the standards of acceptability, and thereby be anonymous, but I pray that you have the courage to strive for much more. I pray that you'll dare to be great.

There will be others that will receive the Sheedy Award, but I doubt that any could be more appreciative than I have. Despite the discomfort I have experienced in seeing my visage on posters throughout too many buildings on campus, I would not change a thing. Just a couple days ago, President John Jenkins reiterated something he has said many times; namely, that the faculty are the bedrock upon which universities stand. We are a fortunate group, but our fortune must be tempered with humility and respect. I believe that we should strive to be more grateful than proud.