

Jim Collins
Sheedy Award Reflections 2010

Preparing this talk over the past few months has been one of the most challenging things I've ever done. When I learned I was to receive the Sheedy award this year, I was deeply humbled because I've gotten to know many of the previous recipients of the award over the years, and I know full well that Richard Pierce, Jim McKenna, Steve Fallon, Valerie Sayers, and Bill Krier really do live up to their reputations as living legends. And then if I wasn't already humbled enough, I went online and read their reflections on teaching, which are little short of awe-inspiring because they're even wiser and more articulate than I was afraid they would be. So you start in a hole, which for me only grew deeper, because I normally rely on the Socratic method. As soon as I walk into a classroom, I start asking questions. That being the case, I knew I wouldn't be able to give you even a reasonable facsimile of how I teach, or convey why I take such delight in the process. For me to give a formal lecture like this is more or less like asking an orchestra conductor to suddenly turn toward the audience and start singing an aria. The results aren't necessarily going to be disastrous, but then again, you're not exactly going to see why he got to be up there standing in front of everybody in the fancy suit. So I convinced myself all summer long that you would all be sitting there thinking: So this is what virtuoso teaching looks like? Did they get the name wrong or what?

I could go on indefinitely with disclaimers like this, so I'll switch to a few quick acknowledgements as a way of warming you up for that great operatic performance you won't be getting this afternoon. Like the singing conductor, I thought I'd better go with honest and heartfelt in order to distract the audience from the limitations in technique. I want to begin by thanking my students past and present, because they have made teaching such a joyful experience for me year after year. I'd also like to thank Don Crafton and my colleagues for their support and for setting such high standards for teaching. When you have colleagues who are teaching masters like Siiri Scott, Bill Donaruma, and Peter Holland, you convince yourself that each and every class you teach has to be a life changing experience or you're simply letting the side down. And since Richard thanked his mother last year, I have to thank mine, too, because I know full well that if I don't, when she meets me at the Pearly Gates some day, the first thing she'll say will be, "And that nice Professor Pierce thanked his mother the year before, but you couldn't work that in somewhere in your talk?" I imagine Saint Peter shaking his head sadly, saying "And you had a golden opportunity man—what were you thinking?" So bear with me for a moment, because eternity is an especially long time to be answering that question. Since my mother started me on my way to a life devoted to books and films, she most certainly does deserve to be acknowledged, especially since she logged so many hours reading me Classic Illustrated comic books and taking me to the films I knew even then, at a tender age, were cinematic masterpieces—films like *Hercules Unchained* and *300 Spartans*. She was fiercely proud of her influence, and I want everyone to know that she was, indeed, the author of my professional life. I also have to thank my four daughters, Ava, Nell, Sophia, and Gabriela, who are always my first audience for anything I eventually present to my students. They function as my select advisory council about popular culture, and since they range in age from 11 to 29, I have an unfair advantage over most of my colleagues. If they're at all intrigued by something I run by

them, I know it's worth pursuing, but if I get that look that says all too bluntly, "You're just clueless, Dad," I usually revise my plans.

So now that I've done my disclaimers and acknowledgements, I need to get down to this singing business. What can I possibly say about teaching that hasn't been said far more eloquently by my predecessors? I tried to zero in on what I might bring to the table that was in any way unique, and I decided to address what might seem like an apparent contradiction: the Sheedy Award itself is testimony to one of the very oldest traditions at Notre Dame—a commitment to exceptional teaching which has been a vital part of this university since its inception in the 19th century, long before football or ambitions to become a national research institution appeared on the scene. This year that award is being given to someone whose main research area is the emerging digital culture of the 21st century, a world where the print isn't just still wet, it's on a multiplicity of screens, intertwined with an endless array of images which have fundamentally redefined the relationship between *literacy* and *visuality*. What does this combination of storied tradition and contemporary culture suggest about why I teach the way I do?

My teaching has been shaped by both the most traditional notions of what this university stands for and also by a vision of what it should become if it hopes to make significant contributions to our understanding of cultural life in the 21st century. In order to pursue this in greater detail, I'm going to borrow a lesson from the Gospel according Spielberg: hook them with a strong narrative element in the first scene or don't even bother. So let the narrative begin. In terms of tradition, I come from a long line of teachers, so there may well be something in Collins DNA that plays a part in all of this—my father was a teacher, and five of his siblings have taught at one time or another during of their careers. My grandfather was a teacher and superintendent of schools in northern Iowa during the Great Depression, and his mother was a teacher. My oldest daughter has just begun her career as a fourth-grade teacher in New York. But it's more than the teaching genes that brought me here, because that grandfather was also a militant member of Notre Dame's Subway Alumni, and for him, there was only one university that represented the very pinnacle of higher education. I invoke his spirit today, because my career as a teacher at this university is directly linked to him. He was, of course, delighted when I told him I'd been interviewed for the job and that things looked good—but I had to wait for the official letter of offer from Father Hesburgh. I have to admit that while I was happy to give him the news, I was a bit worried about fulfilling some kind of family destiny since I was fresh out of graduate school at the time, and I was terribly sophisticated intellectually, having studied critical theory in Paris, no less. So I was pleased that my family was so thrilled, but I was more than a little ambivalent about the Notre Dame mystique which I found far too sentimental.

But then my life suddenly turned into a lost John Ford film, a mash-up of *The Quiet Man*, *Knute Rockne: All-American*, and *The Last Hurrah*. When I was waiting to get my letter of offer, my grandfather began to slip away. It became obvious that he had only a few days left, but on his deathbed, he kept asking whether I'd gotten the letter from Notre Dame yet. I was told by my parents not to call home when the letter arrived—I was to call the hospital back in Iowa immediately, because everyone who was taking turns at my grandfather's bedside had been duly prepared for my call. Since he could have passed away at any moment, I suggested to my father that I call my grandfather and just tell him I'd gotten the letter since it was virtually a done deal. But my father vetoed

that idea—don't make the call until you have the letter in your hand; that's how he'd want it. So the ordeal began, with frantic calls from my family back in Iowa each day, asking if the letter had arrived, accompanied by increasingly dire reports about my grandfather's condition. I remember vividly the moment when my career at Notre Dame started, because I was playing with my three-year-old daughter in the front yard. I took the mail from the postman, saw the return address I'd been waiting for, grabbed her under my arm, and ran for house praying I'd be in time to deliver the news. My aunt answered the phone and immediately put the phone up his ear so I could give him the good news. He congratulated me in a very frail voice and told me how much it meant to him. He slipped in and out of consciousness until he passed away the next day, but I was told by relatives that whenever he did come to the surface, he'd smile and tell whoever was with him that "Jim got the job at Notre Dame."

It was a classic Hollywood ending, but it came with an enormous burden—How could I ever live up to those expectations? How could I ever become the sort of success as a teacher at Notre Dame that he expected me to be someday? Answering that question proved particularly daunting at first, because when I arrived on campus a few months later in the fall of 1985, I encountered a faculty that was deeply divided about what it meant to be an outstanding professor at this university. There were the young turks of my generation who were publishing like fiends and the old guard for whom classroom teaching was the only priority. I remember meeting a senior colleague from another department who told me flat out, "Oh, yes. I understand you publish a great deal. You mustn't care very much about your teaching." Dire predictions were being made about the future—25 years from now, we may be a major research university, but we'll have lost forever what really sets us apart—inspiring classroom teaching. I could say that, like the vast majority of professors at this university, I tried hard to do both—that I did my research and devoted an enormous amount of energy to my teaching, which was continually enriched by that research. But I also decided to do my research on teaching. One of the most satisfying student evaluations I ever received said my classes were like intellectual conversations that were so absorbing you couldn't imagine *not* taking part in the exchange of ideas. So I how could make those conversations ever more engaging?

Listening closely to my students and designing courses that responded to their questions and concerns about living in a digital culture was a huge part of it. I take the culture that surrounds them seriously, and I give them a chance to investigate how the media they encounter on a daily basis might entertain them, but it also shapes their identity. But I also wanted to learn more about how they analyzed films before they came into my classes and how they would be thinking about films long after they left those classes. And what were they learning about visual media in their other classes at Notre Dame?

This meant doing some fieldwork, so I actively sought out other teaching opportunities that would allow me to engage other kinds of conversations. I taught a seminar for the *Teachers as Scholars* program, a Notre Dame initiative designed to bring our faculty together with teachers from the local public and Catholic schools, so I could learn more about how my students were being taught to read books and films before we encountered each other. I also taught in the *Summer Scholars* program, intended for college-bound high school juniors, in order to get a sense of why they planned to major in film or theatre. But if I wanted to inspire my students to be lifelong learners, what sort of

films would they want to watch closely and argue about passionately years after they left my classroom? In order to answer that question, I began teaching a film course for the Memorial Hospital Humanities Project. I had a pretty good idea of how to make films compelling to 20 year olds, but listening to doctors who are 30, 40, and even 50 years their senior talk about films—and make them a vital part of their life of the mind—gave me tremendous insight into what this lifelong learning business might look like. I've also taught intensive summer seminars for Notre Dame faculty who wanted to incorporate films and new media into their classes but hesitated to do so since they lacked the formal training in visual culture. These seminars have, apparently, proved quite useful for my faculty students who felt empowered to explore film as a way of knowing and not just a sidebar illustration. I gave them a sense of how to read films critically using a variety of different approaches, but in the process, I learned from them how films can become crucially important in political science, anthropology, history, theology, and philosophy. Learning how films could resonate so powerfully in other disciplines took me outside the box of my own discipline as I engaged in exhilarating conversations with colleagues like Louis Mackenzie, Remie Constable, Kevin Dryer, Lionel Jensen, Cathy Kaveny, Maria Tomasula, Michael and Catherine Zukert, John Sitter, Sylvia Lyn, and Joanne Mack to name only a few of the more than 70 faculty members who have taken part in these seminars.

All of these other teaching experiences gave me insights I would have never otherwise acquired if I hadn't tried to enrich the conversation I have with my undergraduates. They made me a better teacher because, quite simply, I became a better learner. Being a student of teaching means you have to remain constantly open to how other teachers practice their crafts. One of the most important things I've learned about teaching is how to make what seems to be simple far more complicated than it might appear, but also how to take what seems overwhelmingly complex and show how simple it can be if you ask the right questions. I saw my most vivid example of how a master teacher handles the delicate interplay between simplicity and complexity while I was watching my wife, Stephanie Bevacqua, teach her kindergarten class at ECDC about architecture. She began by talking about circles and rectangles and how you could build with them. Within minutes, her students were engaged in making their own models of the Guggenheim Museum with their blocks. One of the students turned to me at one point and said with all due gravity, "It's how you stack the circles." I knew somewhere Frank Lloyd Wright was chuckling with utter delight—these six year olds had grasped the premises of his form-vocabulary perfectly and were inspired to create their own structures. Depending on how you looked at, the Guggenheim was one of the most sophisticated architectural masterpieces of the 20th century—or it was an amazing stack of circles with some cool rectangles on the side.

Most of the famous quotes about the art of teaching leave me cold, except for one, and it came from someone we don't think of as an educator, at least not in the traditional sense. Gandhi summed up in one eloquent sentence the teaching philosophy I've spent years trying to enact: "Live as if you were to die tomorrow, learn as if you were to live forever." If we imagine ourselves learning forever, the tensions between storied traditions and cutting edges begin to soften. Yes, one could say that my commitment to teaching is solidly within the tradition of old Notre Dame, but in my classes, my students and I grapple with the questions concerning the future of learning when total information

access is allegedly only a few keystrokes away. When we talk about iPads and digital readers, we ponder what it will mean to be able to take our libraries with us wherever we go. How will that kind of portability change how we make culture our own? How does that *access* to the *excess* change our notions of self and other? How has it changed what we think of globality? And as we all become curators of our own digital archives, how does that change our understanding of who gets to be a cultural authority? And why does that question lead inexorably to another even more pressing question: What can I offer my students in terms of knowledge that Google can't? What can I do in a classroom that remains a superior way of learning, even though it might be far more labor intensive to pursue? Those questions may be at the cutting edge of the new humanities, but I'm convinced that we can hope to answer them effectively only by engaging in rigorous intellectual conversations with our students that will generate ways of knowing that they can't get elsewhere—in classrooms that are set solidly at the intersection of global information access and timeless notions of intellectual exchange.

So to return to my grandfather's story, I believe that the best way for me to try to fulfill his expectations, and honor his vision of Notre Dame, is to keep refining my craft as teacher by wrestling with questions that were unimaginable 25 years ago. The Sheedy Award celebrates more than the vestiges of a tradition of inspiring classroom teaching that was a central part of old Notre Dame. That tradition should indeed be remembered, but it will remain vitally alive only if this University continues addressing the pedagogical challenges of the 21st century. The image of Notre Dame as the shining city on the hill for Irish-Americans, Italian-Americans, Polish-Americans and now Latino-Americans obviously resonates very powerfully for me, because I'm a product of two of those immigrant populations. I honor that tradition only if I do everything within my power as a teacher and scholar to continually reinvent what Notre Dame will be for the students who will continue to come to us looking for an education they will find nowhere else. You do me a very great honor by acknowledging those efforts. I will never receive any recognition that will be mean more to me. Thank you.