

Education in a Consumer Society

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If those who can't do, teach, then maybe those who can't teach, teach the arts at good universities. The really hard teaching is done in grade schools and middle schools, where a good teacher is worth a king's (or, more often, a queen's) ransom. My job is easier. I have *The Prince or King Lear* or *The Discourse on Method* or *Paradise Lost* or *Pride and Prejudice* on one side, and bright and motivated students on the other. As long as I can stay out of the way, something good is bound to happen. I've rarely, while teaching, thought of myself as a good teacher. Each term, I'd tell my wife, things were going wrong: this class is not going well, this group of students is not learning. Nancy never believed me. If she were here, as I dearly wish that she were, she'd be saying "I told you so."

Deserving or not, I am deeply grateful for the honor of the Sheedy Award. I am proud of my scholarly writings on Milton and the Renaissance, and the response to my writing has been all I could have wished it to be, but one publishes or speaks at conferences several times a year at most. Teaching, on the other hand, is my daily work, and it's where I find my deepest satisfaction. My sense of the honor is increased by my good fortune in sharing the award with a truly excellent teacher, Bill Miscamble. The last time I shared a raised platform with Bill was almost eleven years ago, when he baptized my youngest child.

Many welcome things come with this award. Who wouldn't wish to be associated with the award's past winners, or with the teacher for whom it is named? I don't mind having my name on a plaque outside the dean's office. I'll put the award on my résumé. But I welcome most my fifteen minutes in the bully pulpit, from which I can share my thoughts on education in a consumer society. If this sounds like a bad deal on your end, you can console yourself with the thought that I'd have been able to harangue you for twice as long were I not sharing the award with Bill.

I've long found, in fact since my own undergraduate days, an apt epigraph for the undergraduate experience in the first two lines of Keat's extraordinary sonnet on Chapman's Homer (see end): "Much have I traveled in the realms of gold, / And many goodly states and kingdoms seen." In this poem Keats, in the early nineteenth century, records the effect of reading George Chapman's translation, from two centuries before, of the *Odyssey*, another twenty five centuries farther in the past. The older poems are renewed and recreated as Keats, like Odysseus, explores unknown territory. A simile combines the old and the new, the maritime and the cosmological: "Then felt I like some

watcher of the skies / When a new planet swims into his ken.” The keynote here is wonder. Keats experienced wonder by surrendering to great works from the past, and he learned to express wonder from the same books and from other books, notably Shakespeare’s *Tempest* and *The Winter’s Tale* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.

I was around twenty when I first read Keats’ sonnet, about the same age as Keats when he wrote it. From Keats I learned the value of surrendering myself to teachers far better and far more accomplished than I could hope to be. In my teaching and scholarship since, I’ve seen my role as helping students see the wonder of well-wrought texts. My role is secondary. In my scholarship I attempt to articulate the still undiscovered art of older texts, and thus to release their wonder. If it’s true, as some say, that postmodern criticism errs on the side of placing critic above author, that’s one of the few pitfalls into which I have not stumbled. I can be, as my students know, a critical reader. Homer sometimes nods, as do Shakespeare and Milton. But for nearly a quarter of a century I’ve seldom been disappointed in following my intuitions of the hidden art of even the most oft-dissected works. As a teacher, I want my students to experience, as I experienced, the undergraduate years as a heady exploration of the ever-expanding universe of human genius. The realms of gold.

Of course there is gold and there is gold. We live in a time that, like most times, values material gold. In sending me to Princeton, as a considerable cost in gold, my parents put me in a position to join the social and economic elite. The favored career tracks were law and medicine, which promised wealth and status. High scores on LSATS and MCATS were golden tickets.

But increasingly in recent years, unless I am succumbing to nostalgia, as fees have soared and as job prospects have dimmed, university culture has been infiltrated by consumerist language. Students are paying customers, with a right to be given what they want, whether it be relevance, attention to saleable skills, or higher grades. As one with three children, the oldest of whom will be choosing a college in two years, I understand why students and their families might want, or demand, these things. But do students know what they should want?

My experience of college, as I suggested above, was discovering vast worlds that I had not imagined before. New planets kept swimming into my ken. If I’d had my eye on courses tailored to future employment, I might have missed all this.

If in a consumer society the customer is always right, in a liberal arts education customers are sometimes wrong. And the art of teaching can lie in not giving them what they want. I would never have embarked on an immensely satisfying career as a scholar of Renaissance poetry if Princeton had not made me take older literature along with the modern literature that was all the literature I wanted to study. I’d hold my breath, take the Chaucer to Pope survey required of majors, and then get back to the nineteenth and twentieth-century novel, where I belonged. A funny thing happened on the way to E. M. Forster, as my Chaucer to Pope teacher, Bob Wickenheiser, a young Milton scholar who is now president of St. Bonaventure University, got my attention long enough for me to

see the seventeenth century. I haven't looked back (or forward?) since. This teacher had the wisdom to pass me along, for my junior and senior independent work, to Tom Roche, a senior Renaissance scholar, and friend of Notre Dame, who continued to be a mentor through my grad school years in Charlottesville and my early years here.

My best teachers in college and even high school helped me to discover something counterintuitive, something few customers think to ask for, something that might be called, taking Yeats out of context, "the fascination of what's difficult." Brother Charlie Hodulik, teaching us high school calculus, resolutely refused to tell us what it was for. He wanted us to see its internal beauty, which, after several months of struggle, we did. Paulina in Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale* tells Leontes what my teachers implicitly told me, and what I tell my students, "It is required you do awake your faith." Faith that the effort given to reading great works and asking hard questions will be repaid tenfold.

In college, I was most drawn to works that required effort. I developed a taste for Kierkegaard, one I've been able to indulge in PLS's senior Great Books seminar. I learned to set myself difficult topics for papers, so that they would hold my attention. I wrote more than one paper with a negative result, unable to establish what I hypothesized.

I was drawn to the arts in general because of difficulty. Always strong in mathematics and science, I found the humanities more difficult. In the former, at least at the level one studies them in high school and college, one can with enough work find the answers and be sure of them. But how can one be sure of an answer to the questions posed in the humanities: Is the *Aeneid* a work of propaganda? How does Vermeer's Catholicism appear on his canvases? What is the central cause of the French Revolution?

To answer any of these questions, even provisionally, is to stretch oneself. My last teacher, the extraordinary scholar William Kerrigan, with whom I am now editing Milton's poetry and prose, exhorted us tirelessly to "ask the hard questions." Life is too short for the easy ones. Don't look to find in works of genius what you expect to find, what you've found before, what fits comfortably within your ken.

To find answers to hard questions, indeed to find the hard questions in the first place, one must do more than reduce a teacher's lectures into notes and return them to the teacher in blue books. Teachers, I am increasingly convinced, should not give answers. To withhold answers is another exercise in frustrating our customers' understandable but counterproductive wishes. It's easy to give answers: it burnishes the armor of authority that students admire and teachers find so comforting to wear. But our answers might be wrong, and even our right answers are not as valuable to the student as his or her own hard-won answers.

For this kind of teaching, which I learned first in English departments, I've found a perfect setting in the Program of Liberal Studies. Even when teaching Shakespeare or Marvell or Milton or Dickinson or Stevens as an "expert" in PLS literature classes, I teach by discussion, asking my questions and teasing out from students their own. In the

Great Books seminars I have the luxury of leading discussions of works in which I am not expert, or, if I have expertise, leaving it at the door. Whatever authority I have in the seminar room comes from my knowledge of the text, and my ability to direct students to passages that support, complement, or call into question nascent interpretations. It's easy to say, "Interesting point, Mike, but in the seventeenth century it would not have been read that way." It's more difficult to be ready to say, "Interesting point, Margaret, but how does that square with the last paragraph on page 286?" The Program at its best is a school for teachers as well as students; it's not surprising, perhaps, that three of my senior colleagues have won the Sheedy Award.

Of course, some or even most students want answers from their professors, and it takes work and patience to move them to the point where they want not answers but guidance in learning how to find answers, and questions, for themselves. In the end, they are happier for the temporary frustration. The willingness to frustrate expectations, the consumer's desire for so much knowledge for the time or money spent, is one key to a liberating education. If you don't stretch students, they will not learn to learn for themselves. If you want to get me started, tell me that teachers should adapt teaching methods to "where students are." Students are visual learners, some say, so give them video and images. But some things, many things, many immensely valuable things, can't be domesticated in images. Sesame Street, I'm not the first to suggest, may have been counterproductive, in buying short term memorization gains at the steep price of reinforcing short attention spans. I'm something of a Luddite, having resisted encouragement to use the multimedia arsenal of DeBartolo and having missed the demonstrations of PowerPoint to which countless brochures invite us. Slow down and read. And read for yourselves. If there is anything valuable to be learned from my classes (and I am realistic enough to see this as more than a rhetorical question), it will not be reducible to bullet points. It will be a way of reading, a habit of asking certain kinds of questions of texts, a deep interest in philosophical and theological contexts of aesthetic works, an interest nearly as deep in the aesthetic power of many of those "non-literary" works themselves.

It's gratifying of course to do well on TCE's, even if the TCE is an imperfect instrument at best. It's more gratifying, of course, to be singled out for such an award as the Sheedy. But it's most gratifying to have the experiences that we have all had, of a letter from a student telling us that our class was the one that inspired her to pursue the intellectual life, of a conversation with a student who tells us that he hadn't expected to find much in a required course, but for whom poetry was now a passion. Students, I've found, rise to the challenge, whether it be of difficult reading, difficult papers, difficult grading even. And PLS students, having chosen what can only seem the most unmarketable of majors, are cut from rare and wonderful cloth.

To work with students like this keeps one young, and it keeps one humble. Early in my time here I spent an hour after class with a sophomore who tried out on me a reading of Aquinas on law. No, I thought and said, you're missing the crucial point. We went back and forth, over and around and through the text, until, fifty minutes in, the scales fell from my eyes. He was right; I was wrong. If the student had been trained to take his

answers from professors, then I'd have been left in ignorance and I would have missed a valuable lesson.

I want to end with a few observations on what has become for me an exercise in humility. For three years now, Clark Power and I have run a series of one-credit Great Books seminars through South Bend's Center for the Homeless. We had batted around the idea for several years, until my wife called our bluff: "are you two going to do it or are you going to just keep talking about it?" (We are academics, so of course we were inclined to just keep talking about it.) Shamed by Nancy's straightforward question, and by the Program's students' extraordinary record of service, we found ourselves a week later in the office of Lou Nanni, then director of the Center and a PLS alumnus, who believed with us that guests at the Center could read with pleasure and profit works by such authors as Homer and Shakespeare, Augustine and Frederick Douglass, Darwin and Freud, Emily Dickinson and Wallace Stevens, Melville and Mahfouz. We have been overwhelmed by the response. The students are hungry for learning. They have embodied the imperative of Confucius: "Learn as if you were following someone whom you could not catch up, as though it were someone you were frightened of losing" (Analects 8:17). They've asked for longer classes and harder questions. They come to class with stories of heated debates in Center dormitories over Socrates' innocence or guilt and with dog-eared and heavily marked texts (texts we had given them brand-new the week before).

We've learned things about texts we've taught countless times. Tragedy and comedy look different to someone who's been on the bottom, for whom homelessness is more than a metaphor. And any private fears that our own commitment to the arts might be only the delusive pastime of a leisured class have been dispelled by the ferocity of our students' response. When a reporter asked the class if they might have been better served by a vocational training course, one replied that "man does not live by bread alone." Another student observed, "When you come out of the fog of addiction, you thirst for knowledge. For twenty years, I never had a goal beyond where my next glass of vodka was coming from. When Socrates talks about the pleasures of knowledge, I know exactly what he means." The students we've met through the Center have been the fiercest and most eloquent champions for the vision of liberal education I've advocated today. We've seen again and again the kind of reaction recorded by Emily Dickinson, who recalled her excited response to the first book that she devoured: "Then this is a book! And there are more of them!" We've had success stories, the kind we, in our social action dreams, had hoped would be typical, but we've had tragic stories as well. If some students have gone on to more confident and productive lives, others have relapsed into addiction or returned to prison. But the learning is worthwhile for itself, for the pleasure of reading good books together, for the give and take of discussion, for the chance to put aside distractions and material differences and join in the great conversation. Clark and I have found in the course a tonic and an inspiration that we are loath to give up. In the students we have found the love of learning that we had thought we would model for them.

It is to that love of learning, not only of the books read but of the process of question and answer, of the romance of trial and error, and of the human beings with whom I share this

adventure, that I owe whatever success I've had as a teacher. To live in this atmosphere, to "breathe" as Keats put it in his sonnet "that pure serene," is a great gift, and a constant reminder of how much one has to learn and how far short one's teaching falls. Thank you.

Much have I traveled in the realms of gold,
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have I been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
That deep-browed Homer ruled as his demesne;
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He stared at the Pacific—and all his men
Looked at each other with a wild surmise—
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.