

Sheedy Teaching Award*October 11, 2002*

Good afternoon faculty and friends,

My name is Chris Broughton; I am a junior from Siegfried Hall studying Economics and Psychology. I am also one of the fortunate few students that had the opportunity to share in the CORE course experience with Andy last year. I see myself here today as merely the spokesman for the learning community we constructed in CORE last year, which we refer to as the “the campfire” and which is also how I will describe it today. But before I begin, I must confess to you all that anything shared in these brief reflections can, in some way or another, be attributed to my interactions with the other members of the campfire (some of which are present here today). In fact, so as to stay true to the spirit of the campfire, I took time out to interview a few of them, one on one, before putting together my own thoughts to hopefully present you all with a more collective, complete perspective on what makes “the campfire” pedagogy so unique.

So WHY ARE YOU HERE? Why are you here today, at this time, with these people, in this place? This is the question that I, and every other single member of the campfire, was asked on the first day of CORE class. Though seemingly trivial to me at first, that one question served to establish the challenge for the entire year, namely, to continually question how we think, act, and feel about the world, others, and, maybe most importantly, ourselves. From that day on, the questioning never stopped and over the course of last year, all this questioning led me to make a few discoveries of my own, three of which I’d like to share with you today. First, I became aware of my tendency to make false dichotomies of my life experiences. For instance, my compulsion to moralize everything, to reduce the matter to being either good or bad, became alarmingly obvious to me. The second insight that emerged as the year progressed was the power of language. I came to the realization that one’s use of gendered language does, in fact, implicitly influence how one views

and thinks about the world. Thirdly, I came to appreciate the tremendous impact culture has had on constructing my view of the world.

Each of these personal discoveries emerged as a direct byproduct of the unique learning dynamic that took place around the campfire every Tuesday and Thursday, at 12:30PM, in the basement of Zahm Hall. We would gather as a community in a circle to create a place where we could cultivate truth together. Each class was its own unique journey and took its own course. One of my fellow campfire members described CORE as the most causal and comfortable class she had ever taken, but also the most demanding class as well in terms of the analytical and critical thinking required. For me, the challenges came as much from the shared stories of others around the campfire as they did from within my own self.

One of most meaningful truths I learned from my campfire conversations in CORE was that everyone's perspectives have merit and can shed light on different aspects of the truth. No one ever has the perfect, completely "right" answer to any of life's big questions. While it may be true that our life experiences are for the most part individualized and unique, I learned that it can also be true that our collective exchange of experiences can converge on similar conclusions. Yet, at other times, our experiences lead us in totally opposite directions with conflicting conclusions. No matter the outcome of the conversation, the underlying principle of respect was a constant. The principle of respect for one another and each other's ideas guided and grounded all that took place around the campfire. To borrow the words of a man more eloquent than I—Colman McCarthy—"Although we did always see eye to eye, we still could talk heart to heart." Disagreements arose on every topic we discussed. But all the moments of disagreement made the magic of the campfire shine through all the more clearly through open, sincere conversation. It was only by routinely disagreeing with others that I was able to learn how to be fully present to them by listening.

Andy alluded to the disconnectedness that exists between students and their professors, and I would argue, between class in general and everyday life. I feel we overcame this sense of disconnection around the campfire through our shared sense of intentional community. Everyday life was integrated into class by allocating time for housekeeping issues at the start of each class. That is, structuring time to discuss anything from outside class that might be germane to the campfire. Though usually a short amount of time, housekeeping was key to bridging the gap between everyday life and academics.

Having the rare freedom to either engage or disengage personal experiences with critical thought in a community like the campfire fostered a unique relationship with everyone around the campfire, a relationship built on a shared sense of community and collaborative truth. It is these relationships and the knowledge they instilled in me that I treasure most. Our relationship doesn't fit very well within the domain of any relationship I can think of—we aren't as close as family or good friends, but we are much more than just acquaintances and classmates to one another. Maybe it's that the campfire pedagogy fosters relationships that reside in a realm all of their own that defies description.

In closing, the campfire gave me my first real taste of what a truly liberal education is all about—that is, learning how to start asking the right questions. It taught me how to rethink my perspectives, reevaluate my assumptions, and better articulate my thoughts to others. It taught me to love learning for its own sake. It taught me that learning doesn't require hard and fast answers, but rather only that we seek out trusted companions to help us discover them along the way.

Thank you for your time.