

Sheedy Award Talk
Christian Moevs
September 7, 2006

It's special to be introduced by Bill Ramsey. He doesn't know it, but he's been an inspiration and model for me in these years. I'd hear accounts of his legendary performances in the classroom and think, "I'd love to be able to do that." I was thrilled when he won the Sheedy. But also a little cowed. I thought, "Now that's a bit much. I can't follow you there!" Now I find myself here, and I think of the dozens of teachers at Notre Dame I could name instantly who are deserving of this award.

When I was first told about this award, I was deeply moved. I was moved because I understood that this award is an emblem of the love that the University of Notre Dame has for its students. This award means that Notre Dame is celebrating teaching in itself, but it celebrates teaching because it loves and cares for its students. Teaching is for students; it is not an end in itself. I accept this award as an expression of Notre Dame's love for its students, and I dedicate it to them.

I must of course also share it with Dante. One of my main duties at Notre Dame is to teach Dante, especially the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. I sometimes think: well, with those texts, who needs me? Stones would awaken and shed tears if confronted with those texts. Then I remember a full year course on Dante's *Comedy* I had in college. At the end of it I swore I would never ever have anything to do with Dante again: I couldn't understand why anyone read such a dogmatic, allegorical, boring, stillborn text. It took a forced encounter with Dante in graduate school, years later, for me to awaken and realize that the *Comedy* was the most sublime, profound, complex, and vital text I had ever encountered, or was likely ever to encounter. So I realize now that, yes, teachers can make a difference. We can kill any text. And we can sometimes make texts come alive for students, so that the student and the text can talk to each other.

I'm a little startled to be here. I'm not sure I'm a good teacher. More than half the time, sometimes as much as three quarters of the time, I leave class thinking it was a disaster. There are different degrees of disasters: really bad disasters, moderate disasters, barely-passable disasters. Only occasionally do I feel a class went well. Every time I teach a course another time, I have to redo it or change my approach. I couldn't bear to have it go as badly as the last time. This perhaps means I'm a little insecure or neurotic. But seen positively, I suppose one could truthfully say I'm dedicated to teaching. I do take it seriously, as an enormous opportunity and responsibility that I feel I rarely live up to.

My own training in teaching in graduate school was a little rudimentary. That is to say, there was none. A week before the semester began, I was handed a textbook of first year Italian and told, "Get to Chapter 11 by Christmas." It occurs to me now maybe they were talking about bankruptcy. I was told nothing about classroom techniques, about grading, writing tests, crafting assignments, organizing a syllabus, principles of language learning. Nothing. When I think of the state of the art training we have in Italian here at Notre Dame, under the direction of Colleen Ryan-Scheutz, a training now extended to all of Romance Languages: a week-long intensive

orientation, a full semester's seminar and practicum in pedagogy and methodology, constant continuing guidance, observation, and counseling, new teachers thinking through and practicing together every dimension of teaching, learning, testing, from the most practical to the most theoretical.... I had none of that. If I did it now, I'm sure I would learn all kinds of things.

I had received only two pieces of advice about teaching, from a retiring professor, John Nelson, in my first semester in graduate school. He told me, "When you start teaching, always remember two rules: 1) never humiliate a student in front of the class; 2) always give written homework." Those are in fact excellent pieces of advice, and will get you a long way. I still follow them.

I had one other rule I had given myself: Don't bore your students. That rule was the result of twenty years of excruciating boredom in classrooms through my life. Boredom so deep I would wish I had never been born. I swore I would not do to my students what had been done to me. That is still fundamental in my approach: Whatever you do, don't bore them! Life is too short, too precious, for boredom. Boredom is a crime, a sin, a death to soul, reality, truth, life. If we are really awake to ourselves and to the world, we cannot be bored.

Of course I had had great teachers too, many great teachers through the years. The great teachers we have had inform every minute of our own teaching, of our own understanding and approach. I want to mention a few of the great teachers I have had, and something of what I learned from them, because they share in some way in this award. Teaching is a legacy of generations: my teachers, and my teachers' teachers, teach through me.

In high school I remember the unparalleled clarity, elegance, and lucidity of my pre-Calculus teacher, Doug Poyee. Everything about him was clear and transparent; he could explain anything to anybody, with perfect economy of time and words. Not a moment was wasted, but nothing was ever rushed. Even his writing on the chalkboard was breathtakingly elegant, rapid, and precise. Like Giotto, he could draw a perfect circle with one sweep of his arm. When I write on the board, I still think of him. Every important point cycled back three times in his lectures over a period of days or weeks, in different ways and forms, because of what he called the duck's back principle: if you want to get a duck wet, you can't pour water on him only once. Three times is ideal. That lesson too still lives in my teaching.

My great high school French teacher, Donald Cuccurello, made coming to French class the high point of the day. He showed me that one can be completely familiar and informal with students, on a first name basis even in high school, and still maintain full authority and respect.

In college, in my first year, a great lecture course ("Ideas of Man and World in Western Thought") co-taught by Stanley Cavell and Martha Nussbaum made me a philosophy concentrator. I learned from them how deep philosophical illumination could arise from asking the right questions of the most varied texts, from Sophocles to Hollywood films. At the most basic level, as I think Cavell once remarked, what we do in a classroom is show smart young people that smart people take these texts seriously.

I'll never forget the impact of a course taught by John Rawls on Kant's *Groundwork of the*

Metaphysic of Morals. He spent four weeks taking apart the inner structure of that work. It was a revelatory analysis: we felt he had handed us the key to the text. In the fifth week, he remarked that we had made a rough first pass at the text, and now it was time to begin to analyze it, to try to seek clarity and understanding. I thought we had just finished, and he had only just begun. That experience taught me that textual analysis is never done: one can always achieve greater clarity, lucidity, understanding. I also loved how teaching made him young, made him one of us: though in his 60s, he was like a boy in class, in his intensity and enthusiasm. Once he climbed over ten rows of seats to get to the chalkboard. That image is important to me.

My most formative experiences took place in six tutorials in philosophy, which were limited to five students each. In my sophomore year, a tutorial with Tom Ricketts on Descartes' *Meditations* terrified me. I was challenged as I had never been challenged in my life, and I pushed myself harder than I had ever done. The five of us met in his office. I remember his feet up on the coffee table, long silences, his piercing steady gaze at us over his pipe, his sardonic suggestion of a smile as he waited eternities for our halting attempts at answers. I wrote my best paper for him. It came back with pages of single-spaced typed comments, keyed by number to phrases in my text. The comments concluded, "Now in your re-write...." What I thought was polished, my best and finished product, was a first draft. The experience of that tutorial is behind every University Seminar I teach at Notre Dame. Tom Ricketts was the first professor ever to make dinner for us at his home. That dinner affected me deeply. I still invite almost all my classes home, and cook for them myself.

In a tutorial on Montaigne's *Essays*, Stanley Cavell taught me that every great literary text is a philosophical text, and every great philosophical text is a literary text. That turned out to be the key to my work, and to my teaching of literature.

The greatest intellectual experience of my life was a tutorial with Burton Dreben on J.L. Austin's "Other Minds." That essay is twenty pages long. By the end of the semester, we had thought through a page and a half (and that's because we speeded up at the end). Dreben was a legendary figure in philosophy, who wrote little (except in mathematical logic), but was cited everywhere, and had a huge impact on generations of philosophers. I learned from him what it means to do philosophy. I also learned that when it comes to serious reading, life-changing reading, less is more. At the end of the tutorial I went to see him, to tell him I'd be two days late with my paper. He told me that was fine, he would very much like to read my paper, but he had already given me a grade for the course. When I expressed some surprise, he looked at me, raised his eyebrows, and exclaimed, "My dear child, you don't think I base my grades on anything as trivial as a paper, do you?" That experience is behind a College Seminar I've taught here which required no written work at all (though lots of other work). It's also behind how I assign readings in certain courses.

In my senior year, Dreben gave a lecture course on Philosophical Analysis, his first lecture course in seven years. The room was packed with philosophers and graduate students from all over the East coast, most of Harvard's philosophy faculty, and us, the undergraduate concentrators. At the end of the second week, he asked for a volunteer to actually enroll in the course, or Harvard would have to cancel it. (In those days, Harvard would not cancel a course if even one student was enrolled in it.) The requirement was to prepare a tape and typescript of the

lectures. Much of the teaching in philosophy at Harvard was directed at other philosophers. As undergraduates we were given the extraordinary privilege of sitting in on this work, and learning how it was done, what the standards were. I used to come out of philosophy classes at Harvard trembling, literally shaking, from sheer excitement and intellectual tension, from the effort of intense concentration, and mostly from fear, from knowing I was always in over my head. I didn't understand everything, and yet it set a standard for a lifetime. I think at Notre Dame we sometimes tend to treat our students too much as advanced high school students, that we don't throw them enough terrifying challenges, adult challenges, at the very highest level. To throw them such challenges is to express our deepest respect for them, and in some cases, to change their lives, to show them what the highest standards are, to summon in them resources and strength they did not know they had.

Warren Goldfarb was the head tutor in philosophy, and directed my senior thesis on Wittgenstein. I had persisted in philosophy, even though he had told us not to concentrate in philosophy unless we knew we had to, and not to pursue honors, unless we knew we had to. The last summa in philosophy had been Saul Kripke, seven years before. Who did we think we were? Warren Goldfarb, with Tom Ricketts, became a life-long mentor and friend. I learned then that to be a true teacher once, means to be mentor and friend as needed for a lifetime. It means to be ready to offer guidance and perspective both in and out of class, on texts and on life. If our work in the classroom is real, the two are not quite separable.

In graduate school, at Columbia, a school I dearly love, I appreciated being treated as an adult, and being given the responsibility for my own learning. To the older faculty, I was always Mr. Moevs. No one held your hand at Columbia.

I'll mention just one of my great teachers at Columbia. My beloved adviser and dissertation director, Teodolinda Barolini, shaped me in very deep ways. I saw that we loved her so much, because she loved us, and gave everything of herself. Not that she wasn't demanding, terrifying sometimes. She could correct us in the sternest ways. I had worked a year on my dissertation, and had given her the first two chapters. A week later, she handed me a three page typewritten letter in a sealed envelope. That letter said lots of things, but the gist was that in her estimation, I had done nothing worthwhile, and that if I continued on the tack I had taken, Columbia would no longer support my education. It was a complete demolition. A few weeks later, she invited me to lunch, and told me what she thought the real germ of my interest in Dante was: the central concept that concerned me. In a few minutes, with one sentence, she brought into focus everything I had struggled with for a year, and set me on the path that would become my first book. Teo made me a dantist and scholar, to whatever extent I am those things. Teo is always in the background of my teaching, my sense of what teachers are and do. They tear down shanty towns, faulty structures, they clear the ground, they help students build anew, on strong foundations.

All these teachers, all these experiences, were behind me when I walked into my own classroom for the first time, to stand in front of a class. On my first day as a teacher I felt the greatest terror I have ever experienced. Fear that entered my bone marrow. You walk into the classroom, and it falls silent. Twenty pairs of human eyes, full of light and intelligence, fixed on you, waiting. It's all up to you.

That's the day I discovered the awesome responsibility of teaching: to monopolize human time and attention for an hour and fifteen minutes, times twenty, for twenty human beings. I discovered that teaching is a sacred trust, a sacred responsibility. You can't squander human time, human awareness. It is a priceless treasure.

But I began to discover too the generosity and love in those eyes. In a human being, generosity and love is one with consciousness, with awareness. I began to learn how much students will give, how much they will give of themselves, how they will respond, come towards you, if you step towards them.

Any success of any teacher depends on that light, love, generosity in our students. I learned then that the key to all teaching is: You must love your students with a deep, self-giving love. There is a famous phrase in Dante, about how no one loved can escape from loving in return. That is not actually true with sensual love. It is true with selfless, self-giving love. That love is the bond, the link of communication, through which real teaching and learning happen.

Later, when I came to Notre Dame, I went to all the workshops of the Kaneb Center for Teaching and Learning. The Kaneb is a wonderful institution. I learned all kinds of useful techniques, ideas, methods, tips, theory, that I use all the time. But I remember thinking: the key to it all can't be taught. It is love. You must love your students. You must see the divine light and love reflected in them, and respond with the highest in yourself, give the highest in yourself.

Even on a practical level, it works: If you love your students, you will not waste their time and attention. If you love them, you will not bore them. If you love them, you will be attentive, sensitive to what they need, to what isn't working. They will correct you day by day, and teach you how to teach them.

I mention not wasting class time, as part of loving your students. That is very important to me. I calculated once, with tuition and fees at \$30,000 a year: that's \$15,000 per semester. With five courses of thirty contact hours each in a semester; students have 150 hours of class time per semester. That's \$100 per hour of class time that students or their parents are paying. I think sometimes: Was that last hour of class worth \$100? Would I pay that? \$100 per hour is what lawyers charge, or doctors. Doctors help bodies grow in health to full potential, and fix physical maladies. We're supposed to do that with the human intellect, to make it grow clear, strong, lucid, sharp, broad, free of distortions, with open horizons, limitless horizons.

If there's a key to my own teaching, it's Wittgenstein's great phrase, that his aim was to prevent understanding that is unaccompanied by inner change. That is the motto of my teaching. We read these texts because they see into life, into God, into the world, into us, more deeply than we do. They set a challenge to us. To meet that challenge is to grow, to change. I always say this to students, at the beginning of every course: If we're not different, if we have not changed, as a result of reading these texts, let's all just go home. We're wasting our time. Human life, human time, is too sacred to waste.

More precisely, one could say, with Wittgenstein again, and with Dante, that understanding can come only through moral perfection. To grow in understanding is to grow in love, in selflessness, in self-sacrifice. So love is not only the key to teaching, it is really the subject, the substance of teaching: it is what is taught. It is only the contact with the foundational love that gives being to all things, that can permanently change us, change our behavior. That contact alone can address the causes, instead of just the symptoms, of the world's problems.

What is a human being? A great concentration, embodiment, reflection, of divine light and love. Sometimes disguised a little, in a slouchy form, with a baseball cap on backwards. Yet it is really divine light, the spark of divine awareness, the light of the world, that is reflected in our students' eyes. The love that moves the sun and other stars, as Dante says. There is no greater treasure.

Everyone is on a path from God, to God, in God, whether or not we are aware of it. There are advantages to being aware of it, ever more deeply aware of it. True education is an ever deeper awareness of the immanence of the divine in oneself, in others, in all things. My real job as a teacher is to live in that awareness, and to foster it in my students. Only that can change me, change them, and thus change the world.

As my students know, I am passionate about my discipline: about Italian literature and language in particular, and about human culture in general: poetry, philosophy, history, art, music, architecture, etc... Though they are my trade and I love them passionately, ideas, concepts, words, images, culture are still of only relative interest to me. In themselves they are dead ends, they are stillborn.

At my first Opening Mass, the year I came to Notre Dame, the provost, then Tim O'Meara, said, "Here at Notre Dame we believe that the search for truth in any discipline is ultimately a quest for the vision of God." The sentence moved me to tears. Those were not just words for me. They expressed a certainty I felt to the core of my being: the true goal is the vision of God; nothing else is an end in itself. No discipline, no inquiry, no concept, no idea, no other goal, is an end in itself, no matter how wonderful, important, beautiful, interesting it is. To put it simply: the beauty and truth embodied in things does not depend on things.

This is a radical proposition, at the center of revelation, of the Gospel, of Christian life. If we believe Tim O'Meara's sentence about Notre Dame, it has some implications, some consequences for us as teachers and scholars. Let me make four reflections related to that sentence.

1) Doing is not an end in itself. I think we sometimes forget, in our frenzied lives here, the sacred spiritual truth that doing can add nothing to being. At most doing can manifest in ephemeral space and time a glimmer of the infinite actuality of being. And then only to the extent that doing arises consciously from being, in awareness of being. Doing that is not rooted in being will not produce any lasting benefit to the world. Indeed it is often monumentally destructive instead.

2) We might say: yes, we work frenetically without pause, but our work is all dedicated to God. Here we must stop and be honest. We cannot dedicate some task to God, even a most worthy task like building a greater Notre Dame, or knowledge in our field, if we care more about Notre Dame or our field than we do about God. You can't dedicate what comes first in your life to what comes second. What you dedicate things to must come first, in your thought, your motivation, your desire, your love, perhaps even your time. If we live more for Notre Dame and knowledge than for God, we will have nothing lasting to give to the world.

3) I think we need to remind ourselves, in our own quest to achieve great things, to build an ever greater Notre Dame, of another fundamental spiritual truth: ambition of any kind is incompatible with any true spiritual life. The way of the Cross is the antithesis of ambition:

Bear all and do nothing;
Hear all and say nothing;
Give all and take nothing;
Serve all and be nothing.

The contrary of ambition is not passivity: if we think the way of the Cross is passive, we have not tried it. Those who love God work from the other direction: they give everything of themselves, they do the task God gave them to do to the greatest perfection possible, striving to their limit, because they seek nothing from it, no worldly recognition or reward of any kind. It is an offering of themselves; of all of themselves, for God, in God. If we live that way, great advances in knowledge, and glory for Notre Dame, will come of themselves as a corollary.

4) We cannot give what we have not received. St. Francis required his monks to spend a month in solitary contemplation (at the Eremo delle Carceri near San Damiano) for every month they worked in the world. Otherwise, he said, they would have nothing to give to the world. Note that he did not count preaching, catechism, moral instruction, in themselves as things to give to the world. The more we are aware of the infinity of silence and truth and love at the center of our being, that creates us and sustains us, the more we will have to give. I see it sometimes as living near the shore of the ocean, and immersing oneself in it frequently, and keeping a pot of that water at hand, to give to visitors.

The Latin *educo, educare* means to lead out, to draw forth. We lead out the latent infinity and freedom of the human being. We lead out the innate human, and divine, qualities of truth, love, peace, selflessness, and non-violence that are at the core of our being. We draw forth awareness, being, and love, and bring it to consciousness of itself.

So what do we do with the light shining at us in 20 pairs of human eyes, all fixed on us in expectation? We awaken to that divine light and love in ourselves, and then we awaken that divine light and love to itself in them. That is the true purpose for which we are born. The rest, no matter how important, is all secondary. There is no path to this awakening that does not go through the Cross: through selflessness, self-giving, self-sacrifice. We grow as teachers as we grow in selfless divine love, in awareness, in inner stillness, in surrender.

I tell students about this sacred goal of a true education. I tell them not to use their college degrees as a begging bowl, only to seek money and a job. That is not the purpose for which they were born. I ask them not to sell themselves short. Let's not scrape for coins in the dust when the treasury is open behind us. Let's plunder the treasury and give with open hands. Let's live on the shore of the ocean, and give water to all who ask.

Stanley Cavell came here a few years ago to give a talk. Afterwards I went up to him to tell him he had been my teacher, and how his teaching had shaped my life. He looked into my eyes and smiled. Then he said, "And what do you do now?" I said, "I teach Dante, here." He beamed with an expansive joy, and opened his arms, and he said, "To teach Dante in a great university. What a wonderful life!"

It is indeed a wonderful life.

Thank you.