

Sheedy Speech  
December 7, 2022

Thanks, everyone, for being here this afternoon. It's the end of the semester; there's a crush of work to get done; and it's cold and gray outside, one of those days it would have been pleasant to stay home with a warm cup of tea. I confess I wondered whether anyone outside my immediate family would actually show up today. Thank heavens for the open bar.

But I'm humbled, I'm honored, and I'm more than a little surprised to have received this award. I'm *humbled* to stand before you, my Notre Dame colleagues. If every one of you pointed to the person sitting next to you and said, "This person deserves a Sheedy Award," you'd probably be right. I'm *honored*, almost unfathomably so, to join the ranks of previous Sheedy awardees, including my colleagues and friends in the English Department who have been so honored, John Sitter, Valerie Sayers, Steve Fallon, Bill Krier, and Sonia Gernes, to name but a few. And I'm *surprised*—the better word might be stunned—to have been given this honor.

The Sheedy Award honors an outstanding teacher in the College of Arts and Letters. I don't consider myself an outstanding teacher. On my good days, I'm a good teacher. I have many faults as a teacher. I'm disorganized. I take too long to return student papers. I'm disorganized—wait, I just said that. Clearly, this is not an award for the well-organized.

My merits and demerits aside, one of the truly wonderful aspects of an occasion like this is the opportunity it provides one to publicly thank at least some of the people who have made the moment possible. With your indulgence, I'm going to spend the next few minutes doing that.

First, thanks to everyone on the Sheedy Award committee for your work in reviewing what I am sure was an overflowing portfolio of deserving awardees.

To each person who took the time to write a letter in my behalf, that is a debt I will never be able to repay but one I never will forget. Thank you.

Thank you, Dean Sarah Mustillo and Dean Mary Flannery for continuing to honor the work of teaching by supporting the Sheedy Award. (And thank you, Sarah, for quickly assuring me, when I responded to your message saying, “Call me,” that I wasn’t in trouble, which is what I assumed.)

A few more. I must thank my family—my sons Sean and Devin, and my best friend and spouse, Katheen Opel. Nothing possible, nothing meaningful, without you.

I must thank my students. Thank you for your passion, your curiosity, your seemingly boundless goodwill. Thank you for everything you have taught me over the years. If any of you watching this speech, now or in the future, have ever had the occasion to wonder if you, personally, mattered to me—you did. You did.

I must thank the late James Kinnier, high school history teacher, Archbishop Molloy High School, Queens, New York. I was an aimless high school sophomore when I had the good fortune to be enrolled in Mr. Kinnier’s U.S. History class. Jim was the first person to treat me like an intellectual, by which I mean he asked me questions not to quiz me, but because he was genuinely interested in the topics he asked about. Even more implausibly, he actually listened to my replies as though I might have something interesting to say, which I almost certainly did not. Jim taught me about the art of asking meaningful questions and, even more critically, the importance of listening to the answers you may receive.

I owe thanks to Stuart Greene. Stuart was one of my professors in graduate school at the University of Wisconsin and later recruited me to join him here as a colleague at Notre Dame. I took several classes with Stuart at Wisconsin, and I used to wonder how he managed to inspire such rich, compelling classroom discussions without seemingly doing all that much. He’d propose a prompt, clarify a point, occasionally redirect the discussion. It took a while, but

eventually I began to see Stuart's for gift letting students wander, go astray, start over, and, most times, find their way back toward an insight. Stuart taught me something of the value of restraint in the classroom, and he provided a model of intellectual humility.

I must thank my colleagues in the University Writing Program. I served as the director of the program for over a decade, and for every minute of that time I was blessed to part of a community of skilled and devoted educators. The faculty in the Writing Program for the most part work outside the various limelights of Notre Dame. Few people are aware of what goes into the work of being a writing teacher—the countless hours spent reading student papers, responding to student writing, conferencing with students to mentor and encourage. There are few occasions to publicly honor the faculty who do this work, so I hope you will understand why I take this occasion to celebrate the faculty of the University Writing Program by name: Professors Patrick Clauss, Nicole MacLaughlin, Matthew Capdevielle, Erin McLaughlin, Beth Capdevielle, Joanna Lin Want, Jessica Shumake, Damian Zurro, Nathaniel Myer, Michelle Marvin, Whitney Lew James, and Aaron Breymeyer. Thank you, my friends. You have taught me more than I could say in a dozen Sheedy speeches.

Finally, I must thank Notre Dame. Quite obviously, I would not be standing here if Notre Dame had not welcomed me, supported me, and, let's be honest, put up with me—because I can be a pain in the ass at times.

But this is a talk in which I am supposed to offer some sage words about teaching. If I sometimes doubt myself as a teacher, and I do, I feel certain I don't have much to offer when it comes to advising other people how to teach. So when Kevin Barry approached me some weeks back to ask if I would be willing to speak with new faculty about teaching at Notre Dame, I felt disinclined to do so. I don't know much about teaching, I told Kevin. And I certainly don't have

anything interesting to tell new faculty. All I know might be summed up in a single, decidedly banal sentence:

If you treat students decently, they will respond in kind.

Who needs to be told that?

But Kevin Barry, being Kevin Barry, responded with a question: Ok, he said, but what does it mean to treat students decently?

I hadn't expected that. I had thought my flippant response would be the end of it. But I have been thinking about Kevin's question since he posed it. Decent and decently are anodyne, uncomplicated terms, but what does it mean to treat students decently? What are the qualities of decency as they relate to teaching? What might practices of decency look like in the classroom?

I haven't yet arrived at satisfactory answers to those questions, but for the rest of this talk I'd like to share with you what has become for me a work-in-progress in sorting out what it means to treat students decently.

I would say, first, that to treat students decently means to see them where they are. This is the generation of school shootings and school lockdowns; of George Floyd and Black Lives Matter; of rising temperatures and climate catastrophes. It's the generation of the Me Too movement and Dobbs v. Jackson; of LGBTQ rights and transphobia; of January 6 and Donald Trump. It's the generation of vaccines, N95 masks, and learning to live with a pandemic. These are not the Notre Dame students of twenty or ten or even five years ago. To treat them decently means to see students for where they are at this moment in history, with all its attendant uncertainties, anxieties, and possibilities.

To see our students at Notre Dame means to see those students who arrive here having known academic success throughout all their years of schooling, only to find themselves, for the

first time, floundering in the middle of the pack, or well behind, and who enter our classrooms doubting themselves, wondering if they really belong at Notre Dame, whether they can cut it here.

To see our students at Notre Dame means seeing the first-gen students and students of color our university is so commendably recruiting, and who arrive at this private, Catholic, wealthy, gated, primarily White institution and ask themselves if they belong here, if all our cherished Notre Dame traditions, history, and narratives belong to them, too.

It means seeing those students quietly experiencing episodes of stress, anxiety, and depression. When studies tell us that during the 2020–2021 school year, more than 60% of college students met the criteria for at least one mental health problem<sup>1</sup>—a truly astonishing statistic— it means seeing students as full human beings who are managing our coursework in the contexts of their relationships with others, their separation from families, and their concerns about the future, which may or may not have anything to do with our courses.

To see our students at Notre Dame means finally, and perhaps paradoxically, to see ourselves, or more specifically to examine anew what we are teaching and considering what that might mean to students living through this moment in history. How do students understand our lectures and readings, our theories and arguments, given the world they are inheriting? What does it mean to read Henry David Thoreau when the Amazon is fast disappearing? How will students understand the writings of James Madison in a time of election denialism? When our nation is so polarized and serious scholars talk of civil war, what will students make of the famous lines of the Irish poet, W.B. Yeats:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/10/mental-health-campus-care>

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Will students read those lines as poetry, as history, or as prophecy? What relationships will our students develop to the study of literature, history, or human psychology, given the moment in which they are coming of age?

If we do not see students where they are, we will never know.

\*

To treat students decently means to listen to them as well as see them. It means listening to students in class discussions; listening when they visit our offices; listening when they write for us. It means listening closely and generously to all the things students may say to us.

But treating students decently also calls upon us to listen for what is not said; to listen, as best we can, to what students do not or cannot tell us. You know those students—the ones who sit in the back, who rarely speak in class, who do not visit during office hours. What are they saying to us? What are they not saying? And how do we respond to their unspoken messages? Do we encourage them to open up in class? Remind them of their class participation grade? Accept their silence as their way of learning?

I think of my former student Martin—that's not his real name—who seemed always attentive but never raised his hand or uttered a word in class. He came to my office one day to talk. I want you to know, he said, I have ADHD. It's not that I don't want to speak in class, but it's hard for me to get the words right in my head for what I want to say. By the time I do, the discussion has moved on. Would it help, I asked Martin, if I called on you in class? For me, he answered, that would be a disaster.

But I think too of my student, Angela, who wrote such sharp and thoughtful papers, but rarely contributed to class discussions. I brought it up with her once, and she acknowledged that she would like to speak more in class. Would it help, I asked, if I called on you? It might, she said. Sometimes I want to participate, but the boys—she called them “the boys”—are always talking, *even when they obviously don’t know what they’re talking about*. Yes, that’s what she said. Come on, boys!

And then I think of my student, Caitlin, who would visit my office regularly but who would sit almost silently throughout the visit, seemingly tongue-tied, offering terse responses to my awkward efforts to make conversation. Sometimes I’d run out of ideas, and we’d just sit facing each other or stare at the floor, neither of us speaking. I found these sessions difficult, and I’m sure Caitlin did as well. I’d wonder what I was doing wrong, or what I should be doing differently. Should I talk more or talk less, ask different questions or stop asking questions? Should I—what exactly? And I’d wonder what Caitlin wanted or needed from these sessions. What would she say, if she could say it?

In a perceptive essay, the philosopher Gordon Marino observed that philosophy has paid little attention to listening over the years. Marino writes, “While attempts to break down moral character into a list of virtues — like courage, honesty, self-control and so on,— go back at least to Aristotle, the ability to listen never made the list. Philosophy is mostly silent on the moral importance of being a good listener.”<sup>2</sup>

I’ll leave it to the philosophers in the room to judge the accuracy of that assertion. Yet it is certainly true in my own field of rhetoric. Scholars of rhetoric have spent centuries studying, felled forests writing about, the arts of speech—“The use of words by human agents to form

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/17/opinion/art-of-listening.html>

attitudes or induce actions in other human agents,” as Kenneth Burke famously described rhetoric. We in the field have examined how “the use of words by human agents” has been used throughout history toward great and homely purposes—to anoint and topple kings, to incite and commemorate wars, to move the mysterious and private chambers of the human heart. In all this, there has been a long-standing historical bias toward “The use of words,” toward spoken speech and written language. With a few notable exceptions—the scholars Cheryl Glenn at Penn State,<sup>3</sup> Krista Radcliffe at Arizona State,<sup>4</sup> Daniel Gross at UC Irvine<sup>5</sup>—there has been far less attention devoted to the rhetorical arts of silence and listening.

My student Caitlin graduated. She’s a lawyer now and a writer, fluent in the use of the words. A few years back, she wrote me a letter thanking me for listening to her and helping her believe she belonged at Notre Dame. I didn’t know that’s what I was doing. But it was Caitlin who had given me the gift. She helped me to try listening to what is said, and to what is left unsaid. It’s not an art I’ve mastered, though I continue working at it.

Our students have much to tell us. But we’ll never learn if we do not listen.

\*

To treat students decently means to tell them the truth. Tell them the truth about their progress in our courses, about their development as writers, about the quality of their ideas. Tell them when they astonish us, as they will, with insights and questions mature beyond their years; tell them when they need to dig deeper and think harder about their work. Tell them the truth when they get it right, when they get it wrong, and when we get something wrong. Tell them when we don’t know the answers to their questions; when we’re at a loss.

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.siupress.com/books/978-0-8093-2584-9>

<sup>4</sup> <http://siupress.siu.edu/books/978-0-8093-2669-3>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520340466/being-moved>



Conceptions of truth—both truth with a capital T as an existential question as to its existence, and truth with a small t as to whether one has polished off the last cookie in the jar—both conceptions of truth have taken a beating in recent years. Political demagogues, hyper-partisan media, corporate influencers, and some academics send messages that there are no reliably shared truths, that truth is always relative and subjective, that it is a malleable commodity that can be enlisted by the powerful who will say one thing at one moment and declare the opposite in the next. In such ways has truth become weaponized; enlisted in our ongoing and nihilistic culture wars. We have developed an entire lexicon for describing this state of affairs: post-truth, gaslighting, fake news, troll farms, curated identities, and more. This is the state of the culture to which our students are exposed each day.

We have a better alternative to offer.

Academics are often ridiculed for our abstruse pursuits and the bizarre jargon embraced in some of our fields of study. We have earned some of that scorn. But what is at the heart of the academic ethos, or so I tell my students, are three inseparable links: the question, the claim, and the proof. Whether we are studying medieval alchemists or the causes of autism, we are in the business of asking questions, making claims about questions we've studied, and providing proofs, or evidence, to support those claims. If at any place the chain is broken—if our questions are ill formed, if the claims can be shown to be demonstrably wrong, if the evidence cannot support a credible argument—then we must start anew or abandon the inquiry. The bedrock of the academic enterprise, in other words, is truth-seeking and truth-telling. The truths we assert may be partial, they may be arguable, and they are almost always subject to revision. What they are not is transactional.

This is what we have to offer. In our conversations with students, in our responses to their writing, in the research questions and methods we may choose to share with them, we can offer practices of truth-telling and models of intellectual honesty. We can serve as a counter-cultural repudiation of the post-truth, gaslighting, alternative fact discourse that has become commonplace in contemporary culture. We can offer something better.

It seems the decent thing to do.

\*

Finally, we can treat our students decently by creating community with them. Community in the classroom is the practice of nurturing and strengthening the relationships through which we and our students learn to trust and care for one another. “Caring together is the basis of community life,” wrote the Jesuit priest Henri Nouwen, who once taught at Notre Dame. In community, students come to see themselves not as solitary and disconnected individuals, but as members of a greater whole, working collectively toward a shared vision. In community, encouraged and supported by one another, students learn to practice those habits of heart and mind, such as open-mindedness, empathy, and intellectual courage, that are the basis of ethical argument and the foundations of a democratic society. At its best, the classroom community is a shared space of belonging, cooperation, and equality.

At the same time, we must be wary of community, the term English critic Raymond Williams described as “the warmly persuasive word” that “seems never to be used unfavourably and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term.”<sup>6</sup> Activists and scholars have long argued that the term community can be invoked to universalize oppressive gender and racial norms, reinforce existing hierarchies, and obscure economic injustices with romantic fantasies of

---

<sup>6</sup> <https://people.ucalgary.ca/~bakardji/community/definition.html>

belonging, cooperation, and equality.<sup>7</sup> As our student population continues to diversify, we must continually ask ourselves if the classroom communities we create enable the many different voices of Notre Dame—those of men and women, white and non-white, abled and disabled, progressive and conservative, cisgender and non-binary. To treat students decently means to raise all those voices, celebrate all, and strive to create classroom communities that foster what Parker Palmer calls the “intimacy that does not annihilate difference.” That, too, is a practice of decency.

\*

To see students for where they are in history, to listen to what they say and do not say, to search for truth and build communities with them—these are the constituents of decency as I understand them today. Tomorrow I will return to the classroom, where my students will resume teaching me deeper and better understandings of what it means to treat students decently. I look forward to the work ahead.

To accept the Sheedy Award today is profoundly meaningful to me. To be a faculty member at this university, which I love, is the defining work of my life. And to accompany Notre Dame students on their journey, at least for a short time, is nothing short of joyful. I know you know what I mean.

Thanks again for coming.

---

<sup>7</sup> <https://keywords.nyupress.org/american-cultural-studies/essay/community/>