

“Why I Teach: Life, Sweetness, and Hope”

Kevin G. Grove, CSC
2024 Sheedy Address

Introduction:

I am grateful to Professor Sims for his humbling introduction and to all of you for attending. A particular moment for me as a learner has a lot to do with how I teach. I'll open this address with it. At the end of my first term of college, other than for chemistry, the exams for my three, great books courses were simultaneous. In the same oral exam, a literature scholar would examine me on Greek tragedies and epics, a classicist would take his turn for history of the ancient world, and a philosopher would conclude with the pre-Socratics, Plato, and Aristotle. On its face, it could have been any great books exam and my friends and I had carefully prepared the study questions. The first period of the exam went exactly as anticipated—serious questions about Greek tragedy and epic. Next, however, the classics professor, Dr. David Madsen, indicated that he would leave all his exam questions behind and instead ask me something else. He asked me what parallels I could see between the late Roman republic and farming. That's right: farming. It's been two decades but the feeling of panic is still fresh when I recall this moment. I had not prepared that. I do not even think that we talked about farming in the course. Dr. Madsen, however, was the program director and was unrelenting. He knew that I had grown up on a family farm and ranch in Montana. Scared and maybe even irritated, I stammered out something about Truman era farm subsidies in U.S. agricultural policy and the Gracchus brothers. It was the only thing I could think of, and it pains me a bit to admit how silly an answer it was. Time inched along, but finally the floor was turned over to my philosophy professor. And the philosopher said that he would be loath to move the conversation in a more conventional direction and so we should continue the theme: How could I relate the farmer to Plato's *Republic*, the divided line, and the allegory of the cave? You get the idea. I left the exam not knowing at all what to make of the experience and curious as to why my professors made me speak about farming—which had not been a subject of class, my papers, or my comments. I was studying to be a doctor and not a farmer.

I realized the gift that I was given on the ride home. In the eighty-three miles from the airport to my family's farm outside of a town of 200 people, my mom casually asked me what I had learned. Neither of my parents have college degrees, and it is a great point of pride that their children do. I was immediately dismissive: “Oh mom, it's just a bunch of old philosophy and literature.” And, I remember catching myself before I could add, “and you wouldn't understand.” That was the gift that my faculty members had given me, and I was about to squander it. So I took the risk, and for 80 plus miles had a lively conversation about tragedies, *doxa*, *episteme* and how all of this related to our family and our farm.

I am sure that exam was as painful for my professors as it was for me. But they helped me to turn around and notice as if for the very first time that which I thought I knew, or that which, even more dangerously, I thought I knew well enough to dismiss. To be of service to such moments of turning around, for me, is the deep and abiding joy of the vocation to teach.

I would be remiss, though, without at this juncture giving thanks. Notre Dame Cathedral reopens in Paris this weekend and in the grand transept under the southern rose window are stained glass of the four gospel writers. I love it because they are portrayed small, not much larger than children, and each of them is literally sitting on the massive shoulders of a prophet. I am blessed to teach in a department and college in which I was once a student, and I am very appreciative of the figurative shoulders on which I sit. John Meier read *People Magazine* about things of zero interest to him in order to make points land for his students. His lecture on the prologue of John, in a warm DeBartolo room, is the only time a lecturer has demonstrated such beautiful oratory that it has caused my eyes to mist. The intellectual structure by which

I guide students through their foundations of theology, I owe to Gary Anderson. On doctoral committees or mentoring my own advisees, I can't tell you the number of times I've asked myself what Cyril O'Regan or Sr. Cathy Hilker, OP, would do. My colleagues in theology and across the college are more than I can mention here, but I treasure that I am able to work alongside such talented scholars for whom teaching is a sacred duty. The other group for me to thank is my brothers in the Corby Hall community of Holy Cross. Fathers John Dunne, CSC, Tom Blantz, CSC, and Bill Miscamble, CSC, are predecessors in this award. Our community meals are occasions when conversations about teaching, in some form, are always acceptable. I love Holy Cross at table, for at heart we are still students who inspire each other and keep each other humble. From the way wizened confreres describe him, Fr. Charlie Sheedy, CSC, was the tender-hearted and quick-witted epitome of our Corby community.

While I owe the deepest gratitude to my students, I will save that for my final line. The award asks that I make some not-too-long comments about teaching. I will make three points, each with an example.

Vita

I'm often asked by people looking for a catchphrase: what is unique about a Holy Cross education? Maybe it is good we aren't reducible to a marketable quip. But there is a thread which runs from our founding through our current rule of life. It is a claim that the lives of our students are sacred, given to us, and if cared for sufficiently, we who teach will glory in our students discovering themselves to be ever more fully alive. Basil Moreau, Holy Cross' founder, wrote to all of Holy Cross in 1856 describing education using the strongest available language for life in the Catholic tradition: "Make haste, therefore;" he writes, "take up this work of the resurrection..."¹ This is continued in the contemporary *Constitutions* of the order, which claim "Resurrection is a daily event"²—that we might see daily pedagogy as somehow touched by Easter's light while still longing for fullness. This is a "big idea," I tell my students. For learning and suffering have been paired together for at least three millennia. But that the challenges of learning could be imaged paschally is uniquely invigorating. At times learning might feel like carrying a cross, with multiple falls, help needed along the way, times of loneliness, frustration, and even death to self. But the experience of truly learning that which we will never forget rises up in us in some small way like resurrected life and draws out of us a wholeness we didn't think possible. The darkness of the past becomes the *felix culpa* of a life restored.

Last spring our students showed this to me in a very special way. It requires a brief set-up. I am blessed to be a priest for a residential community on campus called Dunne Hall. Two years ago, in the dark days of winter a freshman named Noah Allen walked down the hallway and asked: "Fr. Kevin, can we read Augustine's *Confessions* with you?" As a systematic theologian who works on memory, Augustine plays a major role in my research, but I'd not had the opportunity to read the *Confessions* with undergraduates. I replied to Noah that never had a Notre Dame undergraduate asked something more beautiful of me. Indeed, we could have a little book club right in the hall for this young man and a few of his friends. But I looked at Noah and asked, "When you get busy, are going you stop coming? And I will end up reading Augustine's *Confessions* alone, which I have done before?" He looked back and said, "Yea. Probably." What emerged from his honesty was a one-credit, pass/fail course, on Monday nights at 7:00 pm. To make this part of the story short, it ended up in DeBartolo 101 with 450 enrolled and the non-registered sitting in the aisles. Other than attendance, the only assignment was—from whatever their perspective—to write their own *Confessions*-style spiritual autobiography at the end. They passed the class upon submission. I read them over the summer and wrote a card to each in one in response. There were 450 registered for the course; more than 450 turned one in.

Appreciating these spiritual autobiographies was more of a gift to me than I could ever express here. And once I get some time to edit it over the break, I will publish my response to them. But, they proved to me that Moreau was right about education and life in part because they spoke about how hard learning has

been. Namely, the digital lives which they began from a very young age have in their darkest times chained them and diminished their freedom and their life, exacerbating feelings of loneliness and anxiousness. They expressed that the moralistic therapeutic deism³ that characterizes the religious practice of American young people is profoundly unsatisfying and forms one cognitive shallow root of the disaffiliation of our age. They laid bare the pressure to succeed, to be recruited, and that the drive for possessions, pleasure, and power can transform the goods of this world into a way of “sacrificing our twenties to the grind.” In these ways our students carry their own crosses. I also read, in story after story, that, when things go well in Notre Dame classrooms, human dignity is uncoupled from performance and wisdom emerges. A young woman captured something common to them all when she said she had “an intellectual resurrection at Notre Dame,” including and especially concerning her faith. These humble tales, not of triumph but of weakness touched by grace, are how students describe—at their best—their classrooms and their dorms. I ended the summer more excited about what we share as faculty here than ever before. Resurrection as a daily event isn’t a distant star or platitude; it is a mystery revealed in the gritty commitment to accompaniment. My theological tradition is committed to the idea that the glory of God is the human person fully alive. The miracle of education for me is to be of service to that new, and rising life.

Dulcedo

My second point is that teaching here brings with it what the poets describe as the unexpected sweetness of virtue we faculty learn from and with our students.

Each semester on the first day of class, I promise my first-year students that I will never give them busy work. Though I will ask a lot of them, everything serves a purpose and will build on itself throughout the whole term. It is accountability for myself, but I’ll give you an instance of how students have raised the stakes. One of my courses is a “supersection” of Foundations of Theology. In advance of the first semester of teaching this supersection, I spent a lot of time thinking about how to make a large classroom feel small. I ultimately decided to collaborate with Residential Life on a model that might draw strength from our students’ residential experience. In the classroom, I break down the room for first year students to be a map of campus from Graham Family in the East to Carroll Hall in the West and have students sit with members of their own residential community. In the class, this allows me to make theological concepts sticky by connection to local traditions, a room of 256 students divided by 33 halls feels like going to class with seven friends, and it helps me greatly to memorize names spatially. This is accompanied by a program of intellectual mentoring whereby sophomores and juniors in each residence hall who have had my class before lead peer conversations about the practical consequences of theological ideas for students of all traditions and none at all. It is an opt-in program and students meet with leaders in their own communities, normally at some very late hour of their choosing, for 30 minutes a week.

I’m an Augustinian scholar at heart, so I believe that grace builds on nature. The enticement for nature is extra credit. And over 99% percent of students elect to participate. What begins as a chance to earn a few points toward the GPA, has become the grace of our students witnessing the virtue as well that everything matters.

Because these conversations are spread across thirty-three residential communities, I simply ask the leaders to take a photo—an attendance selfie—after their conversations to assure me everyone was there. To be honest, this was just meant to save me time in administrative work. But only two and a half weeks into the first semester of the program, the women of Pasquerilla East made incarnate a conversation from class about Michelangelo’s *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden* on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. I added it to my slides for the next class and the students have never stopped. Caravaggio’s *Sacrifice of Isaac* of

Genesis 22 found expression in Lyons with the rector's dog caught in the thicket. Bruegel's "*Tower of Babel*" is reproduced most semesters in O'Neill. Tissot's *View from the Cross* has exposed a surprising number of anonymous toes. My own hall of Dunne took on the last supper with gestural precision. Even without an image, the Otters of Sorin College caught hold of the rabbinic tradition that the eyes of the fish were like synagogue windows that opened Jonah to a light of mercy that was not his own.

There is much about these examples that is simply playful. But it does not make them less profound. For an image is only intelligible in as much as it relates to that which is beyond itself. The theological contention is that we, too, are images, only intelligible inasmuch as we relate, beyond ourselves, even unto God. Each student image follows a conversation about life's purpose. The students themselves are the artistic expression of a human image that simultaneously discloses God and neighbor. And, in six semesters and over a thousand students having these weekly conversations about brokenness, self-interest, mercy, and life itself, I have been a privileged witness to the *imago Dei* in their shared humanity, as those related in love, whose lives are *of* and *for*. That fundamental relationality is a way of living and, at our best, with our students, we incarnate its sweetness as virtue.

Spes

The final reason I teach is hope and not simply because I wear a cross and anchors around my neck. But, theology over the centuries has found that God's revelation is often enough discoverable under the meekest sign of its opposite. And so, in the first week of college, I assign a reading about doubt. Over the first weekend of fall semester, I ask students to write their first paper on an essay written by Notre Dame Laetare Medalist and essayist Walker Percy called "The Message in the Bottle."⁴ Percy's thought experiment takes up the predicament of an amnesiac castaway on a wonderful, scientific, and cultured island. The protagonist knows everything but his purpose—the conditions of where and how he might feel at home in this world. Good science, culture, music, and community provide a wonderful life on the island, but he cannot shake the fact that he is a castaway. Percy's contention is that this is the human condition, that we are cast into the world. And, the condition of our despair is to dupe ourselves into feeling at home when really we are not.

Here are just a few lines I treasure from a former student: "At that very moment when he should feel most at home on the island, when needs are satisfied, knowledge arrived at, family raised, business attended to, at that very moment when by every criterion of island at-homeness he should feel most at home, he feels most homeless...he is a castaway.' As soon as I read this from Percy, I felt like he had written it specifically for me. I have always had a 'good' life by most standards, with a stable family, good friends, and a strong sense of personal accomplishment, but at the same time I have, for as long as I can remember, longed for something else. Even at Notre Dame, my dream school for my entire life, I had all the pieces of what I thought made me happy, yet I often felt like I was still just playing an act. After all, as Percy reminds us, 'The worst of all despairs is to imagine one is at home when one is really homeless.' I consistently found myself at the Grotto at 2 AM on many nights of the week, asking God if there was something wrong with me. I didn't get it, I was *supposed* to be satisfied with what I had." The student concludes, "I am a castaway."

This is the reason for my hope. In the College of Arts and Letters we need not simply bemoan the brokenness of our world as those observing from without. Rather, we have the freedom to begin from the collegial union of spirit that is forged from the humble admission that we are not altogether at home in the world as we have made it, and that we long for more. I have had many students write that they remember and relate to Percy's "castaway" the most out of their theological formation.

And because election or vocation does not culminate in triumphalism, neither should Sheedy addresses. I teach about the predicament of not feeling at home in this world, because I join my dear students in it. In

fact, I suspect that most of us faculty would claim the same. We careen for the contradictions, the paradoxes, and the unsettled things in this world because working hard on the pursuit of truth opens us up to realities we do not make but receive—especially the closeness of God and neighbor.

Conclusion:

I'll close this address in the fashion I end all my classes, from the first-year to the doctoral. As I offer to my students, when they walk across the stage and receive their degrees, they will be marked in gold with three words: *vita, dulcedo, spes*. It is my contention that for all and for each these words have significance. Even more than history, and certainly more than simple piety, they seem to me to form a posture, a way of learning and teaching that is the special calling of this Catholic research university. For those three words come from a Marian prayer called the "Salve Regina" which has the courage to identify the conditions of our world as a place in which we do not feel at home. Percy calls this the predicament of the castaway. The Lady on the dome's claim is that we are exiles in a valley at times even of tears. Mary, Notre Dame, frees a community of scholars and students alike to admit their restless hearts as the opening posture of our inquiry. It is a posture that allows us to turn around each day and see as if for the very first time that our social, intellectual, and spiritual attainment will be measured by the graces we reflect—our life, our sweetness, and our hope. My receipt of this award is in gratitude to my students, who continue to teach me all three.

¹ Basil Moreau, "Christian Education," in *Basil Moreau: Essential Writings*, eds. K. Grove and A. Gawrych (Notre Dame: Ave Maria, 2014), 376.

² *Constitutions of the Congregation of Holy Cross* (Rome, Congregation of Holy Cross: 1986), VIII.119.

³ This term was coined by Notre Dame sociologist, Christian Smith. See: *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁴ Walker Percy received the Laetare Medal at the University of Notre Dame in 1989. "The Message in the Bottle" in *The Message in the Bottle* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1975).