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“Language of the Heart”

Remarks at Senior Convocation
May 14, 2004

Jennifer Cognard-Black
Assistant Professor of English

Note: This talk was given in 2004, a year before this “Speaking Out” publication was first conceived. The editors are proud to include it four years after the fact.

I am the daughter of an immigrant. I am here because my mother’s parents survived the blitz in Britain. Maisie and Kenny MacLeod buried their infant son on the day the war broke out, September 1st, 1939, but lived to bear a daughter, my mother, Anne Maria, three weeks before the end of World War II. I know the streets in Glasgow – Middleton Street and Plantation Street, Cardonald Drive and the Paisley Road Toll – where my grandmother Maisie made biscuits for British troops and dodged potholes made by Nazi bombs. I know the factories at Renfrew and Clydebank where my grandfather Kenny bent metal into airplane parts 16 hours a day, six days a week, for nearly five years.

I am the great-granddaughter of an immigrant. His name was François Jean Cognard. Between 1900 and 1952, François labored in the darkness of Missouri coal mines and loaded, on average, more than 16 tons a day, six days a week. His carbide lamp now sits on my sister’s writing desk. His rose-gold watch, worn smooth by over five decades in his woolen pocket, rests on a small marble table in my living room. It keeps perfect time.

My great-grandfather spoke French. He spoke of “pommes de terre” – apples of the earth – whenever he spaded up potatoes from his garden. He spoke of “mon petit chien” – my little dog – never calling his pug-nosed mongrel “Mike,” the name the English-speaking miners coined for it.

I know these things because my father told me.

My Scottish grandparents, proud members of the clans MacIntyre and MacLeod, spoke what they called English. At their kitchen table, almost too young to remember, I ate “mince and tatties,” “bangers and mash,” “scānes” instead of “scōnes.” I endured the epithet “wee skelp” and learned that “poc ma’ hon” was somehow dirty because it was always spoken low and to the side (“poc ma’ hon” means “kiss my arse” in Gaelic). I longed for the day when I, too, could partake of a “dram of drambuie” or a “wee doch ’n doris” – I now know that these phrases refer to the mysteries of alcohol.

I know because my mother told me.

As a kid, my parents translated the language of their emigrant worlds for me, transferred their meaning to me. I was not a student of words; that would come much, much later. But I was a lover of language, seduced by its power not only to create identity, but to preserve it. I lived for stories; family anecdotes became my anchors: the day

my grandfather Cognard met my grandmother at a Methodist mixer and told his buddy, before he'd even spoken to her, "That's the girl I'm going to marry," or the day my uncle Donald MacLeod rode an eight-year-old's bike through the streets of downtown Glasgow to bring it home for my mother's birthday, his knees knocking the handlebars like the beat, beat, beat of a big bass drum.

Even in adolescence, when I confronted the angst every teenager feels – the arrogance every young adult assumes when she believes that the sun grew round the very day that she was born, and that before then no one (no, no one) led a life worth knowing – these stories lived in my heart. These stories fastened me to the broad, flat Nebraska plain where both the Cognards and the MacLeods improbably landed and took root. These stories still lived in my heart, and in my heart I did not forget the gift that past language gave me, the glimpse of lives beyond my own to which I was indebted and connected.

But in my head I did. In my head, after I turned 13 and was much more interested in being an American teenager – not a Scottish one or a French one (not even a Nebraska one) but a Madonna teenager, a Molly Ringwald teenager, a preppy Izod Sperry-Top-Sider teenager who used language like "girls just want to have fun" and "eat my shorts" and "gag me with a spoon" – I forgot the language of my family stories. Nearly every member of my generation forgot their family stories, too – as have nearly every member of yours – as do nearly all young women and men who leave behind the idle narratives and childish fancies of their youth and trade them for upward mobility and the promise, the apparent promise, that theirs will be a new world which has nothing to do with the old.

For most people who have experienced what it's like to be alive on this planet in roughly the first two decades of life – and that is all of us here, at one time or another – history is, well history. It's dead, buried, long ago, once upon a time, back in the day. Our identities, forged anew and forged now, are what count. Who and what our ancestors were, while maybe interesting or fun, is quaint and sentimental, like a fairytale out of a storybook. As 20-somethings, we all speak in a new idiom for a new day: war and oppression, starvation and intolerance will be conquered by "information technologies" and "global economic policies" and new "social systems" that we invent, that we develop and sell. Our world is not our grandfathers' vale of tears, not our grandmothers' domestic and mercantile routines, rendered important only by a World War and the fear, violence, and ignorance that occasioned it.

No. We are past all that. We are the smartest generation that ever lived. We are the best-educated, best-housed, most affluent, and healthiest human beings ever to walk the earth, and we know that our lives will make those lived in the 20th century, or in the 19th, or in any past, bygone century, mere Platonic shadows of the Ideal (with a capital "I") – an Ideal which we now possess.

We don't need to vote, and 45 percent of us don't. The economy sustains itself; diplomacy defers to the reality that, as the most powerful nation on earth, we may do as we please in the Middle East, in Asia, in South America, and the Philippines; and education – well, Maisie, Kenny, and François would stand amazed. Now that we know what to assess and how to assess it, no child – neither black, nor Latina, neither female nor poor – shall be left behind. The millennium, figuratively and quite literally, has arrived,

and that millennium is American; it comes with a Biggie Coke, a Disney collectible, and a side of MacDonald's Freedom Fries.

We have plans. Our heads tell us that they don't include lobbying for civil rights, because (although we have no memory of it) that necessity was precluded in 1964 by a few strokes of the pen by a president from Texas (we forget his name). No one need ever again worry about the liberties, civil or human, of any minority: those with moral claims to such liberties have already won them, and those without moral claims shall be silenced by what will likely become Constitutional authority.

Our heads tell us that our plans don't include any of the draconian or rigid "isms" that haunted our parents and grandparents. Fascism's dead. Feminism saw the last bra burned decades ago. Communism gave it up within the lifetimes of everyone here. And ageism is meaningless to a generation whose productive years promise to extend well into the eighth, ninth, or even tenth decade of life – in fact, your generation can even be cryogenically frozen upon death to wait for and live out the next millennium.

We have – you have – as they say, got it made.

The only thing is – you don't.

We don't.

And way deep down we know we don't, because – like me – we only gave up the gift of our ancestors' language in our heads, not in our hearts. Only heads can be self-absorbed to the point of becoming complacent or smug; only heads can be provincial or pompous, insular, or self-righteous. Not hearts.

Maybe it's not fashionable to talk about hearts at Convocation. We are all academics, after all, on one side of the desk or the other, and we have been told time and time again that success is governed by the head. We've analyzed our options, not gushed, hugged, or cried over them. We are persuaded that the intellect supersedes our instincts. I have implied as much, daily, in my own classes, to which over a third of you have dutifully arrived on time, choreopoems and lyrical ballads and rememory papers and reception history projects in hand, submitted – of course – by the 5 p.m. deadline.

At St. Mary's, we have adopted, fashionably, the jargon of "now" and frame our new world order with words like "nanosecond" and "sound bite," "smart bomb" and "market share." We speak with the certitude of those who know. We professors and students are, in a word, "sophisticated." We have left the past behind. The very words "convocation" and "commencement" seduce us into thinking in only the future tense.

But if we listen to our hearts – the real custodians of all that language represents – we know the past has not left us. The language with which our parents preserved their way of working in the world, preserved for our ears the sounds of their joy and, for our eyes, the sights of their despair is nothing less than the living embodiment of their identity, an identity to which we are linked in language just as surely as we are linked by the strings of genomes.

We must – and you will – we must listen to the voices of the past, our past, the rhetorical voices of my grandmother and yours, and the collective parental voices of those who speak for the flawed generations before us. You will listen with those hearts I have had the honor of discovering in my own classroom because your hearts tell you that you are as flawed as they were, as frail and uncertain as they, as incapable of solving the terrors that plague us as ever they were, even in your best moments.

And best moments you will have. You will mark the epiphany when, alone in some government cubicle in our country's capital, your numbers prove that balanced national budgets and responsible welfare programs are not mutually exclusive; when, as a Peace Corps volunteer in Nicaragua, your words persuade a corrupt cleric of the *iglesia de cristo* to return the coerced tithes of the poor; you will mark the epiphany when a family says “Gracias” for the habitat you have built for them, or an English student in Japan stammers “Thank you” and you stammer “Arigato,” or a species of heron survives another winter because you found 16 million dollars and knew where to spend it. You will have your moments.

You will not save the world. No one can. You will not make the world into an image of your own. No one should. In your heads will be, yes, the inevitable affirmation of absolutes: United We Stand. In God We Trust. Our Country, Right or Wrong.

But in your hearts, if you listen to them, as did my parents and your and their parents before them, will be the language of those whose lives testified to the humility of uncertainty, whose stories bespeak the struggles of everyday people slightly unfit for their society.

For that is what my grandparents were, you know – and yours: slightly unfit, slightly incapable of conforming to the rigidity of dogma. They knew that William Butler Yeats was right when he said, “The worst are full of passionate intensity.” The worst always have answers – passionate, intense, easy, clear answers that can be written on billboards and printed on bumper stickers in red, white, and blue. But answers that extinguish diversity, deviance, or dissent.

Language, our most distinctive human pursuit, literally models the paradox of our human natures. It reduces the infinite to the finite and paradoxically enables a footprint on the moon at the same moment that it spawns a Richard Nixon or a Ho Chi Minh, the mass graves of the killing fields in Cambodia, the names of the dead on black marble slabs rising from the Washington mall, or, in the metaphor of my grandparents' lives, the dead that “moan[ed] round with many voices” at Auschwitz.

We must listen to each other. You must listen to the language of the ones you love and measure its cadences, rustic but true, against the “United We Stand” or “In God We Trust” of those who lead. And you must come to understand, as in your hearts I know you do, that the language of tolerance, humility, and love comes to us not only from the history of our own families, but from the collective testimony of all persons of wisdom and grace whose language bespeaks the inherited values of the human family.

Let me show you what I mean. Let me tell you about two Colorado brothers whose language speaks to hearts. They will never hold office. They will never save the world. And they could be your uncles.

They are Harold and Raymond McPherson, sixty-five-year-old bachelor farmers who come to life in the pages of *Plainsong*, the best-selling novel by Kent Haruf, my undergraduate fiction teacher in Nebraska. Harold and Raymond, secure in who they are and what they believe, risk ridicule and scorn – not to mention suspicion – as they become the surrogate parents of a 17-year-old outcast, Victoria Roubideaux, and grandparents-in-waiting to her illegitimate child. Harold and Raymond bond with Victoria over a dining-room discussion that uses – of all things – the language of the feedlot.

When Victoria asks the brothers if they can explain what they call “the market,” one of them says, “Why sure, of course. . . . Now, the market is what soybeans and corn and live cattle and June wheat and feeder pigs and bean meal is all bringing in today for a price. The man on the radio, he reads it out every day at noon. Six-dollar soybeans. Corn two-fifty. Fifty-eight-cent hogs. Cash value, sold today.” The language of the feedlot is the brothers’ history; the language of hog prices and the cattle market, their idiom. And as their conversation draws Victoria deeper and deeper into the world of pork bellies and wheat futures, their world becomes Victoria’s.

Even more miraculous, her world – an idiom of cigarettes and beer, of “getting knocked up” and a mama who says, “You got yourself into this, you can just get out of it” – begins to change in the warmth of the brothers’ understanding. Grounded in the old, all three characters transcend the past to create a new, uncertain present: a new kind of family, one without the bond of blood but with the shared genealogy of words. Together they take risks, to be sure, but risks tempered by respect, tolerance, and humility, risks forged by an acceptance of who they are and the anticipation of who they may be if they choose.

Like the McPherson brothers, like my mother Anne Maria MacLeod, and my great-grandfather François Jean Cognard, like all those who have lived and learned what you now are about to discover, you will come to know that language and identity are synonymous; that we are, for better or ill, what we say; and that the stories we are told, borne with the love that renders them fragile and uncertain, perceptive but incomplete, become the stories that define the better angels of our nature.

My wish for you on this night is that you will know these stories, know them all by heart. You will return to the language of Ethiopia that traveled to Baltimore, of Bosnia that came to Gaithersburg, of Mexico that was transported to Frederick, of Japan that arrived on the Eastern Shore.

My wish for you is that, as you tell your own stories, yours will be the plain-spoken and pure voice of a Main Street – of a Route 5 or a 235 – unfit, slightly, for the silver-tongued mavens of Madison and Pennsylvania avenues.

My wish for you is that, enabled by this old but reborn voice, you will reform this nation, replacing smugness with compassion, hate with hope, and blind blame with personal integrity. I know you will, because, like the best of the generations before you, you will assume your share of responsibility for the unfair enterprise of life.

You will do so because over the four years that I have had the privilege of being your teacher, I have seen many of you grow up from that first-year awkwardness in my introductory composition and literature classes to your full, mature grace on this

glorious eve of graduation. In the four years that I, too, have grown up with all of you as a new English professor learning what it means to teach and be taught by one's students – to give language and receive it – I have borne witness to the fact that you have a full measure of those attributes necessary to make real change in the world: dignity, honor, commitment, courage, and hope. In the old language of Walt Whitman, language over 150 years old, “[You] contain multitudes.”

With these multitudes you will redress injustice, you will alleviate pain and make other lives worthwhile; you will bring tolerance to your neighbors and your children, and – as my mother's mother strove to do – you will establish peace.

“The Power of Community, Part II: Hegel’s Idea of Ethical Institutions”

The Faculty Seminar
March 3, 2008

Sybol Cook Anderson
Assistant Professor of Philosophy

Last December, the Teaching and Learning group hosted a magnificent discussion, “The Power of Community.” Those who gathered related many varied experiences of community on this campus: quiet walks with colleagues that often end in silent reflection by the river; meals and faculty seminars, especially those we used to enjoy in the old faculty/staff dining room in Cobb House; activities engaging shared interests such as softball or basketball. But then someone asked: “Wait... what do we really mean by community?” Is a group of people getting together to play basketball a *community*? Needless to say, we had lots of different perspectives on that question, and my sense was that we left with the question still hanging over us.

I was delighted, then, to be invited to give a faculty seminar ... because I think this question of what community *is* is well worth taking up again. I certainly didn’t think it appropriate at the T&L lunch to launch headlong into a Hegelian analysis—but I can really get into it today! I do think that continued reflection on the meaning and power of community is vital—and in this I agree with Hegel—because our experience of freedom depends on it. We both contend that our individualistic and atomistic culture misses the point that individuals, to be *fully* free, must be robustly cognizant of the *fact* of our interdependence. Liberal freedom, in other words, depends on our continual awareness of, and attention to, our status as members of communities.

Today, I’ll elaborate on this thesis with particular attention to Hegel’s analysis of the social institution that is the ideal manifestation of community—the ethical “corporation.” I’ll address three facets of his argument. First (Section I), I’ll discuss Hegel’s conception of freedom as socially mediated. I highlight his idea that individuals win what he calls the “right of particularity,” their liberty to “express [their uniqueness] in all directions”¹ as a *recognized* right, through their conscientious agency in communal contexts. The main point there is that freedom is a very particular kind of self-expression that is somehow other-regarding. Second (Section II), I’ll examine Hegel’s idea that citizens of a liberal state could really learn the meaning of conscientious agency as members of what he calls “estates,” social classes representing, not socio-economic status but, rather, fields of endeavor. A social class becomes, in Hegel’s account a kind of educative professional community, albeit an extremely large one. Finally (Section III), I’ll relate Hegel’s account of how, more specifically, conscientious agents both *win* and *exercise* their right of particularity through membership in “corporations,” Hegel’s term of art for the public and private institutions of civil society (e.g., businesses, government offices, institutions of learning, civic associations, etc.). In Hegel’s liberal state, the corporation, a kind of intentional community, is the chief locale of every-day, freedom-securing relationships of mutual recognition.

After this talk, I hope we can reflect together on the question of whether Hegel's idea of ethical institutions might inform our vision of community here at St. Mary's and, if so, how.

I. Hegel's Idea of Freedom

Hegel argues that freedom is socially mediated, and that it is crucial that we recognize that fact in order to *be* free. It is a mistake to conceive of freedom in purely individualistic terms—either as license, “to do or forbear doing” whatever we as individuals will ... or (as the more stoical among us might conceive it) as the ability to be self-legislating in the sense of being governed by our reason rather by our desires and impulses.² In both of these cases (license and stoical autonomy), Hegel suggests we are in truth ultimately determined by our impulses. We either merely *follow* them or *override* them; and insofar as they are (in both cases) the focus, we can, in extreme cases, find ourselves enslaved by them. Hegel suggests that we see freedom instead as more squarely the activity of *determining* one's own will.³ Hegel is after something more explicitly reflective and, as it were, open-ended: *What* will I do? Freedom involves one's robust awareness that one really is choosing one's end in a given case of action: perhaps to follow one's impulses ... perhaps not. The free will, Hegel says, as the activity of *determining itself*, makes “reference to itself” (PR §7). The idea of *choosing in the wake of reflection* seems to be featured here.

But Hegel's elaboration—in terms of choosing in the presence of an other—can, I hope, make this clearer. He observes that we explicitly have this experience of making reference to ourselves in cases of action (of determining our own wills) in response to solicitations from significant others. He explains that in “friendship and love,” for instance,

we are not one-sidedly within ourselves but willingly limit ourselves with reference to an other, even while knowing ourselves in this limitation as ourselves. In this determinacy, the human being should not feel determined; on the contrary, he attains his self-awareness only by regarding the other as other. ... Freedom is to will something determinate, yet to be with oneself [*bei sich*] in this determinacy. (PR §7A)

Hegel wants us to see that the choice situation involving significant others is different from the choice situation that doesn't. When we choose actions in ordinary circumstances, say, in relation to “ordinary” objects, such as people who have no significant influence upon our “feeling” (PR §7A), we do tend to simply follow or override our own impulses, as it were, “unreflectively” (or relatively so). We are “one-sidedly within ourselves.” Now, many of us think of freedom *as* just this ability to choose unaffected by others. However, Hegel thinks that real freedom is realized as choice in response to a “check” upon the will, such that we are explicitly *self-determining*. When others count for us, we allow them to influence our choices, that is, to limit us. This is not absolute limitation, for we are not talking here of compulsion. It's limiting in a qualified sense, as a “check” upon an otherwise comparably “unreflective” will. But, furthermore, a significant other only constitutes a limit insofar as her will is different; insofar as it is the same as the agent's, there is no meaningful “check” upon the will—it's the same will. So, Hegel stresses that it is when we are asked by the other to limit ourselves that we can

experience our wills as free, that is, as explicitly making reference to itself (in response to a “check” by an other) and issuing in a free choice.

There’s another dimension worth noting. If we allow significant others to “check” our will, this means we recognize their authority as subjects. In order to *experience* ourselves as free, then, we must interact with significant others whom we also regard as free.

The really interesting point Hegel makes is that for a state to be a truly *liberal* state, its citizens must experience this kind of freedom in public life as well as in private relationships of friendship and love. To experience full, concrete freedom, individuals must experience themselves as determining their own wills in response to significant others in the public realm who make influential claims upon them. They must recognize each other in public. This amounts to cultivating bonds of solidarity in the social world that in some respects mirror those of friendship and love in private life. This is the basis of Hegel’s claim that in ethical life we find ourselves “at home” in the world.⁴

Another way Hegel talks about freedom is by saying that we only secure our recognized right of particularity when we learn to harmonize two components of concrete freedom: subjective and objective freedom. Subjective freedom is free agency, the expression of particularity. Again, Hegel insists that in truly liberal ethical life, we must be free to “express [our particularity] in all directions” (*PR* §184). However, that free expression is indeed only free insofar as it is an explicitly other-regarding as well as self-referential. At the same time, we now clearly understand that freedom is not license. Genuine subjective freedom is the recognized right of particularity. Thus, concrete freedom has an objective component as well. We might think of objective freedom as the objective conditions of freedom; for Hegel these are the community’s laws, customs, and institutions—what we collectively endorse as rational constraints upon our agency if we are to have any free agency at all. Hegel argues that a problem of liberal states as we’ve known them is that they’ve aimed at securing objective freedom without enough attention to the need to secure subjective freedom—what it would really mean for citizens to be free to express themselves (the whole picture). That’s the picture he wants to contribute: a portrait of a state that regards freedom as incapable of being secured only by laws, but rather requiring a certain kind of whole *ethical life*.

In his account, then, Hegel features the process by which we secure subjective freedom, the right of particularity. From what’s been said, we can now understand subjective freedom as other-regarding in two dimensions: first, insofar as we are self-consciously choosing in response to the solicitations of significant others in the community; and second insofar as our expressions of particularity require recognition as a right. This is where the condition that subjective and objective freedom be harmonized comes in. Winning the right of particularity means having one’s agency recognized as consistent with the laws, customs, and standards of the community. Agents who win that right are those who are ethically disposed to harmonize their own interests with those of the community—they are *conscientious* agents.

It is crucial to stress, though, that for Hegel this is a two-way street; your willingness to harmonize your interests with those of the community understandably depends on your confidence that the community is also genuinely concerned for you. Indeed, Hegel insists that “the universal [the community] does not attain validity or

fulfillment without the interest, knowledge and volition of the particular” (*PR* §260). To garner the individual’s concern legitimately, then, the community must procure the concrete good of individuals. As one commentator puts it, “there is no freedom at all in a society whose members “identify” themselves with it only because they are victims of illusion, deception, or ideology.”⁵

In short, in liberal ethical life, the individual and the community must recognize each other. The individual allows the community to influence her actions because it is a significant other that she recognizes as authoritative; and its authority derives in part from its commitment to her interests. This brings about that condition Hegel describes as “be[ing] at home” in the world (*VPR* 4, 102). Such an individual—a *free* individual—is what Hegel calls an agent of true conscience. She is disposed to act in ways that reveal that the community’s interests, which she can recognize as legitimate, are coextensive with her own interests. She can accomplish this quite “naturally,” according to Hegel, through her free choice of a career.

II. How Particularity Wins Its Right: Cultivating the Ethical Disposition

On, then, to how we learn to be such conscientious free beings. In Hegel’s ideal liberal state, the ethical disposition of true conscience is actually cultivated from childhood. But it is further educated and sustained in adulthood through individuals’ membership in “estates” and “corporations.” One commentator offers the following excellent account of the role of this educative function of estates and corporations:

[F]or Hegel, the purpose of [ethical education] is to integrate important horizons of meaning into the conscious self of freely-choosing individuals. Hegel’s ethical community is an environment in which we can become aware of the roles that institutions, practices, and choices play in our self-construction. ... [It] is a space in which we maintain, structure, and rationalize the “external” institutions that construct us and the basis on which we can make choices; but it is also a space in which we can become aware of the role that those institutions play in our construction and come to understand, from a self-conscious and practical point of view, the value of these institutions in the construction of our identity. Ultimately, on Hegel’s view, we then come to “choose” them, to self-consciously acknowledge and accept them as integral to ourselves.⁶

That is to say that ethical education is the means by which individuals discover *for themselves* the value to their own self-actualization of identifying with the community, integrating its interests and good into their own purposes.

However, Hegel acknowledges that against the background of the rampant self-seeking that typically characterizes civil society, ethical education will be experienced by “naturally” self-interested individuals as *difficult*: as “the *hard work* of opposing mere subjectivity of conduct, of opposing the immediacy of desire as well as the subjective vanity of feeling [*Empfindung*] and the arbitrariness of caprice” (*PR* §187R). This is because such persons originally view the community interest as merely a means to their own satisfaction. However, Hegel says that experience will reveal to self-interested individuals that the attainment of their ends really is conditioned by the

community's well-being. They will often find, for instance, that when their interests are inimical to the community's good, others will resist them.

So Hegel stresses the need for a form of ethical mediation in civil society that actively cultivates individuals' understanding of and genuine interest in the community's good. Enter the estates and corporations.

In Hegel's picture, estates are three general fields of endeavor that become the new basis of class in civil society: agriculture, trade and industry, and civil service (*PR* §§202-205). As members of estates, individuals not only have specific jobs and professions, but they also become aware of the significance of their functions and of their relationship to other functions in civil society. So, social members achieve, first of all, "a determinate social identity" as a member of both a profession (e.g., college teaching) and a social estate (e.g., civil service).⁷ But secondly, individuals receive training that emphasizes the significance of the various functions and relationships that conduce to the thriving of civil society as a whole (we are keenly aware of the value of the roles played by faculty members of a public liberal arts honors college).

So with regard to the first aspect: the achievement of a determinate social identity in an estate is crucial because it is through that determinate role that an individual's particularity acquires social significance: Hegel explains that "[t]he individual attains actuality only by entering into existence [*Dasein*] in general, and hence into *determinate particularity*; he must accordingly limit himself *exclusively* to one of the *particular* spheres of need" (*PR* §207). Here we see clearly how the choice of a career is a free choice, made in response to significant others. But it is also a choice that can be publicly recognized. Rupert Gordon comments beautifully that "[h]ere, particularity or difference is ... difference with some significance. Determinate particularity is difference that is understood and respected *as difference* in circumstances of social meaning."⁸ The work of individuals wins recognition as "a determinate kind of contribution to the welfare of civil society as a whole."⁹

The second interesting feature of life in the estate is that one is educated by fellow members about the significance of one's functions for society's overall functioning, such that one can take pride in much more than the procuring of one's own livelihood. Through this training, individuals come to identify with the larger goals, interests, and objectives of the community and cease being only self-interested "atoms." Members also come to appreciate the significance of other estate members' many different professional contributions. Thus, the college professor, in identifying strongly with the mission and purpose of civil service, can come to appreciate the significance not only of his own role, but also those of the many others who make different, yet significant, contributions to civil service. But he can also come to appreciate the significance of the roles played by the other estates in supporting the functioning of civil society as a whole. Thus he comes to grasp more fully the interdependence of all members of civil society and discovers a rational basis for acknowledging the legitimacy of the many different contributions of diverse social members.

The real beauty of this system, to my mind, is that because estates are functional, social classes are not determined by birth, property ownership, or income level, but rather by the nature of professions. Accordingly, the custodian at Harvard belongs not only to the same institution as Harvard's president, but also to the same class (civil

service), and this constitutes a bond between them that they recognize.

Ethical education via estate membership clearly provides, then, a basis for relationships of mutual recognition among all contributors to civil society—relationships that can secure the right of particularity.

III. Securing the Right of Particularity: Corporations as Sites of Public Recognition

Hegel assigns a distinctive role to corporations as chief sites of the recognition of particularity, because it is the primary locus of activity in which individuals are able to experience their agency as objectively valid and legitimate. That is, unlike in the family, in which the individual is loved “no matter what she does,” in the corporation she is recognized *for* what she does, namely, contribute conscientiously to the common good. Moreover, in contrast to the state, which recognizes her as a legal person, and thus without regard to her sex, ethnicity, etc., in the corporation it is understood that while her collective identity characteristics are not the sole determinants of her agency, they may play a significant role in shaping her interests and ends, which *are* the “soul and determinant” of her actions (*PR* §121).

Again, corporations are not only businesses, but all voluntary associations organized around professional and social interests. Corporations make community an explicit concern for members by making them even more robustly aware of how their interdependence serves individual interests. As “second families,” as Hegel calls them, they perform at least four crucial functions for their members: (1) they are concerned for members’ well-being as well as that of their professions; (2) they recruit new members on the basis not only of skill, but also of rectitude, and in appropriate numbers as indicated by the needs of civil society as a whole; (3) they provide education and training for prospective members; and (4) they protect members against, and in the event of, contingencies, such as injury or unemployment ((*PR* §252).

I have noted that the crucial condition of the ability of corporations to recognize members’ right of particularity is that members are conscientious, harmonizing their particular interests with those of the community. But herein lies a challenge: because estate and corporation membership are not determined by birth, socio-economic status, etc., but by free choice, corporations are bound to be socially very diverse. How then do we determine the collective interest? Who decides what kinds of action conduce to the satisfaction of that interest and hence are worthy of recognition? Regrettably, Hegel doesn’t seem to tell us this. But insofar as corporations are distinctively *ethical* institutions inhabited by members genuinely committed to the community’s good (whatever that might be), Hegel surely envisions corporate standards being decided democratically. We can imagine this to be the case among agents who grasp that they and others can only recognize as legitimate standards which they can identify with as consistent with their own interests. Hegel stresses that “[t]he right to recognize nothing that I do not perceive as rational is the highest right of the subject” (*PR* §132). He adds: “The *right of the subjective will* is that whatever it is to recognize as valid should be perceived by it as *good*” (*PR* §132). Accordingly, the condition of corporation members’ endorsement of corporation standards is that the members can acknowledge them as rational, good, and (very importantly) *their own*.

The result of such collective deliberation must surely be a thin set of standards, such as we find in corporate mission statements. But in this case, corporation members should find that they have a great deal of latitude for actualizing their own and the collective interest in diverse and truly meaningful ways. And their particular styles of agency are not only meaningful to them in virtue of contributing to their own good and that of others, but also inasmuch as they are expressions of aspects of their very being, that is, of their particular interests, concerns, needs, and desires. Insofar as these expressions of particularity can be recognized, then, members really do enjoy subjective freedom.

We can appreciate the significance of corporate recognition of particularity when we consider the consequences suffered by individuals who fail to secure it: they are alienated and marginalized. We readily imagine, I think, the implications of marginalization for the least empowered. However, Hegel suggests that the powerful and wealthy, too, can suffer from marginalization, that is, from the failure to win the support and genuine recognition of subordinates and peers. For instance, Hegel acknowledges the potential danger of envy for those who provoke it. Of course, the powerful may be cynical, not seeing the need to garner others' recognition and support. What are the powerless going to do about it? Moreover, they may see such other-regarding concern as weakness, entailing compromises and losses of power inimical to their interests.¹⁰ Hegel suggests, however, that in garnering the support of subordinates and peers through mutual concernment, the conscientious powerful actually win valuable security for their interests, since the whole community actively supports them; the conscientious powerful needn't safeguard their interests on their own.

Perhaps more importantly, Hegel states that "rectitude ... receives the true recognition and honor which are due it" (*PR* §253). The powerful or wealthy *conscientious* corporation member exchanges the false recognition accruing to wealth and power for authentic recognition of his very self. Ultimately, then, in Hegel's corporation everyone can achieve subjective freedom.

Conclusion: The Power of Community

I have argued that Hegel thinks that a truly liberal state is one in which citizens enjoy concrete freedom to express their particularity. They achieve this freedom through their conscientious agency in corporations that function intentionally as communities. Members establish shared standards of corporate life, which they recognize as both necessary for the flourishing of the community and as serving their individual interests. Individual freedom, then, is finally secured. This is the power of community.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Hegel, GWF, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen Wood, trans. H.B. Nisbet (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), §184. Henceforth *PR* followed by the section number in parentheses.
- 2 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1994), 167-168. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 53.
- 3 For this particular way of characterizing Hegel's theory of freedom, I am indebted to Axel Honneth; see *Suffering from Indeterminacy: An Attempt*

at a *Reactualization of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (Assen: Van Gorcum and Company, 2000), 23-27.

4 Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Rechtsphilosophie*, vol. 4, ed. K-H Ilting (Stuttgart: Frommann Verlag, 1974), 102. Henceforth *VPR* 4 followed by page number in parentheses.

5 Wood, *PR*, xiii. We shall see that in the *PR* account, the individual's membership in an estate and an ethical corporation brings it about, very significantly, that he or she has actual representation in the state.

6 Gordon, "Hegel and the Politics of Difference," 94. See *PR* §152, 152R.

7 Wood, *PR*, xix; see *PR* §207. In Hegel's time, all universities were state-run, as are many American colleges and universities today.

8 Gordon, "Hegel and the Politics of Difference," 194.

9 Wood, *PR*, xix.

10 Robert R. Williams, *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 255.

“Dead End, Begin Again”

“Last” Lecture Series
April 17, 2008

Jennifer Cognard-Black
Associate Professor of English

(The following talk was accompanied by slides that the editors could not reproduce.)

I. Death

Since I will die tomorrow and, as a result, have been thinking a whole lot about this lecture – the last sustained words I will say before I die – I want to start with what may seem like an obvious point: that you too will die.

Each and every one of you in this room will die. All your friends will die, all of your enemies will die, all of your lovers and ex-lovers will die, all of your family members will die, even the children you haven’t yet given birth to will die. Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie, and Jennifer Aniston will die; Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and John McCain will die; Osama bin Laden will die; Nelson Mandela will die; your RAs and RHCs, your English and philosophy professors, and even the bartender you buy your beer from at the Green Door will die. They will all die. I die; you die.

This is not a metaphor.

I’m not talking about sex, *le petit mort* or the “little death” of orgasm. I’m not talking about Hamlet’s “undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveler returns.” And I’m certainly not talking about you asleep in your bed at age 80, at the end of a long and fruitful and upstanding life, death “taking you” or “stealing over you” or “visiting you” while you’re asleep: “To die, to sleep; To sleep, perchance to dream.”

I’m not talking about a dream.

We say, “He passed away.” We say, “Since she’s been gone.” We say, “They’re in a better place.” These are euphemisms. These are evasions, ways of skirting the real. We hold funerals with portraits of “the dearly departed” displayed prominently in front of closed caskets. Each week we watch photographs of soldiers who have died in Iraq – those “brave men and women” who’ve “sacrificed their lives in the service of their country.” And every spring, we turn on the Oscars and pay homage to those deceased actors who get lifetime achievement awards while montages of their faces repeats over and over and over, ever in movement, ever active, seemingly fresh, seemingly warm.

As Susan Sontag has noted, “After [an] event has ended, the picture will still exist, conferring on the event [or the person] a kind of immortality . . . it would never otherwise have enjoyed.” Despite the fact that photographic portraits are, themselves, already pictures of dead moments, of faces already dead to “time’s relentless melt,” these micro-thin pieces of chemically treated paper, these digitized images of zeroes are ones that are more real to us than the actuality of what’s left, of what remains after death, which is just this:

Dust. Ash. Dirt.

Each of you has at your chair a cup of dirt, and I want you to take a moment to pick it up and look at it. Really look at it. Note its darkness, its coarseness, how small the bits of clay and earth and stone are that make it up. *Touch it*. Consider how it feels: cool and soft and dry and grainy and dense – perhaps even claustrophobic, clingy, closing around your finger when you push it in, dead center. *Taste it*. Yes, go ahead; “eat dirt,” “bite the dust,” eat a mud pie,” a “dirt cake.” Put a little on your tongue. What does it taste like? Don’t think “earthy – be more precise. Don’t go for a simile – don’t think “like sunshine” or “like olives.” Dirt is bitter; it’s moldy, made of mold. It’s fusty, dark, *de-composed* – a word that etymologically means to undo or reverse the action of the verb “to compose,” which is to form, to frame, to fashion. Dirt is un-formed, un-framed, un-fashioned, un-done. It is the reverse of what was once composed, what was once sentient and whole.

Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The Judeo-Christian Adam was formed “of the dust of the ground” into which the Lord God breath[ed] life.” The Greek god Prometheus carefully molded humans out of clay, while his brother, Epimetheus, lavished all of the good gifts of vision, speed, and instinct on the animals he fashioned out of the same stuff. The Iroquois god Enigorio or the Good Mind “formed two images of the dust of the ground in his own likeness, male and female, and by his breathing into their nostrils, he gave them the living souls.”

So what does dirt taste like?

It tastes like you. You will go to it, eventually. You’re cradling a cup of yourself. Hold your breath for four short minutes, hold your breath until your heart knocks and your chest cracks, and that cup of dirt will be you – you will start de-composing at once. Four minutes is the knife blade between you and that little blue cup of dirt.

I borrowed this skull from the Biology Department. [Cognard-Black holds up a skull.] When I first started asking around for one, I think the faculty thought that I was going to put on a scene from *Hamlet*. I first went to Professor Dan Ingersoll in the Anthropology Department, but all he had were plaster skulls. No offense to Dan, but a plaster skull is just a fake, just another way to lie. And so Professor Elaine Szymkowiak generously loaned me this one, an actual skull – I don’t hold in my hand “poor Yorick,” that “fellow of infinite jest,” or even someone I once “knew.” But I do hold a head – part of what was once a flesh-and-blood, breath-and-bone person. These sockets saw, these teeth tasted, these ear-holes heard, this nose nook smelled, this face felt someone once who held it, cupping it in her hands; here hung those lips that someone, at some point, kissed.

To quote the novelist Margaret Atwood – not the Bible, not the Koran, not the Bhagavad Gita, not even Shakespeare – the end of everyone’s story is simply this:

“John and Mary die. John and Mary die. John and Mary die.”

This skull is your future.

II. Fear

It's an edgy thing, death. It makes us anxious; it makes us afraid. We will the thought away. We say to ourselves, "But I don't have to think about that until I'm really, really old." This month *The New Yorker* published an article about how the Baby Boomers (your parents and grandparents) are in the process of changing their game. No longer are they playing the game "He Who Dies with the Most Toys Wins;" now they're playing the game "He Who Dies Last Wins" – for what good are the convertibles, the McMansions, the Swiss chalets, the Rolex watches, and the Prada purses when you're dead? It's that old adage that the Pharaohs just didn't seem to get . . .

You can't take it with you.

Here is what we fear: in the words of George Orwell, that "[a] human being is primarily a bag for putting food into. . . . A [woman] dies and is buried, and all [her] words and actions are forgotten, [except] the food [that she] has eaten lives after [her] in the . . . rotten bones of [her] children." Bags for food. Bags for shit. Bags that die and decompose and make no lasting imprint on human memory.

And what is the result of this fear? What do we turn to in hopes of dealing with it, or avoiding it, or making ourselves feel better about it?

I've wrestled hard with my own fear of death. When I was five years old, my mother (another English teacher) had me memorize a speech given by King Macbeth, one he makes after his wife's suicide, in which he laments:

Life is but a walking shadow,
a poor player that struts and frets
his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more.
It is a tale told by an idiot,
full of sound and fury and signifying nothing.

Pretty heavy stuff for a five-year-old. And maybe that's why these words imprinted themselves in me, have made me, over time, want to avoid or refute their meaning.

Some people seek solace in spirituality, some in fate, some in good deeds, but in high school and especially in college, my fear of death translated into an embrace of Hedonism, less along the lines of its 19th-century founder, Jeremy Bentham, and more in terms of the modern organization Hedonist International (not that I knew about them in college), with its creed that hedonists seek "joyful togetherness," epicurean ideas," "multifaceted joy," sensuality," "diversion," "friendship," "sexual freedom," "the arts," "a cosmopolitan existence," and "a world without borders or discrimination." I sought beauty in the miracle of the body, in tactility and sensation – in music, sex, beer, food, and friendship. (In other words, I was a typical college student. *Carpe diem* and all that.)

And yet these pursuits didn't allay my fear of death. If anything, they put me in peril of hastening it. When I drank, I was anything but cautious. I was often the only girl in a room of guys doing upside-down margaritas one after the other, and there were mornings when I couldn't remember what had happened the night before. My first year

of college, I got so drunk that when I climbed out of a loft bed to go to the bathroom, I dropped onto the corner of a desk – and now have a wide, smiling scar on my shin that I provocatively call my “shark bite.” When I got a little older and was lent a fake ID, my friends and I spent our weekend nights at the bars, and I drove my car from downtown back to campus with no memory of having made that drive. And, of course, I was obsessed with whether I was attractive, and I detested the very body I was exploiting as my source of pleasure. At 17, I was anorexic. By the time I was 20, I was bulimic. And even long after college, when I was 29, I tried plastic surgery to remove small veins on my cheeks and nose.

The central paradox of Hedonism is this: one’s fear of death is only heightened as the vulnerability of the body is made more and more evident in pursuit of hedonistic pleasures. Sexuality and physical beauty are chimeras: the body corrupts. In his novel *Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde makes this clear: “Dorian winced, and looked round at the grotesque things that lay in such fantastic postures on the ragged mattresses. The twisted limbs, the gaping mouths, the staring, lusterless eyes. . . . He knew in what strange heavens they were suffering, and what dull hells were teaching them the secret of some new, [torturous] joy.”

So if the everyday miracle of the body couldn’t assuage my fear of death, and since I wasn’t raised in a specific faith tradition, then what else could I turn to? Remember that I was a child taught to memorize parts of Macbeth at the age of five. As I often joke, having two parents with doctorates in Renaissance literature meant that if I was raised in any kind of faith, it was in the Church of Shakespeare. My favorite Shakespeare sonnet, number 18 – “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” ends like this:

But thy eternal summer shall not fade
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st,
Nor shall Death brag thou wand’rest in his shade
When in eternal lines to time thou grow’st.
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

By the time I was 10 or so, I knew I was a writer. I entered Young Writers’ contests; I wrote and illustrated my own Choose your Own Adventure books, as well as short whodunits in the style of Nancy Drew (my sleuth was named Holly Dutch). Stephen King calls the magic of writing “telepathy,” and I think even at age 10, I intuited that power, the pure magic of language that allows for someone writing (in the case of Shakespeare) 450 years ago to communicate something vital and true to me all those centuries later, something that I can understand instantaneously, despite the fact that the only vehicle of that communication is a bunch of black scratch marks against a white background. It may sound ridiculous or even blasphemous, but that’s holy; that’s a miracle, a sacred act. King tells writers that they “must not come lightly to the blank page. . . . This isn’t a popularity contest, it’s not the moral Olympics, and it’s not church. But it’s writing, damn it, not washing the car or putting on eyeliner. If you can take it seriously,” King says, “then we can do business.” I wanted to do that business. I wanted to believe Shakespeare’s words on the immortality of art – “So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.”

This meant that I spent a good deal of the last 30 years studying the art of writing. I took classes with Kent Haruf and Lee K. Abbott and Jane Smiley. I got a master's degree in fiction writing, a Ph.D. in critical writing about literature. I wrote a dissertation, which I turned into a book. With my mother, I coauthored a textbook on teaching writing through the study of rhetoric. With my sister, I co-edited a book of primary source documents – 19th- and 20th-century letters by women writers. And on my own, I wrote and published short stories, popular articles, and even the occasional bad poem.

Back to *The New Yorker* (yes, I don't have cable, so it's practically the only pop culture I know aside from "Seinfeld" re-runs!). It's absolutely true that writing is miracle – that so long as humans can breathe and eyes can see, writing has the potential to "give life" to the past, to re-memory the past into the present, *but of course in order for that to happen, your writing must be read*. A book on a shelf (or being used as fuel for a fire) isn't a book of miracles. It's just a collection of black scratch marks on a white background.

Okay – I'm no Shakespeare. (I've reached an age where I can say that and be all right with it.) I won't be read in 100 years. But will Shakespeare be read in 3,000 years? What about 100,000 years? If the earth is still here, how about a million years? So far, he's only stood the test of 450 years.

Here's another favorite poem of mine, this one by Percy Bysshe Shelley. It's a sonnet called "Ozymandias":

I met a traveler from an antique land,
Who said – Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed,
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name in Ozymandias, King of Kings,
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

There is an arrogance, a vanity, a self-absorption in any artistic act – in any attempt to make oneself immortal in sculpture or writing, or in possessions or property, or even in certain acts of philanthropy, such as giving money to have a building or a monument or even a brick named after you. We so want to stamp ourselves on this earth, to scar it with the form of our faces. But no matter what material things we make – even if our motives are to engage in what Oscar Wilde called the "uselessness" of art (an activity that's not about making money but about making meaning) – that material thing we make, no matter what it is, it too shall pass. Eventually, our Works will be nothing but colossal Wrecks, boundless and bare. Our Works are Vanity Fair.

III. Give

There's a quotation I keep on my kitchen refrigerator from the 12th-century Persian poet Omar Khayyam that is translated "Be happy for this moment / This moment is your life." Now I have to admit that I don't really live by this saying very well, but I do believe in its wisdom – that the past is but a shadow, the future a fog, and the only life we really have is this life – this life in this room in this moment. Right here, right now.

The ephemeral *is* the immortal: the fleeting *is* the eternal. It's what you do now, in this present – this beat, beat, beat of your blood, this breath, breath, breath of your body, this seeing, this feeling, this be-ing – that matters. And of course what matters most in this now is what you already know: it's how you act and interact with others. It's how you give of yourself to yourself – as well as to the world.

The writers I most admire knew this, even as they attempted immortality with their own books. William Wordsworth writes that when he turns to the memories of nature in his mind's eye, that "the weary weight / Of all this unintelligible world, / is lightened – "

Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

Present tense: we *see* into the life of things. Walt Whitman calls this state of being "containing multitudes." Charlotte Brontë believes it's an immediate and tangible sympathy: "as if I had a string somewhere under my left ribs, tightly and inextricably knotted to a similar string situated in the corresponding quarter of your . . . frame." For George Eliot, it is to make yourself a "willing fence before the breast of another" and to carry your "own heart-wound in heroic silence." For Virginia Woolf, it's loving "life; London; this moment of June." For Harriet Beecher Stowe, it's "walking alongside [another] soul & up and down paths of thought and suggestion . . . the purest expression of what disembodied communion may be." And for E.M. Forster, it is the simple elegant command, "Only connect!"

Each of these writers wishes to give to others; it's the fundamental reason why they wrote in the first place. They wished to give themselves to others through the miracle of "disembodied communion," of writing and reading (itself a kind of gift).

So what do I want to leave you with today? Not death – not a dead end at all. I want to leave you with the life that inevitably is borne from death, the birth you can enact every day, every moment.

Give up. Allow yourself to give up. Give up on your failed relationships – the failed friendships, the failed lovers, even the failed familial connections. Give up on the activities that others have told you that you should pursue, the ones you do because

you'd feel guilty if you didn't do them. Give up on the vain hope that if you just work hard enough, or work out enough, or make enough money, or choose the right major, or know the right people, that you will be happy. Give up on anything and everything that you do that hurts yourself or someone else.

The poet Mary Oliver has written that:

To live in this world
you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it
against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.

In my own life, I've had to give up my almost pathological need to try and mend failed relationships. For different reasons, I no longer talk to my two best friends from college, even though I was in both of their weddings, and they, in turn, were in mine. For a number of years, I tried to re-connect with each of them, but (again, for different reasons), neither one wanted to connect – neither one wanted to find a new now between us. And so I've given up on feeling bad about that, on feeling guilt or even regret. The time I held them against my bones was the now of the past – and that has to stay in the past.

I've also tried to give up on the self-destructive behaviors I had throughout my teens and twenties, such as starving myself or trying plastic surgery. I've tried to make peace with my own fears of aging by writing about it and by teaching Women Studies and talking with young women about their own body image disorders.

And I've had to give up (or at least try to give up) my tendency to be a workaholic, the driving ambition and energy that takes me away from my daughter and my family. While I love teaching and writing and all of the events I've helped organize since coming to St. Mary's, I've also spent the past few years measuring, measuring – tallying myself and my achievements up. It's not even mathematics, the elegance of numbers over lines – a numerical stretch toward eternity. My list is just a tally, hash marks, the work of a stick in the sand – a slim language of pettiness and doubt.

Give birth. So I want you to try and give up, but I also want you to give birth. Now, you can be literal with this directive and have children. Having children humbles you, forces you to be altruistic, forces you out of yourself, reminds you of the beauty of this moment, this here, this now. You clench your teeth at the preciousness of your children.

But even if you don't have children, you can give birth in many other ways. For one, you can give birth to love. For another, you can give birth to friendship.

Henry David Thoreau once wrote, "If you give money, spend yourself with it." You can give birth to the human by giving of yourself. Host a dinner for a group of your friends. Write a letter instead of an e-mail. Make a gift instead of buying one. Bake for someone – something you've never baked before. Give away \$25 every month to a different person or a different cause. Kidnap your roommate, your best friend, your boy-

friend or girlfriend and take them down to the river – watch the sunset. Make fun. Make love. Make meaning. Make laughter, make up stories and songs, make joy. Make new. Make this, here, now, in front of us.

This afternoon, I want to end by having you once again pick up that little blue cup of dirt. I'm going to pass around seeds – they are grass seeds, and I want you to plant a few in your dirt. It's okay if you don't actually grow the grass in your cup – you don't have to take it back to your room and tend it, put it in the sunlight, water it, and watch it grow green. But you do have to put a seed deep into your earth, feel what that's like, something small taking root in your cup, in you.

As you do that, I'm going to read to you from Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass." This is from the first poem in that book, called "Song of Myself," section number six:

"A child said *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with full hands;
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any
more than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green
stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may
see and remark, and say *Whose?*

Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the
vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,
Growing among black folks as among white,
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I
receive them the same.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

Tenderly will I use you curling grass,
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,
It may be if I had known them I would have loved them,
It may be you are from old people, or from offspring taken soon
out of their mothers' laps,
And here you are the mothers' laps.

This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers,
Darker than the colorless beards of old men,
Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.

O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues,
And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths for
nothing.

I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and
women,
And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken
soon out of their laps.

What do you think has become of the young and old men?
And what do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere,
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the
end to arrest it,
And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.”

Plant yourselves – your dead end is also, now, ever a beginning.

Acceptance of the Homer L. Dodge Award for Excellence in Teaching

April 26, 2008

Asif Dowla
Professor of Economics

I am really surprised that I am receiving this award. Think about it: the best picture Oscar this year went to the movie “No Country for Old Men.” I am worried that when my former and current students find out that I am receiving this award, they will scream, “There will be blood.”

This is an important occasion to thank all the people who made it possible for me to receive this award. First and foremost, the credit goes to my wife, Rubab, for being a wonderful life partner, and understanding that teaching makes me happy. More than 25 years ago, she said “Yes” to a first-year Ph.D. student whose monthly income was only \$500.

My children are here today. I am glad they are here. They are not convinced that I can teach. Even now, if they have any questions, they go to their mother first. They are my gateway to the “TXT” generation. They tell me about episodes of “South Park,” “Family Guy,” and “The Simpsons” that I should watch and integrate into my teaching. They help me decipher some of the languages that young people use. Last semester, I was reading comments on the online teaching evaluations. One of the comments was that my only weakness is that I am kryptonite. Now, I had no idea what that meant. I thought it must be something really bad. They told me it means I am stronger than Superman. I hear that students say that when I do a push-up, I push the ground down. My children tell me that this is a Chuck Norris analogy, meaning I am a tough guy.

I want to thank Norton Dodge, a former economics professor, for sponsoring this award. I joined the Economics Department after he had already retired. So, I missed the chance to be his colleague. I want to thank generations of students who have enabled me to become a better teacher. I thank presidents and provosts at the College who have helped me: Ted Lewis, Maggie O’Brien, Mel Endy, Alan Dillingham, and Larry Vote. My colleagues in the Economics Department, especially Andy Kozak, Alan Dillingham, Ho Nguyen, and Don Stabile served as my therapists and helped me to become a better teacher. I have learned a lot from them. My friends in the College – you know who you are – you have also helped me in numerous ways to become a better teacher, and I thank you for that.

A benefit of teaching in a place like this is that it gives you an opportunity to develop lifelong relationships with students. The mentoring and teaching does not stop after graduation. At least once a month, I receive e-mail or notes from former students informing me of happenings in their lives. Sometimes there is a request for career advice or about graduate school. Surprisingly, some of them still want me to teach them about some aspect of economic events. I remind them that there is a statute of limitations on their tuition.

I knew early on that I wanted to be an economist. But I did not know that I would become an economics professor. My plan was to join the Foreign Service after finishing a graduate degree in economics.

I still remember the first day I started teaching. I was walking through a long hallway heading towards my class. More than 150 noisy, mostly male students were waiting for me to teach them. I was so scared, because I used to be one of them. Then, suddenly, it occurred to me that I was the teacher and they were the students. That realization was immensely overpowering. I have not looked back ever since. Something or someone convinced me that I am meant to do this for the rest of my life and this is my calling.

Clearly, no acceptance speech about teaching will be complete without a few words about my teaching philosophy. Quoting the MIT physics professor who is a superstar for the YouTube crowd, my job as a teacher is not to cover a book, but to uncover the mystery of economics. I believe in teaching more by teaching less. At the end of each class, students should be surprised to learn a new fact or theory. They should feel that they got their money's worth.

This is an important occasion. In a few minutes, three of my SMP (St. Mary's Project) mentees will also receive awards for excellence. There is nothing better for a teacher than to share his or her accomplishment with his or her students. I thank you once again for selecting me for this award.

Thank you very much.

“Notes from a Strange Messenger”

Senior Convocation Speech
May 20, 2008

Benjamin A.L. Click, III
Professor of English

Thank you, Sarah. There’s seems to be a truckload of joy and light around here tonight. Thanks for including me. As for the wisdom that Sarah said I would impart, well, let’s just see how that turns out. No matter how it turns out, feel free to break into spontaneous mirth at any time; hoot and holler if you must; and chuckle if you catch an inside joke from one of the classes we shared; then explain it to the person sitting next to you. I’m just sorry I couldn’t have taught all of you.

Obviously, this address tonight is dedicated you: —the class, the group, the gang, the passel, the posse, the pack, the mob, the St. Mary’s community that is the Class of 2008!

But I’d also like to dedicate this talk to my mother, whose laughter did and still does so many things for our family. And to my father, who had the vision to see “the ten thousand high-grade comicalities which exist in the world as well as the comic side of a thousand low-grade and trivial things” (Twain). You also have him to thank for the funeral suit you see on me. I have now worn this suit three times: 13 years ago at my father’s funeral, four years ago at [pulling out book mark from his coat and reading the date] Molly and Bob’s wedding, and tonight at the Class of 2008 Senior Convocation! Don’t tell me that you aren’t a special class—this night now ranks in the grand, sublime, and memorable company of funerals and weddings. And damn, am I uncomfortable.

By invoking my parents tonight I can remind you that no matter what your relationship is or has been with Mom and Dad, or Mom or Dad, or Mom and Mom or Dad and Dad, or whoever you call parent (just covering the bases here), they are responsible for you—if you know what I mean. There would be no you without them. So, show them your love in the most human and touching way possible: send them a heart-felt emoticon on your cell.

By invoking my parents I can also recall their attitude toward this mean ole world—that we are owed nothing from this life. As Mark Twain said, “The world owes us nothing; it was here first.” But he didn’t mean that it doesn’t *offer* us anything, because it does. It offers us innumerable opportunities to use our most valuable and distinguishing characteristic as humans—that which separates us from the lower animals. No, it’s not the opposable thumb (monkeys have those), it’s not our ability to reason (Lord knows we don’t possess that trait), it’s not our use of language (but I’ve heard that all of the three presidential candidates can speak and think in complete sentences, so there’s hope). According to my friend, Dr. Bill Williams in biology, it’s our large brains and tool making that distinguish us. See, recent thought on human evolution argues that the reason we have large brains is the result of complex social structures. The complexity of these structures required us to be smarter. You didn’t have to be the smartest, just smarter than your competition. You would attract more mates this way. And the smarter you were, the better tool you could produce, and the better tool allowed you to defeat

your competition: thus, more mates. As much as I admire him, I think Bill is . . . well . . . *wrong*. It's none of these things. It's our sense of humor. Oh, and if you're hung up on that attracting mates thing, have you seen how beautiful my wife is? (You should concoct your own one-liner here. I've given you the raw materials: mate, tool, big sense of humor. But let's just say that she didn't marry me for my looks, but I can make her laugh).

But humor is a serious thing, and I'm serious about it. Twain called it "mankind's greatest blessing. Humor is the great thing, the saving thing after all. The minute it crops up, all our hardinesses yield, all our irritations and resentments flit away, and a sunny spirit takes their place."

This entire week you have been conferring this great blessing upon one another. You're sharing stories and laughter from your time at St. Mary's. In fact, this place has a way of imprinting all of you so much that you are likely to have weird and recurring dreams about it once you leave it. When you are no longer living in Lewis Quad, QA, Dorch, (mentions Mike Strittmater, a senior still living in Dorchester), or a town-house with a waterfront view, you'll dream that you haven't gone to your chemistry class since the first week of the semester. So real will be this dream that you'll scurry from your bed, scramble to find your wallet, purse—your nonexistent bookbag—and double-check that you actually don't have that class on your schedule. Hell, you don't even have a schedule! You're out in the world, you're not at St. Mary's anymore. Once you realize this, the anxiety of not attending class will pass, and you'll laugh. Now don't get wistful; remember, humor is a saving thing.

Through this dream and your waking from it, you just experienced a high-grade comicality. Let me explain, simply: You can't stay in this idyllic spot forever. And it's a funny irony that St. Mary's makes you feel so much a part of it for four wonderful years, and then kicks you to the curb and haughtily commands you to, "Have your stuff out of your room by 3 p.m. tomorrow!"

Your teachers realize how attached you become, yet we still teach you knowing that you'll depart and a new group of students will take your seat in our classrooms, *not* your place in our hearts or our memories. Personally, I can't play blues with Audrey and Josh at St. Mary's forever; I can't keep mentoring Conni on her SMP; I can't continue to advise Mandy to take it easier in life (well, maybe I can); I can tell Jenna that she's awesome in only one Convocation Address; I can't keep bothering Dan, Tyler, or Julie for free piano lessons; I can't tell Brittany anything anymore (I never could); I won't be able to listen to Brenna make some of the best comments about Twain that I've heard; I won't be able to listen to Jimmy's unique and compelling voice on a weekly basis; I can't keep bugging Brooks for a CD of one of the coffee houses he taped; and I sure as heck can't keep dedicating country blues songs to Corey Ahearn who never shows up to receive the dedication.

Teachers—we are strange messengers, indeed. And tonight surely there is no messenger stranger than I because I hold in my hand two lists. List One contains those of you who will graduate tomorrow (Oh, By the Dog, Mark Fiege, the Registrar is still waiting for your SMP Action Plan—she just wanted me to remind you of that—if you'd like to walk tomorrow, that is.) List Two—and this is the important one—was compiled by a supreme being, a great creator, the god of your choice, Buddha, Zeus, God, Allah, Krishna, or Isis (there's the shout-out for Religious Studies) whoever you believe is in charge of this grand mess we call humanity. But for tonight let's call her The Great

Humorist. I know she's a she because no creator could ever make a male and not find *that* funny. The names on the two lists are identical, but the second list ranks those of you who are on the path achieving eternal salvation through Laughter—some were born with the sense of humor, some have developed it, and some of you . . . well . . . we have some work to do. But perhaps we can make some headway this evening. This list reveals those who have marked the moments of life through humor, not tragedy. See, there's redemption in laughter, and very little in sorrow.

My students know I could bore you with what my friend Aristotle has to say about the difference between Comedy and Tragedy, about tragedy's cathartic ability to wash away emotions of pity and fear. Of course, ever since Aristotle's treatise on Comedy fell out of the back of his toga never to be found again, Comedy's been treated like the red-headed stepchild of Tragedy. And, I'm mad as hell about it and I'm not gonna take it any more. Believe me, there's a joy in humor that can be just as profound and cathartic as the pity and fear of tragedy. I'm rather fond of the way Texas-born author Katherine Anne Porter puts it: "I think joy is just as instructive as pain, and I like it better." Me too, and so do the students at the top of List Two—those of you at the bottom who just chuckled, you're moving up.

Humor derived from life's comedy provides us with a way to keep on keepin' on. When you all attain a goal, be humble and smile at your achievement; when you fail to attain a goal, examine the true ridiculousness in your reaction of utter disappointment. And you'd better be ready to do just that because there will be people who are less qualified than you, and they'll get your job, get promoted, and be praised right in front of you. I bet you've sat next to them in class, thinking, "What a tool; this guy's no smarter than me . . . I mean 'I, no me—oh hell, what a jerk.'" One day you might have kids of your own, and you'll wonder why the next-door neighbor's kids always get recognized in school for their achievements while yours, just as worthy, get second, third, or no place. You'll have to witness it too (your parents did!). For example, when I was seven, when my father was stationed in Japan (we moved quite a bit when I was young), he knew I got beat up by Frank Ace on a weekly basis. Frank Ace was at least a third larger than I was (I was skinny—joints-larger-than-limbs skinny!). Anyway, Frank Ace would surprise attack me, knock me down, pin my arms down with his knees, and slap me in the face until he decided to let me up. I'd cry every time. It must have pained my father to see his boy getting beat up so often, but what could he do; we were boys and Frank Ace wouldn't have obeyed him or his own parents anyhow.

But one day, I caught my tormentor out of the corner of my eye, and somehow when he lunged for me, I managed to flip his large, flaccid body over my scrawny back. Immediately, I pounced on him, pinned his arms down with my knees and with closed fists, through tears of fury, bloodied his nose. His mother came bounding out of her kitchen, shrieking, "My Little Frankie! Col. Click, get your crazy boy off of my little Frankie before he kills him." I peered up through my tears, wondering if I would hear my dad's familiar commanding voice telling me to stop. But instead, I saw him just sauntering, in a mock jog, over our way, saying calmly, with his cigar hanging out of his mouth, "All right, son, you'd better stop." Of course to me that meant, "Keep pounding away." When he finally reached me he gently pulled me off—keeping my dignity intact. As we walked away from Mrs. Ace's screeching about suing us and about what a delinquent I was, I remember my father looking down at me, trying to hold back his broad and always available grin, saying, "Glad you got that out of your system. I don't think Frank Ace will be bothering you anymore, son." I laughed and said, "I think you're

right, Dad.” Until writing this talk, it hadn’t occurred to me that I might have suffered a humiliation and helplessness that could have scarred me for life. I guess my father’s humor and the laughter it produced saved me far more than my one victory over Frank Ace. Now that’s profound.

Humor’s profound statement doesn’t end in childhood; it’s just getting started. Just one week ago, my wife and I sat at Children’s Hospital and waited for our seven-year-old daughter, Liz, to get to the recovery room after a two-hour eye surgery. Like typical parents, we thought of all the scary possibilities of what our daughter’s life might be like if the surgery didn’t go well, and then I said something laced with profundity, and my wife laughed out loud in my face when I uttered it. I said, “I’m kinda pissed because now I can’t die anytime I want.” Clearly, I meant that if need be I’d take care of that child until the day I died—that I’d (we’d) find a way to keep on keepin’ on. Humor helps you find the way. In its own way, it’s the ability to nearly change reality through laughter or at least make a new reality. And no one knows that better than Liz.

About a week before her surgery, Liz came into our bedroom to wake us and looked at the deck outside our window, and saw beads of water from the previous night’s rainfall. It had since stopped raining and the sun was shining. She said, “Oh, it’s rainy.” My wife said, “No Lizzie, it’s sunny outside.” To which Liz nonchalantly smiled and replied, “Oh, it’s a dry rain.” Talk about changing reality! Another profound statement.

But real humor doesn’t dodge real life; it becomes its most profound in the darkest of times. You think I’m kidding. Consider these examples:

During the horror of the Civil War, Lincoln could be heard laughing hysterically in the White House; when asked why, his reply: “I laugh because I must not cry.”

Two months after Johnny Carson died, David Letterman delivered his Late Show monologue filled entirely with jokes that Carson had written in the last month of his life.

Last year, a surprise comedy hit of Broadway was Mark Twain’s play, Is He Dead? Consider that Twain wrote this during one of the darkest times of his life, on the verge of bankruptcy that would exile him to Europe for nearly 10 years, and following the recent death of one of his daughters.

Or something extremely personal to me: *beer*. Well actually, a beer commercial and my father’s death. In 1995, there was a Bud Light commercial that portrayed a father and his adult son fishing off a pier bathed in a beautiful sunset backdrop. The son, in a touching moment, turns to his dad and says, “Dad, there’s something I gotta tell you.” “What is it son?” “Well, you’re my dad, and ... I love you, man!” The father grabs his beer can, turns to the son, and says, “You’re not getting my Bud Light, Johnny.” Yep, pretty funny.

Just five days before he died from terminal cancer, I was in my father’s bedroom on a Sunday morning, shaving him. Unlike me, he always maintained an air of dignity, and being shaven was just an outward sign of that dignity. He hadn’t spoken for three days. When I finished, I stood up and said, “You know you were always a great dad.” I walked to the door and said, “I’m going to Mass; I’ll say a prayer for you. You know I love you.” As I turned to walk out, I heard his faint voice say, “You’re not gettin’ my Bud Light.” I turned back to look at him, he had a grin on his face, and I said, “What did you say?” He repeated, “You’re not gettin’ my Bud Light.”

It's funny, he didn't even drink beer—he was a hard-liquor man. But he understood what Twain meant when he wrote, “Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand. You are always fussing and fighting with your other weapons. Do you ever use that one? No, no you leave it lying rusting. As a race, do you ever use it at all? No, you lack sense and the courage.”

But I watched many of you have sense and courage to share your good humor. I see it in your commitment to the world (the Peace Corps, AmeriCorps, Teach for America), and to the environment (forming the St. Mary's River Project Educators Club and getting half-naked to do the Polar Plunge—in February!). I overhear your laughter on the path, on the patio, on the Greens, in Daffodil Gulch, at Church Point and throughout Historic St. Mary's City. But most of all I witness it in the classroom . . . which reminds me of a story about a towel . . . in a classroom. (That was called a digression—an extremely important element in telling a story.)

When I was an undergraduate, I had a history class that was taught by Mr. Dillon. He was no Christine Adams, Chuck Holden, or Tom Barrett—that's for sure. Mr. Dillon had a pile of yellowed notes, probably kept from the first time he taught American History—hell, these things *were* American History. But anyway, he would sit at a desk in front of us with his yellowed notes and proceed to read from them, looking up every so often make an orchestrated gesture to emphasize a point. “There were three major causes of the Civil War,” each cause corresponding with the correct number of digits on his hand. “The first cause was . . .” We were bored stiff. What made it even worse was the impossibility of his exams—impossible to study for and impossible to finish in the time period. So, like a typical bored and aggravated student, I sat in the back of the room with one of my best friends, Mike. And every class period just before Mr. Dillon would begin his lecture, Mike and I would watch as Henry Spivvy, fresh out of his tennis class, would fly into the classroom in gym clothes, carrying a gym bag and a damp white towel and plop down right beside us.

As unfair as all of the exams were in the course of the semester, the final exam achieved a new level of impossibility. And wanting to get as much time as possible for the impossible, we all arrived early to take it. Once we were all seated, Mr. Dillon distributed the exams to us. Thus began the class's collective expletives as each of us hoisted up the exam with two hands, mouthing half-audible unified phrases such as “What the fu**? What is this sh**?” trailing off before actually saying the words.

Mr. Dillon brought about silence: “All right, now, get to work.” No sooner had he finished when in flies Henry Spivvy, fresh from his tennis final, bag and damp towel in tow. Mr. Dillon hands him the exam and says, “Take a seat, Mr. Spivvy.” So back comes Henry, plops down by Mike and me and proceeds to look at us and replay what the collective just had said, “What the fu**? What is this sh**?” Mike and I shrugged our shoulders and put our heads down to begin the impossible. But Henry just sat there, staring at the exam, then at the towel, then the exam, then the towel. Finally, he reached down, picked up the towel, balled it up on his desk. (Long pause) Now you know when a group of people can sense something is about to happen, like an accident, and just know to look up? That's what our class did as Henry hurled his balled-up damp towel toward the desk of Mr. Dillon with his yellowed notes stacked neatly in front of him.

As the towel unfurled in slow motion, as in a scene from an Ingmar Bergman film, the collective whole watched as it made its arc and begin to descend. It landed

violently right on the yellowed notes, sending them flying. In near shock, but with no visible sign of it, Mr. Dillon slowly rose, picked up the damp towel, looked directly at Henry and said, “Mr. Spivvy, what is the meaning of this?” (He was pointing at the towel.) All eyes turned toward Henry, who calmly picked up the exam, mockingly pointed at it, and said, “I’m throwing in the towel!”

Laughter erupted. But it quickly subsided as we all turned back toward the front of the room and Mr. Dillon. What would be his reaction? None of us had ever seen him smile, but there it was: a mouth, upturned, with teeth showing even. And in a voice we’d never heard before, Mr. Dillon said, “Throwing in the towel, huh?” and looking around at his scattered notes, chuckled, “Well I should say you did, Mr. Spivvy, I should say you did. Now let’s get back to work, and . . . just do your best.” Perhaps for the first time in his teaching life, Mr. Dillon realized the ridiculousness of what he expected of us. As for the collective whole, our hardness, irritation, and resentment flitted away and a sunny spirit overtook their place.

Henry didn’t throw in the towel for real—he took the test—even though what we were dealt for the semester was completely unfair. And you won’t either when it gets hard, especially in the times that seem most unfair, make you feel most unworthy, most unwanted, and dare I say, most unloved. You know, every time I say, “unloved” I think of that great line from a B.B. King song, “Nobody loves me but my mother, and even she might be jiving me too.” Humor’s gonna save you, and I’m not jiving you about that.

You’ve graciously shown your good humor tonight, laughing in all the right spots and enduring a rather long address. And I’d like to close by making one more dedication to one of your classmates who will not be with you in body tomorrow but who will nonetheless be honored. Ian Glasgow was a student here who died last year. Perhaps you remember him, the guy in the wheelchair, with blonde hair and always a smile on his face. I knew him only briefly, but enough to know that he possessed the courage to use humor to help him on a daily basis. His friend Ginny Insley was kind enough to tell me a bit about Ian’s sense of humor; one story stands out. As part of the Crazy Pianos Club, Ian offered his rather large handicapped accessible van to the members of the club in order to go to a Kennedy Center piano concert. Ian and the club piled into the van and made the trip to the Metro. As Ginny describes it: “A bunch of rowdy club members in a gigantic blue van, bumbling down Route 5 while we argued/laughed/threw food at each other and listened to Grieg’s ‘Hall of the Mountain King.’” Now I don’t know about you, but that scene is stone cold funny. It kind of reminds me of a cross between a scene from “Little Miss Sunshine” with its dysfunctional family jammed in a Volkswagen van trying to get a little girl to a beauty contest and the scene from “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest,” where R.P. McMurphy (Jack Nicholson) takes the patients from the mental hospital on a fishing excursion off the coast of Oregon.” Ian had a wry sense of humor and would have appreciated my analogy. Thank you, Ian, for that.

Ian Glasgow had the courage to use humor; Henry Spivvy had it, my father had it, and my daughter whose whole life lies before her has it. Do you? I think you do. After witnessing you laughing and smiling as a collective whole tonight, I don’t think anyone on List Two has anything to worry about anymore. As your strange messenger, I’ll report back to The Great Humorist that I think the Class of 2008 is going to be just fine. Just fine. Thank you.

“Performing the Divine: Drama and Religion in the Ancient World”

The Reeves Lecture
October 3, 2008

Jeffrey Hammond
Professor of English and
The George B. and Willma Reeves Endowed Chair in the Liberal Arts

Thank you, Maggie and Larry, and my thanks to all of you for being here tonight. This annual lecture is made possible through the generosity of the Reeves family: Steve, Brad, Donna, and the late Willma Reeves, who remains firmly and warmly in our memories.

As I was considering a topic for this year’s lecture, I learned that Family Weekend would also feature Professor Michael Tolaydo performing the Gospel of Mark. Since I’ve been working for a while on a literary and historical study of Mark, the topic of tonight’s talk pretty much fell into my lap. And so, this will be a stand-alone discussion of the links between ancient religion and drama, with particular reference to that gospel. But it also serves as a kind of prologue to Michael’s performances, which will take place tomorrow at 8:00 and Sunday at 2:00 in St. Mary’s Hall.

The live performance of what Christianity considers to be a sacred text underscores a very old connection between drama and religion. It is a connection that’s usually lost on us. In the modern West, religion and drama are seen as two different things – and in some circles, opposite things. My Methodist grandmother certainly believed that. For her, going to church might get you saved, but going to a play – she always called them “stage plays” – was just a distraction, a frivolity. Seeing too many stage plays, including those filmed stage plays called movies, might even get you damned.

I tell you this not to make fun of Grandma, who was, like all of us, a product of her time and place. I tell you this because she was typical in putting religion in one box and theater in another. This reflects the Western habit, especially since the Enlightenment, of applying a divide-and-conquer strategy to human knowledge and experience. We see this strategy in how this very place is organized. Don’t we have an English department, a psychology department, a biology department, and so on?

I have no wish to demean the Western tendency to categorize and classify. Its upside has been a staggering production of knowledge – especially scientific knowledge – since the 17th and 18th centuries. If I ever need a heart surgeon, God forbid, I’ll be grateful for the results of specialization. The downside is that our categorizing habits make it difficult to imagine a time when human experience was seen and felt more holistically, more all of a piece.

This was how it was in the ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean world – the world in which Mark was written and in which Western notions of drama and religion arose. If you were to ask ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, Jews, Greeks, or Romans to describe their “religion,” the question would have puzzled them, because religion

was inseparable from every other aspect of life. And if you asked them how they practiced their religion – their equivalent of “going to church” – they might have said “I’m doing it now,” whatever they were doing. The same could be said for “seeing a play.” Attending dramatic performances was inseparable from who, what, and where you were, both individually and collectively. It’s ironic that we call these things “plays,” because drama, in its beginnings, performed vital cultural work.

Let’s look at those beginnings. Western theater originated in annual festivals of social and agricultural renewal. These pre-Classical fertility rites underscored a unity of human life and cosmic order, one in which the lower world owed its prosperity to its continuities with the upper world. Ancient people routinely gathered to perform communal realignments of these two realms. These realignments were as much political as religious, because the political leader was the chief conduit to the gods. Everyday life also participated in this divine/human unity: the support of cultic practices formed a large part of ancient economies, and, of course, success in anything, including commerce and agriculture, hinged on divine favor. In Egypt the people celebrated the rebirth of Osiris and the annual flooding of the Nile. In Greece they celebrated the return of warm weather and navigable seas. In Mesopotamia they celebrated the rejuvenation of the Tigris and the Euphrates.

What happened at these festivals? For one thing, there was a lot of eating and drinking. But for the ancients, serious partying and just plain seriousness were not incompatible. There were also solemn processions, sacrifices, prayers, recitations, and all sorts of contests. In Greece, athletic competitions gave rise to the Olympic Games. Artistic competitions flourished, too, with prizes awarded for poetry, oratory, and plays. We consider the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides to be “classics” in that PBS sense: canonical works of high-class literature. But as is often the case, our classics started out as somebody else’s popular culture. Shakespeare’s plays underwent the same transformation: his popular entertainments have been reimagined as art so lofty that many of us are needlessly scared of him.

Though the Greek plays were not themselves rituals in a strict sense, they were performed within an overarching ritual of thanksgiving and renewal. Moreover, the specific forms of Greek drama evolved out of practices that were once explicitly ritualistic: choral songs to the gods, chiefly Dionysus. The ritual contexts of tragedy are preserved in its name: the Greek *tragoidia* literally means a goat-song – a trace of its sacrificial origins. The fact that tragic heroes fall also reflects the sacrificial motif, a human parallel to the scapegoat of ancient Jewish tradition.

Most of these plays enacted a reflection on – a questioning of – the conventional wisdom of the community. Comedy did this explicitly; tragedy did it more profoundly. In this, Greek plays were subversive – a trait fossilized in the word satire, from the origins of comedy in the old satyr-plays. But in their insistence on a human realignment with cosmic order, the plays were also deeply conservative – just as religion is a conservative force in most societies. People routinely gathered to reassert this realignment – and performing plays was one of the things that they did.

Drama comes from the Greek word *dromenon*: a thing done or performed. In the ancient world, performance had an implication that coincides, oddly enough, with postmodern theory. Nowadays we say that through discourse, we perform our realities

– indeed, our very identities. The ancients would have understood this. For them, performance enacted the creation of something real. Performative language made real that which it said. The most common forms of performative language, in addition to the language of religious cults, were blessings and curses. The Hebrew Bible cautioned against swearing oaths because words, once uttered, became real. This also suggests the original response to the Beatitudes of Christian tradition. When Jesus said “blessed are the peacemakers,” ancient hearers would not have heard this as wishful thinking. With the very utterance, those peacemakers *were* blessed.

The first systematic thinker about drama was Aristotle, who made three lasting contributions to dramatic theory. The first was the notion of catharsis. Tragedy, in particular, produced in its audience a catharsis – quite literally, a cleansing. We moderns usually imagine this in terms of individual psychology, as a kind of inner release. For the ancients, it was a decidedly communal cleansing as well – an effect reinforced by open-air theaters and performances in the light of day. The audience was not marginalized to a darkened periphery, but drawn tangibly and visibly into the action.

Aristotle’s second observation was that tragedy involved the fall of a noble person. Why noble? The main reason lay in the inseparability of religion and politics in the ancient world. The mythic or quasi-mythic leader was linked not only to the gods, but also to the people in a tightly woven hierarchical chain. A play about a noble person – especially a political leader – was thus also, and inevitably, a play about a whole society. When something was wrong with King Oedipus, something was wrong with all of Thebes – hence, a plague was making the entire city suffer for a single act of road rage in the past. This interconnectedness reflected socio-economic realities: society was based on a web of reciprocal exchanges, a network of client/patron relationships reaching all the way up to the king or emperor. The Romans had a mantra for this reciprocity: *do ut des* – I give in order that you might give.

Aristotle’s third observation concerned what it was that made the noble person fall. It was always something inside the character – an inner trait – that resulted in his or her undoing. We call this the “tragic flaw.” Interestingly, this flaw was usually excessive pride in what would ordinarily be a virtue. Oedipus, for instance, who had solved the riddle of the sphinx, was too brain-proud to heed the seer Tiresias. Aristotle’s word for the tragic flaw was *hamartia* – literally, a missing of the mark, as in archery. When the Jewish scriptures were translated into Greek, *hamartia* was used to translate the Hebrew word for sin – a rendering that early Christians followed in the New Testament. Talk about the drama-religion connection: a core concept in Judeo-Christian theology comes from a technical term used in drama criticism.

For the ancients, the cause of tragedy had to come from within. If a safe fell on Oedipus, it would be sad but not tragic: it would just be lousy luck, the Greek *tyche*. But luck was less important than fate, or *moira*. *Moira*, one’s lot or portion, was intimately connected to the self’s makeup. If *tyche* was a bolt from the blue, one’s *moira* was somehow, at least in part, one’s own doing. Not even the gods could escape its relentless inevitability.

Moira was a metaphysical elastic clause: it made what seemed incoherent and meaningless coherent and meaningful – though beyond human understanding. Fate reinforced the connection of everything to something else, with smaller occurrences

linked to larger occurrences, and to larger occurrences still. This notion is not just Greek. Ancient Egyptians conceived of *ma'at* – cosmic truth, justice, rightness – and *ma'at* would always prevail. Indeed, your heart would be weighed against the *ma'at* feather when you died. In the will of Yahweh, ancient Jewish culture developed a theology much closer to the Egyptian *ma'at* and the Greek *moira* than to the diversified powers and personalities of the humanized Olympians. Here, the Hellenic and Hebraic traditions saw eye to eye. They also practiced deed for deed. Ancient Judaism developed vehicles of realignment, too, especially the Temple cult and its rituals of sacrifice. And interestingly, much of the Jewish Law is given in the form of stories – narrative and dramatic structures put to religious use.

The interplay of religious ritual and theatrical practice continued long after the decline of classic theater in the Athenian mode. The ancient mystery cults found throughout the Mediterranean, for instance, blended Near Eastern with Greek elements of religion and drama. In the mysteries, people still gathered to perform – to make real – their realignment with the divine. We know less about mystery cults than about public, state cults for the simple reason that, as their name suggests, secrecy was one of their hallmarks. What we do know, however, suggests that mystery rituals usually contained three main components. First, words were spoken – the *legomena* or things said in cultic practice. Second, objects were dramatically revealed – the *deiknumena* or things shown: often, an image of the god or a stalk of wheat. And of course, things were done – ritual actions collectively known as *dromena* – that word again.

It was within this world that the writings collected in the New Testament developed. Like their contemporaries, early Christians gathered periodically to perform their beliefs – to make something happen. This reminds us that the technical term for what goes on in communal worship – liturgy – comes from the Greek *leitourgia*: literally, the people's work. Although specific liturgical practices seem to have varied considerably among early Christian groups, clues scattered throughout the New Testament, mostly in the Acts of the Apostles and the Pauline letters, yield a general picture. We know that, in common with many other cults, the early Christians had a ceremonial meal, which would of course evolve into the Eucharist, the Holy Communion. We also know that they preached and prophesied, and that they sang “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.” Sometimes they spoke in tongues, an echo of the nonsensical incantations found in the Greek magical papyri and the cryptic utterances of seers associated with pagan oracles. Paul, our earliest eyewitness to the developing faith, had mixed feelings about speaking in tongues: he wanted those utterances to be interpreted. He had no such qualms, however, about the early Christian practice most directly relevant to our topic: the reading of scriptures.

This brings us, finally, to the Bible – that ancient text that nonetheless remains very much alive as a force in Western culture. In Judeo-Christian tradition, of course, the Bible is considered to be “scripture,” sacred writ. It is a closed collection of books deemed to be “holy,” normative in matters of faith and morals.

Holy books are, by definition, protected books – they are always, in some sense, set aside from ordinary life and experience. The ancient rabbis spoke of building a fence around Torah. The intention was not to isolate the Law, but to protect it by keeping it relevant through commentary and interpretation. Ancient Christians followed this Jewish practice, writing commentaries and basing homilies on their scriptures – which

were initially, of course, the Jewish Scriptures. To these they eventually added new books: four narratives about Jesus, a history of the spreading faith that was initially a second volume to one of those narratives, a collection of letters attributed to Paul and some other apostles, and an apocalypse. This collection, culled from a much larger group of writings, was eventually called the *Kaine Diatheke* – the New Covenant or New Testament.

Thus arose the two-part Christian Bible. Modern Westerners see this book as a fixed, printed text, a material artifact that our culture has very nearly fetish-ized. When modern Christians confront the Bible, it's usually in fragments: brief selections read aloud as part of the Mass, a verse or two as the starting point for a sermon. When the Bible is actually read, the reading takes place alone and in silence. This book has become an object of private meditation, far removed from the communal and performative ethos in which it began.

I've mentioned that the reading of scripture was part of early Christian worship. But what, exactly, did first-century Christians mean by scripture? And even more basically, what did the act of reading mean to them? The first Christian scriptures were, as I've mentioned, the Jewish scriptures. Their authority emerges throughout the New Testament in the frequent phrase "as it is written." To read scripture aloud in worship was part of Jewish liturgical practice, but for the early Christians, even the so-called Old Testament did not constitute a fixed, closed canon. Chiefly because new faith was moving outward from Palestine into the Greek-speaking world, early Christians usually read and cited the Jewish scriptures in their Greek translation, the Septuagint. This collection contained more books than those which eventually constituted the definitive Jewish scriptures, the Hebrew Bible, which achieved fixed form in the late first and early second centuries.

Early on, Christians began incorporating new texts into their meetings. Paul's letters were read aloud to the various groups that he addressed. The *logos* hymn that opens the Gospel of John probably came from the liturgy of the group for whom that gospel was written. And as John itself illustrates, gospels began appearing. These new texts were not yet canonical – not yet definitive. Mark's gospel almost certainly came first. We know this because the authors of Matthew and Luke used it extensively to create their own gospels. For the other evangelists, Mark was not yet a "sacred" text in the sense of being fixed and unalterable. Indeed, they altered it quite a lot, adapting its story to their own needs and adding additional material from other sources.

The overwhelming majority of early Christians did not experience these texts as written documents at all. Instead, they *heard* them as oral recitations performed at their gatherings. Nothing could differ more from the modern, armchair experience of the New Testament – from private reading. The key reason for this difference was the fact that literacy was a skill limited chiefly to priestly and scribal elites – professional readers and writers. This held true throughout the ancient Near East and Mediterranean and throughout the entire period of the Bible's production. Literacy rates have been estimated at around 10 percent in the ancient world. In urban areas it may have been as high as 20 percent; in rural areas it would have been much lower.

To encounter a text in the ancient world was almost always to hear it. We've seen this in the performative situation of Greek drama. But long before that, the epic

poetry that was eventually collected and written into the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* had undergone a long process of oral transmission and performance. The Jewish Bible underwent a similar process; most scholars think that it achieved relatively final written form only after the Babylonian exile.

Once the ancient ubiquity of orality is recognized, its traces appear everywhere. The Platonic dialogues are fictive conversations, modeled on oral instruction. The writings of Aristotle probably arose from lecture notes made by his students, his hearers. It's no accident that most of the ancient images of divine communication also involve speaking and hearing. In ancient Egypt, the notion of authoritative utterance – quasi-deified as *Shu* – was as central to the cosmos as *ma'at*, justice or truth. And the most frequent biblical image of divine revelation is that of hearing the word. Generally, people didn't "see the light" until later. John's gospel promoted that light within Christian circles, but even there the light that comes into the dark world is equated with the *logos*, the divine word.

Written texts served primarily as prompts for oral recitation. In this sense, every written text was a performative script – the bare bones of something that came to life only with oral delivery, with recitation. Indeed, the normal way to "publish" a work in ancient times was to read it publically. Manuscripts were of course copied and distributed, but even here, the text was less a stand-alone artifact than the record of an oral performance. An especially surprising fact, I think, is that even private reading, when it occurred, was done out loud. On the road to Gaza, Philip encounters an Ethiopian eunuch, the queen's treasurer, reading from Isaiah alone and out loud (Acts 8:27). And as late as the fourth century, St. Augustine reported as unusual the fact that his teacher, St. Ambrose, often read silently.

When written and oral versions coexisted, the oral form was often accorded higher prestige. Paul was speaking like a good ancient Mediterranean when he commented that the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life (2 Cor. 3:6). Spirit translates the Greek *pneuma*, which also meant wind or breath – live utterance. Paul sent his letters as stand-ins for his absence, and as late as the early second century, after the existence of the written texts included in the New Testament, Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor, still preferred what he called the "living, remaining voice" to written testimony, to books.

The evidence suggests that early Christians heard the gospels either in large chunks or in their entirety. In the mid-second century, Justin Martyr describes the Christian service as including a public reading of the "memoirs of the apostles," which most scholars interpret as a reference to the gospels. How much of a gospel could be read at a single gathering? Justin says that they were read "for as long as time permits." Ancient cults held elaborate meetings that often lasted for hours. And the possibility that the Christian Eucharist was originally a full meal allows us to imagine that the earliest Christian meetings lasted far longer than in later times.

Mark is the shortest gospel – well within the time limits of ancient cultic gatherings. Given the fact that we've known the outlines of early Christian worship for quite a while, it is surprising that New Testament criticism has been slow to see Mark's gospel as a liturgical drama. In the early days of critical biblical scholarship, Mark was seen as straightforward history – as reportage in the modern manner. Mark may well be a kind

of history, but for the ancients, history was not mere reportage. All history was “interested” history – advocacy or polemical history. Herodotus, the father of history, used the backdrop of the Persian Wars to get at his real theme: the superiority of Greek culture. Rome’s most famous historian, Livy, similarly wrote to assert that Roman supremacy was always meant to be.

Another popular approach is to see Mark as a biography. But ancient biography differed from modern biography in that it also had didactic purposes. The Greek *bios* was a life with significance – a life retold as an exemplar of moral lessons, as when Plutarch offered his parallel *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*.

Seen in its original worship setting, what matters most about Mark is not the genre to which it may have belonged, but the effect that it had on hearers – its impact as a plotted story. Narrative and dramatic criticism of Mark, is only about 30 years old. Werner Kelber pioneered this work by applying Walter Ong’s influential studies of orality to the gospel. Other scholars have followed suit.

This approach is helping us to take seriously the original purpose of the gospels as proclamations of “good news” – the literal meaning of their collective Greek title: *euaggelion*, from which we get evangelist. The root word is *angelos* – a messenger. An *euaggelion* was a good message. As a script for performing this message, Mark was not unlike other ancient cultic texts. It offered a ritual reaffirmation – through repeated hearings in worship – of Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection. It was a performed story by which Jesus was remembered in a deeply experiential sense: that is, put together and made present at worship. In this, Mark was a story that performed its own reality. Other gospels, such as the Q-Source used by Matthew and Luke and the Gospel of Thomas, did not do this, but merely offered lists of Jesus’s sayings. This might explain why they didn’t wind up in the New Testament. The ones that *did* all followed Mark’s lead by basing their presentations on a story, a narrative that could be performed.

Since ancient drama had deeply religious overtones, we might expect an ancient religious text to display lots of dramatic qualities – and Mark assuredly does. I’m not going to go too far into the specifics. One reason is the limitation of time, but another is that I don’t want to spoil Michael’s performance by spilling too many beans.

I will note, however, that Mark has more direct action than the other gospels. There is less narrative expansion on that action, less commentary or explanation, less teaching, less overt theologizing. Mark was written before gospels became multifunctional. In Matthew, Luke, and John, you get a basic narrative, a myth of origins, an apologetic for the faith, and a lot of teaching material – all rolled into one. In Mark all these elements are present, but radically subordinated to the task of narrative proclamation. Even the syntax – the sentences themselves – adds to a terse emphasis on action. Mark does not weave sentences together in complex webs. Instead, the style is insistently paratactic, with a rapid-fire effect: this happens, and that, and that, and that.

Like the Greek plays, Mark features a problem or conflict and a suspense-building plot – in theatrical parlance, a rising action. There is terrifying climax in the crucifixion, a scene that Mark refuses to soften or theologize. But there is also what was later called the denouement – a closing section of resolution, in which the horror is reversed and cosmic order is restored.

Before this final reversal, Mark's author creates an imagined world filled with mundane details that make it believable. When Jesus cures Peter's mother-in-law, trumpets don't blare and the clouds don't part. Instead, she simply gets up and serves the company, as a proper Mediterranean mother-in-law would normally do. Although the story narrates an in-breaking of the divine, the world into which the divine breaks is a very ordinary first-century Palestine.

This world is also filled with lively dialogue and believable characters. Most are walk-ons, but a few are vividly drawn. This economy of main characters is fully consistent with the canons of ancient drama, where the focus was always on the hero. As per Aristotle, Mark's author certainly asserts the ultimate nobility for his. A dramatic innovation, of course, lies in the fact that the flaw that brings down this hero does not lie within, but in the political and religious order that the proclaimed Kingdom of God is destined to sweep away. But even though Mark's Jesus lacks a tragic flaw, he is fully human and displays a staggering range of emotions. Often angry and impatient, he berates his followers, loses his temper, and moves from place to place with un-tranquil suddenness.

Through all of this, the disciples function as a collective personality – a kind of chorus. Theirs is not a chorus of reconfirmed communal values, however, but a chorus of fallen people in desperate need of repentance. The Greek word usually translated by repentance is *metanoia*, and it did not mean simply feeling sorry for one's sins. In its basic meaning, *metanoia* suggested a complete "turning of mind," an utter transformation of identity. The disciples are there to show just how difficult such transformation really is. Peter stands out most prominently, as the ordinary human being engaged in a highly unsettling encounter with the divine. Peter reveals the best and the worst of fallen humanity. He recognizes and proclaims Jesus's identity as the Messiah, the Anointed One, but he also denies knowing Jesus when he feels threatened.

In dramatic terms, this is wonderful stuff. And what unifies it all – what generates the most theatrical power – is Mark's masterful use of dramatic irony. As you'll recall, dramatic irony occurs when the audience understands something that the characters in a story do not. Although the scribes, Pharisees, priests, Herod, Pilate, and even the disciples don't know who Jesus really is, Mark's hearers believed that they knew. And herein lay the gospel's chief rhetorical aim: to realign its audience with the figure at the center of their worship. Each time the story was performed, its hearers were refashioned, once again, into cultic insiders – into people who stood closer to Jesus than did the people who were *in* the story.

Given the ancient propensity to mix solemnity with festivity, I imagine first-century performances of Mark to be lively affairs, with lots of whooping and hollering, shouts of objection, loud laments, and equally loud cheers. The ancient equivalent of boos must have gone up whenever Herod appeared, or Judas. When Peter declares "You are the Christ," I can imagine the audience joining right in as he repeats their most basic creed. At the very end, though, I imagine a hushed silence. Mark is a near-classic tragedy until a surprising conclusion suddenly transforms it into a celebration. Mark's comedic ending, in the technical sense of comedy, is presented as an act of God – one of the most powerful examples of a *deus ex machina* in all of Western literature.

The conclusion of Mark's gospel is extremely interesting. Michael will be performing the King James Version, which ends with several resurrection appearances and a commission to go forth and spread the word. But the King James Version was based on Erasmus's Greek New Testament, which in turn was based on the few late manuscripts that were available to him. Earlier manuscripts and other evidence suggest that this ending was a later addition. Mark originally closed with the women fleeing from the empty tomb, telling no one what they had seen because they were terrified. In the original Mark, the risen Christ was like the mystery religions' *deiknumenon* – a thing revealed as the result of a ritual realignment with the divine. But for Mark's first hearers, this thing had to be imagined. And so, the original story ended not with fulfillment and closure, but with expectation. For Mark's first hearers, the risen Christ was not encompassed by the narrative, but was poised to appear after and beyond it.

Michael Tolaydo will recreate an experience of the time when Mark's gospel, for all its power, had not yet been frozen into scripture – when it still was a story performed by and for a group of people who gathered to make something happen. It's not necessary to accept its religious claims to enjoy watching the story perform something into reality – an act of the imagination that is deeply human. Of course, hasn't theater always gathered people together to make something happen? But don't take my word for it. Tomorrow and Sunday, Michael will make something happen before your very eyes and ears.

“The Bible as a Jewish Text”

Inaugural Ike Weiner Lecture
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It is an honor to be here and to be giving the inaugural Ike Weiner Lecture. My research is on the history of Biblical interpretation and on the history of Jewish-Christian relations. This means that I am very aware that 1. the Bible has meant different things at different times and to different people and 2. Jews and Christians have disagreed about what the Bible meant.

I teach Jewish Studies here at St. Mary’s College from within a department of religion and philosophy - not from a department of Jewish Studies. That means I am teaching Jewish Studies primarily to students who are studying Judaism in the context of other religions. In my teaching as in my research, therefore, I struggle with the question of how to understand the Bible as a Jewish text. That is, how does the Bible speak to those who share my Jewish heritage, and how do I teach it honestly in an academic setting to those who do not? In this lecture I am going to both outline the problem and give some examples of how I deal with it. Dealing with the issue is, of course, not the same as solving it.

This talk will examine the Bible from a variety of different perspectives. We will see how the Bible is:

1. An Israelite text: a text composed by people who did not call themselves Jewish and did not follow the religion we know as Judaism.
2. A contested text: a text which Jews and Christians have fought over.
3. A multi-vocal text: a text that can mean multiple things at the same time, depending on the assumptions that one brings to it, the context in which one situates it and the questions that one asks of it.

We will investigate how, despite everything, the Bible can be read as a Jewish text, and what it means to read it as a Jewish text.

Since my research is in medieval Bible commentaries, many of my examples will come from medieval texts. I do not mean to suggest that the questions considered here were only important in the medieval period. The Middle Ages are a particularly fruitful time for Biblical studies because the period saw the development and flourishing of diverse ways of looking at the Bible. Later in this paper, we will investigate some of these perspectives on the Bible, and how the perspectives interacted.

At the outset, I would like to introduce one story and one holiday that will be following us through the course of this lecture. The story is the story of the Binding of Isaac, the Akedah, in chapter 22 of the book of Genesis. In this story, God asks Abraham to sacrifice his only son on Mount Moriah. Abraham goes to Mount Moriah, builds an altar, and ties Isaac to it, before God instructs Abraham to sacrifice a ram in Isaac’s place. God then makes a covenant with Abraham, promising him descendants like the stars in the heaven and the sand on the seashore. In Jewish narratives, this is

an important story both about Abraham's devotion for God and about God's promise to Abraham.

Jews read the story of the Binding of Isaac in synagogue on the day of Rosh Hashana, a holiday which will follow us through this talk. Rosh Hashana, which begins the Jewish year, is one of the most significant holidays of the Jewish calendar. It is the Jewish holiday of repentance, when Jews take account of their sins from the previous year and repent as the new year begins. Home celebrations include eating apples and honey and other symbolic foods, and synagogue rituals include blowing the shofar, or ram's horn, and praying for forgiveness from sins. Rosh Hashana opens the 10 days of repentance which culminate in the fast of Yom Kippur.

With this story and holiday in mind, let us begin with the Bible as an Israelite text.

Each year, when I ask my students why they are taking my Introduction to Jewish Studies class, quite a few give the same answer: they want to learn how Jesus worshipped. Similarly, as a yeshiva teacher I was occasionally contacted by Christians before Passover with questions about how to conduct a Passover seder to worship as Jesus himself worshipped the night before he was crucified. I find the thinking here fascinating, so I will try to explain it. First of all, the thinking goes, Judaism continues in a straight line from the religion of Jesus. Second of all, Christianity doesn't. The Bible becomes a Jewish text, with Christianity diverging from Judaism in the post-biblical period. This phenomenon is an example of historical memory, in which members of one religion or another construct their past in relation to the Bible. In this lecture I would like to look at how Jews in particular have read the Bible as their own past, how Jewish reading has made the Bible into a Jewish text. But in showing this, I will also show other possibilities for what the Bible can be. The Bible has not always been a Jewish text, nor has the Jewish-Christian consensus always been to read it as one.

The word 'Jew' does not appear until fairly late in the Hebrew Bible, in the book of Esther, which was composed between the fourth and second centuries BCE and describes (in highly fictionalized terms) the escape of the Israelites from the threat of genocide in Persia. Mordechai, the uncle of Esther and an exile in Persia, is referred to as a 'Yehudi' (Esther 2:5), but one might also translate this word as 'Judean' or 'descendant of Judah.' The main protagonists of the Hebrew Bible are more often referred to as Hebrews, after the language they spoke, Children of Israel, after their descent from Jacob who was also called Israel, or sometimes simply Israelites. Let us take a minute to look at the religion of these Israelites.

In your source sheet (see below) I have included an excerpt from Judges 11, one of the earlier texts of the Hebrew Bible, composed in approximately 1000 BCE. In this story, Jephthah swears to God that he will offer as a sacrifice whatever first comes out of his home when he returns from victory. As usually happens with these sorts of vows, this vow leads inevitably to disaster. The first thing that Jephthah sees upon return is his daughter, whom he is now, by his vow, obligated to offer as a sacrifice. If, as is likely, the story of the Akedah was written after this story (even though it takes place at an earlier time), perhaps the story of the Akedah is partially in response to the story of Jephthah and his daughter, by telling a story of the transition between human and animal sacrifice. Nowhere else in the Bible is human sacrifice commanded or encouraged.

But the distance of Israelite religion from Judaism as we know it does not depend on Jephthah's hypothetical sacrifice (which in any case traditional Jewish exegetes explain as her living a perpetually celibate life, or something short of killing her). And perhaps, one could say, Jephthah, despite his status as a political and religious leader, was simply a bad Jew. So let me draw your attention to the end of the passage: "So it became a custom in Israel for the maidens of Israel to go every year, for four days a year, and chant dirges for the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite" (Judges 11: 39-40).

The people who wrote this text had a very important ritual, important enough to explain, in which women, for three days, bewail the loss of Jephthah's daughter. For those of you who have been to synagogue, let me ask, where does this fall out on the Jewish calendar? How is it observed in synagogue? This ritual is completely absent from Jewish observance, as even the traditional commentators recognize. The people who wrote at least this Biblical text had a ritual that was clearly important to them but that no Jew after the second century has practiced.

Now, this is an extreme case. Let us look at something more typical. Our second text is from the Book of Numbers, and it is the full and complete description from that book of the holiday of Rosh Hashana:

Numbers 29: 1-6 (JPS)

In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a sacred occasion: you shall not work at your occupations. You shall observe it as a day when the horn is sounded. You shall present a burnt offering of pleasing odor to the Lord, one bull of the herd, one ram, and seven yearling lambs, without blemish. The meal-offering with them - choice flour with oil mixed in - shall be: three tenths of a measure for a bull, two-tenths for a ram, and one-tenth for each of the seven lambs. And there shall be one goat for a sin offering to make expiation on your behalf - in addition to the burnt offering of the new moon with its meal offering and the regular burnt offering with its meal offering, each with its libation as prescribed, offerings by fire of pleasing odor to the Lord.

The current Rosh Hashana synagogue ritual includes something somewhat but not exactly like this. If you go to synagogue, you will very likely hear a horn. Probably many of the people at synagogue on Rosh Hashana are not working at their occupations. And yes, the ritual could be described as a sacred occasion. On the other hand, the service is almost certainly lacking in lambs, rams and meal-offerings. It resembles the Biblical passage in some ways, but is not identical to it.

The Bible, therefore, was written by people who did not call themselves Jews and who practiced a religion that is in some ways, but not all ways, similar to Judaism.

Biblical religion is also similar, in some but not all ways, to Christianity. Let's turn to a classic statement of this later similarity. To set the context: this is from the Gospel of John, which was written by a Jew who followed Jesus, or a Jewish-Christian, in the late first or early second century CE. In this gospel, Jesus (who was, of course, also Jewish) is having an argument with other Jews, who refuse to accept him, saying

that they already have a covenant with Abraham.

John 8: 39-44 (NIV)

“Abraham is our father,” they answered.

“If you were Abraham’s children,” said Jesus, “then you would do the things Abraham did. As it is, you are determined to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. You are doing the things your own father does.”

“We are not illegitimate children,” they protested. “The only Father we have is God himself.”

Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire.

Let me again spell out the logic here. Before, in our discussion of the Rosh Hashana passage, we saw that something essential is preserved from the Biblical text to the current ritual: rest, a horn, a sacred convocation. As opposed to, say, rams and lambs. The author of this excerpt from the Gospel of John makes the argument that what was essential about Abraham was his faith in God, which he showed by, among other things, being willing to offer his son to God. Therefore, anyone who responds to a Divine summons, no matter how unrealistic it is or what it demands, is a descendant of Abraham. Conversely, those people who reject the Divine summons are descendants of the Devil.

For later Christians reading this gospel, the meaning was quite clear: the Jewish biological descent from Abraham did not make them Abraham’s true descendants. Rather, the Church is Abraham’s true heir.

Every year I ask my students in my Jewish Cultures course to define, just for the purpose of this course, who is a Jew. Which cultures, I ask them, should we include in this course? This is something of a trick question, because they almost always answer, as good tolerant liberal arts college students, anyone who considers themselves Jewish. To which I respond, all right, shall we include the entire medieval Church? Medieval Christians considered themselves the true Israel, the real Jewish people and the true inheritors of the Bible. If the Bible was a Jewish text, that still meant that it truly belonged to the Church.

Here is an example of what this looks like in the Middle Ages from the seventh century Spanish Christian commentator Isidore of Seville. He points out that Abraham, on the way to Mount Moriah, rode a donkey. Abraham, as we know from John, is the ancestor of the faithful Christian. So what is the donkey? Here is how Isidore of Seville answers this question in his *Quaestiones in Vetus Testamentum* chapter 18:

This donkey, moreover, is the foolish stupidity of the Jews. This foolish stupidity carries all the sacraments, and how does it not know what it carries?

For Isidore, then, the Jews have a place in the story of Abraham: the place of the donkey who carries the scriptures that the Christians have used to find God but who is somehow not able to understand them. Here, it is not the story of Abraham that is about the Jews, but rather the story of Abraham's donkey.

Let me summarize the question at this point. If the Bible was written by people who did not call themselves Jews and who practiced a religion that was in some but not all ways like Judaism, in any sense that we would recognize it, in what sense is it a Jewish text? Many, perhaps even most of the Bible's readers were people who did not think that Jews – by which I mean the Jews as they have existed as a separate religion from Christianity since late Antiquity – had a right to it. So, again, in what sense is it a Jewish text?

An outstanding contemporary Bible scholar has a potential resolution. James Kugel, in his fascinating book *How to Read the Bible*, struggles with the question of how one can read the Bible both as a Bible scholar and as an observant Jew. To an observant Jew, Kugel suggests, what is important is the Bible as it was canonized: as it was read, and as it continues to be read, by observant Jews. At the end of his book (under the humorous heading “Harvard Bible Prof Says Bible Research a Mistake”), he suggests that the history of how the Bible was written is really only relevant to scholars. To a believer, what matters is the sacred text as it was canonized and accepted by the observant community. For Kugel, a scholar of the Bible as it was written, I think this is an excellent solution. My academic research, though, is not in Biblical criticism but rather in the history of Jewish-Christian relations, and I am not able to get past the reality that, if you look at the Bible as it was canonized and as it was read, the vast majority of its readers were Christian and reading it not as a Jewish text but as a Christian one. So, for the third time, in what sense is the Bible a Jewish text?

Since I am a medievalist studying the history of interpretation and of Jewish-Christian relations, I am going to draw on my medieval sources for help. When medieval Jews or Christians read Scripture, they read it as having multiple levels, or ‘senses.’ These senses are all present in every passage of Scripture and do not contradict each other. In this lecture I am just going to look at the Jewish version, although I have included the Christian version in your handout as well.

1. *Pshat*, the literal sense, is also, and perhaps better, translated as the contextual sense, although it is oddly limited in the contexts that it allows. According to this approach, if you want to know what the Bible says, you have only to read the Bible. You do not need to take anything else into account or put the biblical text into any particular context. This method assumes that the Bible is written in the same language that people speak all the time, and that the reader does not need any particular exegetical tools (aside from comprehensive knowledge of Scripture) to understand it.

2. *Remez*, looking for hints in the Bible, is an approach that is based on assumptions about the unique characteristics of Biblical language. If the Bible is Divinely composed or at least Divinely inspired, the thinking goes, it could not have been written in the kind of language that you or I would write. Every word contains God's message to

Humanity, a reflection of the Divine mind. If the text contains a word that seems not to be necessary to our puny human intelligence, we need to ask, what is this word teaching us? If something is repeated, we need to ask, why? Every word, every hint, contains Divine meaning which is the reader's responsibility to uncover.

3. Midrashic approach, which looks at the Bible in the context of the Oral Torah, is based on the traditional narrative of how the Torah was given. That narrative as it appears in later rabbinic texts, is as follows: When God gave the Torah to Moses, God also whispered a second Torah in Moses' ear, and said, Don't write this down. Rather, teach it to your students. So Moses taught it to Joshua, who taught it to his students, who passed it down orally until it was finally written down in the second to fifth centuries. Jewish law is largely based on the Oral Torah. For example, the Bible only says not to boil a calf in its mother's milk. Keeping meat and milk totally separate, in all cases, boiled or fried, from related or unrelated animals, not to mention keeping two sets of dishes, is entirely based on the Oral Torah. The Midrashic approach, as this example illustrates, is essential for Jewish exegesis of legal passages, although it can be relevant for narrative questions as well.

4. The 'Secret' or Kabbalistic approach interprets everything in the Torah as a metaphor for God. The Kabbalah uses the biblical text as a way to illustrate the many different manifestations of God and their various complicated relationships.

All these senses of Scripture are religious senses and are all based on assumptions about how to read Scripture as sacred text and what message to get out of it as a reader. The literal sense is based on the assumption that God wrote the Torah to be read and understood by normal human beings. In rabbinic terms: *dibrah torah bilshon bnai adam*, the Torah speaks in human language. The *remez* level, to find the hints in Scripture, presumes that God wrote the Torah to be scrutinized and analyzed and that the Divine revealer buried hints in sacred Scripture to be uncovered by diligent readers. Using Midrash to interpret the Bible assumes the importance of the wisdom of the sages in understanding sacred Scripture, or, in the case of Biblical law, follows Jewish tradition that law cannot be decided directly from the Bible without taking into account rabbinic case law and legislation. The secret, Kabbalistic, method works with the premise that the Bible is intended to give us information about God in highly metaphoric terms, and that the Kabbalah gives us the method for unpacking that information. These are all different assumptions about the Bible and for the medieval reader they all exist simultaneously.

Let me clarify this distinction between senses with one of the classic examples of medieval multi-level interpretation, from the 12-century Jewish commentator Rabbi Solomon ben Meir, or Rashbam. The verse under discussion, Exodus 13:9, states: "these words" should be "a sign on your hand" and "on your forehead." This is the classic biblical source for the commandment to wear Tefilin, or phylacteres, small black boxes that contain "these words", or verses from the Torah and are worn during morning prayer. Rashbam's exegesis is as follows:

Rashbam on Exodus 13:9

"A sign on your hand." According to the profound plain meaning of Scripture, it will always be a reminder for you as if it were written on your hand. Like

the verse (Song of Songs 8:6) “let me be a seal on your heart.”

“On your forehead”: Like an ornament or gold chain that is customarily put there for decoration.

It is as if Rashbam imagines that the only context we had in which to interpret the Bible is the Bible itself. In the absence of any other context, it would not occur to any reader that the meaning of “a sign” is little black boxes. How could it be? In the Song of Songs, when the lover says to the beloved, “let me be a seal on your heart” is he asking the beloved to put little black boxes on her chest? Obviously not. In that context, it must mean “remember me.” If that is what “seal” means in Song of Songs, Rashbam concludes, that must be what it means in Exodus as well. What he means by the literal sense is reading the Bible only in the context of the Bible, without taking any account of Oral Torah or the ongoing development of Jewish tradition. In his legal and Talmudic writings, on the other hand, Rashbam discusses the laws of how to wear tefilin and takes for granted that it is an obligation. Here, then, Rashbam is not saying that the Exodus 13:9 does not require one to wear tefilin. He is simply noting that, looked at with different assumptions, the text means quite something else.

Note, also, that this example shows that for Rashbam the literal sense is not opposed to, say, the metaphorical. “A sign on your hand” is a metaphor for constant memory, and this is, to Rashbam, the “profound plain meaning.” The literal sense, for Rashbam, is not opposed to the metaphorical but rather to the midrashic, or to the choice to take post-biblical law into account. The literal and the midrashic, for Rashbam, are opposing, equally legitimate and equally necessary ways to read the biblical text. Exodus 13:9 obligates the reader both to wear tefilin and to constantly remember God.

In the contemporary world of biblical exegesis there are also varying options regarding which context to take into account when approaching a biblical verse or passage. Following the model of the medieval four levels of Scripture, I will suggest a modern approach to the four levels of Scripture that reflects different assumptions that can be brought to the contemporary study of the Bible and the different sorts of exegesis that these assumptions generate:

1. Historical/critical, which involves taking a specific excerpt from the Bible, such as a few verses in Genesis or Isaiah, and asking: who wrote it? When was it written? What did it mean to the person who wrote it and in the context it was written? These questions situate a biblical passage in the historical context of its composition and of its early audience. They lead to answers that suggest that biblical books are compilations of shorter texts composed at different times, for different communities, and with quite different purposes.
2. Literary approaches, which read the Bible as a complete, entire, redacted book. These approaches read any passage in the context of passages written before and after it, or of other, related biblical passages, although they might not have been composed in the same place or in the same century.
3. History of Jewish Interpretation and 4. History of Christian Interpretation. This approach asks, what did the Bible mean to people who read it? This question can relate to Jewish interpretation or Christian interpretation, or even to the history of interpreta-

tion at the time prior to the clear separation of the two religions. The answers will of course be quite different from commentator to commentator, and in the second and 12th centuries, and in France and North Africa, and that even 12th-century Jewish French commentators (or 20th-century Christian commentators) will have substantial disagreements.

I have distinguished these as scholarly positions, but in practical terms they are all religious positions as well. A theologian who believes that Isaiah or Ezekiel or Huldah or John the evangelist was truly divinely inspired will be drawn to the first position out of a desire to attempt to reconstruct, if at all possible, what the prophet actually said. The moment of Divine inspiration is the moment of revelation that the exegete seeks to uncover. Alternatively, a theologian might argue that when Scripture is placed in the historical context in which it was composed, the contradictions between different books and passages become clear and one is forced to articulate a theological stand between competing options. The Bible becomes, as Marc Zvi Brettler writes in *How to Read the Bible*, a sourcebook rather than a textbook. This is the position that he advocates. Conversely, an engaged theological reading could choose the second option, which focuses on the Bible as redacted, by following Franz Rosenzweig who saw R, the redactor, as Rabbeinu, our rabbi. One could say that God spoke, (or, that Jews chose to hear God) through the final version of the Bible and the juxtaposition of texts it contains. Finally, one could work within the tradition and approach the Bible theologically through its traditional interpreters. For a Jewish traditionalist, this could come out of a belief in the Oral Torah that was given at Sinai to Moses, whispered by Moses to his students, and transmitted orally alongside the written Torah until it was finally written down in the second to fifth centuries. This oral tradition might preserve the Divine intent better than the written Bible, and so Scripture should not be read without it. But one could take the same approach from a less traditional or even agnostic perspective that simply removes God from the question. In this approach, the Bible as a Jewish text is the Bible as read by Jews. What makes the Bible sacred is the history of a community that shaped itself around it. What makes the Bible important as a Jewish text is the way in which Jews have read it.

These four positions are also ways to encounter the Bible as a student. For one who is neither a scholar nor a theologian but simply, say, a first-year student in a liberal arts college, what are the advantages of these four approaches to reading the Bible?

The historical-critical approach takes the reader into a different world, into a way of thinking about religion that is dramatically different – the world of the ancient Israelites. Reading the Bible through the historical-critical approach can illustrate the many different theologies that are represented in this one text, the worlds each of them come from, and how uneasily they sit together in the Bible. The literary approach can allow one to experience the beauty of the Bible as a unified document, the literary styles, the poetry, the grand narrative. By study of the History of Christian interpretation and the History of Jewish interpretation one can understand how the Bible became the influential text that it is today and how it is used for different purposes, both selfish and generous, as well as the Bible's uses in contemporary politics and in historical debates.

The Bible, then, is, today as in the Middle Ages, a multi-vocal text. There are multiple ways of reading the Bible, each of which starts with different scholarly and/or religious assumptions, each of which asks different questions, and each of which, of

course, is going to generate very different answers.

So, in what sense is the Bible a Jewish text?

Given the multi-vocality of the Biblical text, and the different options for reading it, I am going to suggest that reading the Bible as a Jewish text says more about Judaism than it does about the Bible. In other words: the Bible is not a Jewish text because of something in the nature of the Bible. The Bible is a Jewish text because of choices made, in the past and in the present, by the Jewish people.

Let me go back, again, to a medieval example. The 12th-century Bible commentator Rashi explains the end of the story of the Binding of Isaac thus:

Rashi on Genesis 22:14

And Abraham called the name of that place, Adonai-Jireh (the Lord will see), as it is said today, on the mount where the Lord will be seen.

The Lord will see this binding (of Isaac) to forgive Israel every year and to rescue them from trouble...in all coming generations on the mount of the Lord will be seen the ashes of Isaac heaped up and serving as an atonement.

Rashi here is explaining the words “the Lord will see” from Genesis 22:14. What will the Lord see? The ashes of Isaac. This is a wonderfully paradoxical statement since, as we know, Isaac was not in fact sacrificed. Rashi’s statement makes wonderfully clear that the import of this verse, for him, is not in the events that took place but rather in the meaning of these events for the relationship between the Jewish people and God. What happened is far less important than what God sees. And not just what God sees at the time that it happened - or didn’t happen - but what God sees in every future generation, whenever Jews try to repent for their sins. Rashi, then, is saying that this story is foundational for God’s relationship to the Jewish people, or, to put it otherwise, the Jewish people’s relationship to God. The story of the Binding of Isaac is a Jewish text because it shapes the Jewish understanding of the Human-Divine covenant.

In the liturgy for Rosh Hashana, in between blasts of the shofar, or ram’s horn, we find the following prayer:

Remember for us, Lord our God, the covenant, the kindness and the oath that You swore to our father Abraham on Mount Moriah. Let there appear before You the Akedah when Abraham our father bound Isaac his son upon the altar and he suppressed his mercy to do Your will wholeheartedly. So may Your mercy suppress Your anger from us, and in Your great good may Your burning anger withdraw from Your people, from Your city, and from Your inheritance.

This prayer re-reads and re-interprets the story of the Binding of Isaac in a way that allows for the possibility of repentance and Divine mercy. Just as Abraham was willing to kill Isaac, when he really didn’t want to, and when Isaac really didn’t deserve it, so, the text addresses God, You should be willing to have mercy on us even when you really don’t want to, and even when we really don’t deserve it.

Jewish retellings of the story of Isaac have also had life and death consequenc-

es. In the late 11th and early 12th century, Crusaders ripped through Western Europe on the way to conquer the Holy Land from the Muslims. Somewhere in Germany it occurred to some of these Crusaders, generally the more illiterate ones, that if they were going all the way to Palestine to kill infidels they might as well begin closer to home. In 1096 they surrounded the Jewish community of Mainz and threatened to kill all those who did not convert to Christianity. The Jews, upon hearing this, decided not only to die but to kill their children so that they would not be taken away from them and raised as Christians. Here is how Solomon bar Samson describes it in his account of the Crusades from a Jewish perspective, composed in approximately 1140:

From the Chronicle of Solomon bar Samson: The Crusaders in Mainz

The ears of him who hears these things will tingle, for who has ever heard anything like this? Inquire now and look about, was there ever such an abundant sacrifice as this since the days of the primeval Adam? Were there ever eleven hundred offerings on one day, each one of them like the sacrifice of Isaac, the son of Abraham?

For the sake of Isaac who was ready to be sacrificed on Mount Moriah, the world shook, as it is said [Isaiah 33:7]: “Behold their valiant ones cry without; [the angels of peace weep bitterly]” and [Jeremiah 4.28] “the heavens grow dark.” Yet see what these martyrs did! Why did the heavens not grow dark and the stars not withdraw their brightness? Why did not the moon and the sun grow dark in their heavens when on one day, on the third of Siwan, on a Tuesday eleven hundred souls were killed and slaughtered, among them many infants and sucklings who had not transgressed nor sinned, many poor, innocent souls?

So we see that the Jewish perception of continuity between the Bible and current reality isn't confined to prayer. Here it has life or death consequences. If it does not cause Jewish martyrdom, at least it shapes how Jews understand it. These Jews understand their decision to kill their children rather than allow them to be taken from them and raised as Christians in light of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac. This biblical text becomes the story through which they understand their lives.

For a modern example of the continuity of this imagery in Jewish writings, here is a passage by the contemporary Canadian songwriter and poet Leonard Cohen from his song *Story of Isaac*, written in 1969.

You who build these altars now
to sacrifice these children,
you must not do it anymore.
A scheme is not a vision
and you never have been tempted
by a demon or a god.
You who stand above them now,
your hatchets blunt and bloody,
you were not there before,
when I lay upon a mountain
and my father's hand was trembling

with the beauty of the word.

In an interview in Paris in 1974, Leonard Cohen explains that this song is about generations and how they meet, as he says, “on the altar or on the chopping block.” For him, like for the medieval Jews, this story becomes the narrative through which he can understand and explain the complexities of his experiences as a Jew. Leonard Cohen, as a self-defined secular Jew, used this text to articulate his identity and grapple with questions of his day.

As I have tried to suggest in this talk, questions about the Bible as a Jewish text primarily relate to Judaism, not to the Bible. The Bible is not by nature Jewish, does not inevitably lead to a Jewish reading, and in fact, if you count up the numbers, the Bible is not and has not been read mostly by Jews. Judaism, on the other hand, is inextricably connected to the Bible. So asking how Jews read the Bible can show rather a great deal about Judaism.

It can show, for example, that for Jews the Bible is not exclusively a religious text. We know that it is not exclusively a religious text because Jews who define themselves as non-religious, such as Leonard Cohen, read and use the Biblical narrative for non-religious purposes. Even as a religious text, it is not primarily a legal text, or a guide to practice. In the Rosh Hashana liturgy, for example, it’s a way of trying to manipulate God into allowing forgiveness. When the Bible is read as a Jewish text, it becomes a partner in a relationship. In studying the Bible as a Jewish text, I would suggest, we encounter the ongoing relationship between the Jewish people and this ancient, pre-Jewish, multi-vocal, contested book.

“Gamble Along . . . and Improvise”

“Last” Lecture Series
November 20, 2008

Benjamin A. L. Click, III
Professor of English

Professor Click was introduced by his former student Mandy Heatwole.

I am not an expert on the “Last” Lecture Series. As a matter of fact, this is the First “Last” Lecture that I have ever attended. I am, however, somewhat of an expert on the Ben Click Lecture Series. I have taken five English classes with Ben, and once you’ve taken that many classes with him, well—let’s just say he starts lecturing you even when you’re not in class. And, after having a front row seat to his lectures for so long, I cannot tell you how incredibly grateful I am for each and every one of them.

I truly adore Ben for his continual willingness to lecture me, but I still feel pretty freaking pissed at him because he flat-out refused to give me any guidelines for writing this introduction. Well, that’s not entirely true—he did give me one guideline for tonight: He told me to get drunk and bring my friends. Done. Come to think of it, that was his advice for writing papers and preparing for class too. Anyway, the truth is that it doesn’t make much difference what I say about him because he’ll still “burst on the scene, already a legend.” You see, on this campus, Ben is both well-known and well-loved, and yet he will probably never accept the full extent of that affection. As a matter of fact, last week he and I were discussing tonight’s event, and he confessed to me his fear that having a student introduce him might seem pretentious. I sympathized with his concern, knowing that people often presume pretension when presented with an incredibly distinguished scholar like Ben. However, I think he had forgotten to take into account exactly which student he had asked to give this introduction. After all, among his many accomplishments and honors, Ben has the distinction of being the only professor at St. Mary’s to ever call me stupid. I mean, all of them thought it, but he was the only one that actually said it to my face! Yeah, he’s distinguished, but good or bad, diamonds or rust, he’ll always call it like it is without ever coming within sight of pretension.

And that’s the thing that really makes Ben distinguished: His legendary status at St. Mary’s is the product not of his pretension but of his perpetual wit, warmth, and wisdom. This is a “Last” Lecture, though, and that sounds final, not perpetual. But for someone like Ben, a Last Lecture is special not because of its finality but because of its eternity. Wit and warmth and wisdom have a funny way of refusing to end, and those things absolutely radiate from every lecture I have ever heard Ben deliver. And that radiance will forever live on in the life of every person that experiences it. I know how beautifully, how brilliantly it already lives in mine. It is with great honor—and a complete lack of pretension—that I give you Dr. Ben Click.

Professor Click's Last Lecture:

Thank you, Mandy, for an introduction that I'm sure I won't live up to. Thank you, Amie and Demetrie, for organizing this year's "Last" Lectures for the Nitze Scholars Program, and for the particular demands I placed on you for my "Last" lecture (change of venue, piano, VCR, and the weird food request). And a special thank you to Michael Taber, director of the Nitze Scholars Program, for not flinching when I asked for beef jerky and Dr. Pepper as my last meal. That was impressive, Michael. But a brief word about this meal.

In the late 60s when my sister Cheri Lou and I were little, we would visit my Grandmother Folschinsky in Ben Arnold, Texas (population 54), and my mom would give us 50 cents and say go to Swanzy's Grocery and "get something." Well, that "something" was either Big Red (a Texas soft drink) and a slice of rat cheese or Dr. Pepper and beef jerky. I didn't think you'd be familiar with Big Red or rat cheese, thus, the jerky and DP. As a nod to the title, you'll gamble too if you take too much of that jerky over there. In fact, you may become so addicted that you too will be a "jerkitarian," and if you become a hardcore purist, a "jerkin." And you must thank my wife, Anne, and Dr. Taber for suggesting that I include something for my non-meat-eating brothers and sisters. But, I tried to explain that I'm not really certain that there **is** any meat in beef jerky—it may just be an advertising gimmick. As a boy, I used to chew the leather stitching of my baseball glove, and it kinda tasted the same as the jerky. So, eat up, you'll survive; your colon may not!

But speaking of surviving, this whole "Last" Lecture smells a bit too terminal to me. I'm usually fine using my words, but I couldn't quite find the right ones to express how I felt about being ask to give my last lecture, so I brought you this film clip that captures my feelings. (*Here, Click showed a clip of the "Bring Out Your Dead" scene from Monty Python's Holy Grail*). Showing that clip was my wife's idea, and as you can see she's not only devastatingly beautiful; she's also quite funny.

Still, the title, "Gamble Along . . . and Improvise," may be a bit misleading: I actually do like to know what I'm getting into sometimes. But, it's still a gamble and an improv when you prepare. For example, I wanted to know just what this "Last" Lecture thing was, so I asked Michael Taber who the previous speakers were. It's an impressive list: Glaser, Messitte, Koch, Dennie, Schroeder, Kozak, Holden, Charlebois, Kung, Park, Taber, Norlock, Caldwell, Krondorfer, Burke, Byrd, Ballesteros, Ehlers, Cognard-Black, and Roberts. My first thought: RELIEF. I think all those people are still alive . . . or zombies. My second thought: That's sure a lot of professors preceding me, 20 to be exact. So, I guess with me, you may have reached the second string, the "B" list. Hell, two of those guys were just visiting professors! But at least now I know where I rank.

But dusting off my hurt ego, a third thought emerged: All but three of the illustrious 20 are younger (by far) than I am. I thought the idea behind this thing was to impart some grand wisdom. I'm sorry but you can't do that until you've put some miles on the road. And at 50, I'm not sure even I have enough either, but it's more than those youngsters. So, instead of imagining this is my last (as in terminal) lecture, I have re-imagined this event as my last **paid** lecture. Not some imagined death-knell occasion in which I could provide sublime, eternal wisdom. Believe me, if I'm that close to the end, the last thing I'm gonna do is **lecture** someone (despite what Mandy said). True, I love

teaching students as much as the great ballplayer (and gambler!) Pete Rose loved playing baseball. He said, “I’d walk through hell in a gasoline suit to play baseball.” I feel the same about working with students, but I’ll opt for my immediate family when my tank runs dry.

Besides, the guy who did get to offer so many people inspiration and great and eternal wisdom in a “Last” Lecture was named Dr. Randy Pausch. I can’t tell how many people have mentioned that guy to me when I said I was doing my last lecture. He was the Carnegie Mellon professor who literally wrote the book *The Last Lecture*. He had terminal cancer when he gave his last lecture, and he talked powerfully about not giving up on your childhood dreams. His PowerPoint presentation/lecture, which was really delivered as gift to his three children, has been watched by nearly 8 million people on YouTube. I’m lucky enough people came to field baseball team. My lecture will be different—or at least it better be! See, unless there’s some disgruntled student waiting for me in the parking lot with a lead pipe named “Revenge,” or my wife and my doctor are withholding the tragic results of some recent blood work I had done, I don’t intend to meet my maker, enrich the soil, or litter St. Mary’s River with my ashes any time soon.

My talk is different in many ways: I don’t do PowerPoint presentations, and I’m not interested in achieving any of my childhood dreams – I like my dreams when I sleep and the best ones are the ones I remember when I wake up. They are like some bizarre Dadaist poem or Dali painting: I’m flying in the air powered by a green crayon held in my right hand and I see my dog . . . who is in a tuxedo being robbed by one of my students . . . When I come down to save him, he actually turns into Barack Obama and says, “Excuse me, but I have a date with destiny.” Then my student says, “See what happens when you teach outside of your discipline, Dr. Click.” You know, typical dreams. Besides, childhood dreams are for your childhood—I have grown-up dreams now.

It’s different in another way too: I don’t have any interest in legacy, what it is or how to leave one. In fact, for better or worse, they’re sitting right there in the front row. (*Here, Click introduces his wife Anne and their two daughters, Rosie and Liz.*) The three best things I’ve ever had anything to do with.

But I’m talking to you and saying something I believe I could actually say when my time comes to re-evaluate the laughable retirement portfolio that got shot through the head this past year by a government that failed to realize that allowing lenders to dole out subprime adjustable mortgages to unsuspecting citizens unable to pay up when it came time to, whether they had a job or not, was **a really bad idea**. I know one thing though, I’ll gamble along with what I’ve sowed over the years and reap what I will, improvising all the way: Let me explain. Here’s how the evening will work since you’ve indulged me the time.

I’ll drone on a while, then play an improvised tune, then you’ll clap because you’re polite. I’ll do that two or three times, and if all goes right we leave somewhat satisfied, uninjured, and full of free jerky and Dr. Pepper.

Now, if I don’t further explicate a fuller meaning of my talk’s title, you might think I’m trying to suggest that you just take a gamble on what life gives you and optimistically improvise your way through. You may know that I couldn’t make it through

one of these things without a Twain quote. He has something to say about being an optimist: “At 50, a man can be an ass without being an optimist, but not an optimist without being an ass.” Those fine people who have influenced me most were and are anything but that breed. Whether you know their names or not, I feel compelled to say them aloud as a way of honoring these individuals: my mother and father, Mary Lou and Ben Click; my father-in-law, Paul Taxter; Bob Dylan; Mark Twain; Ray Charles; the writers of the Bible; Fred Rodewald; Bill Cozart; and Chris Caperton. And, I always felt they were the most courageous people too because they resisted the pull of a world that constantly bombards us with the idea that we should live in an eternal state of optimism, AND a culture that shows no compunction or hesitancy in telling you that you can achieve balance in your life. Consider our culture’s clichéd advice infecting us: “Seek balance in your life,” “Find your inner peace,” “Inner harmony awaits,” or the lingo from my era “Get yourself together.” A quick check on Amazon.com under “self-help” books will give you the titles needed to pursue such tripe:

For those of you directionally challenged: *Get Out of Your Own Way: Overcoming Self-Defeating Behavior.*

For those of you who need enumeration: *Five Simple Steps to Emotional Healing: The Last Self-Help Book You Will Ever Need.*

For those with a Thomas Edison or Madonna (not the virgin) fixation: *Reinventing Your Life: The Breakthrough Program to End Negative Behavior. . . and Feel Great Again.*

For the slacker in need: *Self-Help Stuff That Works.*

For the non-slacker, Type A, test taker: *The Psychologist’s Book of Self-tests: 25 Love, Sex, Intelligence, Career, and Personality Tests Developed by Professionals to Reveal the Real You.* (But, hey, no pressure there).

For the Florence Nightingale or Christian Scientist in all of us: *Heal Your Self: A Journey to Find You*

And a book that all of the above authors must have read: *How an Idiot Writes a Self-Help Book.* I’m literally not buying it. Instead, I’ll turn to one of those courageous loved ones I mentioned for help—my mom. Last summer, I asked my 84-year-old mother for her advice on how she had lived so long and well. She rattled off three things: Note the difference in tone from the titles above,

“Don’t slow down.”

“Ben, I’m too busy to get old.”

“Just keep it rolling, boy.”

I’m not sure exactly what the “it” is that she refers to, but whatever it is it’s been rolling for 84 years. So I’ll just keep it rolling, boy, and try and improvise. (*Click goes to the piano, introduces Audrey Hamilton on acoustic bass and Josh Barnett on blues harp and the trio plays an improvised blues tune.*)

Perhaps one of the reasons I'm so fond of Mark Twain is that he gambled along and improvised. A staggering genius with a 6th grade education and penchant for wandering. Well, I made past the 6th grade, but I've done my share of wandering, sometimes with a clear head and sometimes not.

Let me tell you a story: The distance from downtown Houston, Texas, to my former apartment in Nacogdoches, Texas, is 149.83 miles. The distance between downtown Houston, Texas, to the roadside stop off of Interstate 59 near Livingston, Texas, is 80.86 miles, a little more than half the distance. I *know* this because I looked it up on MapQuest last night; I *remember* it because I rode every one of those damn miles. No, I wasn't a serious cyclist or in an Ironman competition; I was a ring-tailed tooter (as my father used to call me) who hooked a car ride from Nacogdoches to Houston in his buddy's car to have a "big time" in a real city at a real house party. We got to Houston and the party. And, around four in morning, everyone was so high they coulda gone duck huntin' with a rake, me included. In such a state of susceptibility, I contracted the wanderlust and decided that staying in that big awful city overnight wasn't as attractive as returning to my own small town. So, I left. On a broken down 10-speed with two working gears that was stashed in the garage next to the house party. I reached the roadside stop in Livingston at 10 a.m., and let's just say . . . (*long pause here*) I was unable to use my duck huntin' rake. In fact, I was fully tethered to this earth and to that broken down 10-speed. I still had 68.97 sobering miles to go. My improvisational gamble to get home sooner than my friends didn't quite pan out as I thought it would.

You know my father used to say, "Son, you could hunt a bear with a fork, but I wouldn't recommend it." And I wouldn't recommend riding a bike from downtown Houston to Nacogdoches, under the influ, um . . . with the intent of, um . . . without training for, um, . . . well, . . . **ever!**

If I had more time, I could finish that story—the rest of it is even better. I should mention that that event happened before I was married or had children, not that I haven't engaged in other gambles with my three partners in love.

Speaking of them, I must publically thank my wife and my kids for allowing me the time for doing all the work I have been doing for the last (here I would insert the number of years I'd been working), and particularly my wife Anne who has gambled along with me for 28 years (it'll probably be 50 when I retire). Believe me, you wanna put the art of improvising to the test: Get married when you're both unfinished with your formal education; move to New York from Texas without a job, a permanent place to stay, no money, and against the will of your father-in-law, and you'll learn. There are far too many stories in our married life to share with you, and some shouldn't be shared—those are private. But I can tell you that she's still the one that winds my clock and brings eyesight to the blind. (*Here, Dr. Click picks up a National steel-bodied slide guitar and plays "Eyesight to the Blind" for his wife.*)

IMPROVISATION. You see, it's a cool word in its various forms when you think about it: As a noun, it's the action of composing *ex tempore*; as a verb, it means to bring about or get up on the spur of the moment, to provide for the occasion. When Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Hummel and Clementi and others performed, they enthralled their audiences with their brilliant displays of improvisation. In jazz, improvisation by the solo instrumentalist is part of the idiom's attraction. In many ways, being married is

like improvising in music. Sure, it's a gamble—what isn't—but learn the art of improvising and you'll be enthralled for life. It's worked for us. I'll leave you with one last story within a story and a song.

Anne and I have met many great blues musicians, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Buddy Guy, Ronnie Earl, and many not so famous in the blues world. One of the greats was Hubert Sumlin, the only real guitarist for the legendary bluesman Howlin' Wolf. While living in New York, we were able to see and meet many great musicians. Hubert was headlining in a lower Manhattan club called the Lone Star Café and our friend John Campbell was his opening act. I sat at Hubert's table while he ate spaghetti and meatballs with his band, telling me why he doesn't play with a guitar pick. It's quite a tale. Wolf was about 6'5" and 300 pounds and the most intimidating bluesman you'll ever see. And he was always "firing" Hubert, who's about half of Wolf's size, because he claimed that Hubert didn't play with soul. One night after being "really" fired, Hubert went home and cried and prayed and cried and prayed to find some soul in his playing. See, Hubert always wanted to be a smooth player like the jazz great Charlie Christian, Benny Goodman's guitar player. And Christian always used a pick. But Wolf wanted soul from Hubert's playing, not smoothness. So, in his lonely apartment, Hubert went to pick up his guitar and play, but he couldn't find a pick, so he began playing his guitar with his bare fingers. He'd never heard himself play like that before. The next day, he showed up and began playing in the rehearsals without the pick, when Wolf stopped the session, and with his immense size and piercing eyes turned on Hubert and said, "What you doing, Hubert?" "What'd you do to yo' playin'?" Hubert was too petrified to answer. After a long pause Wolf says, "Well, whatever you did, keep doing it—you playin' with soul now, son." Hubert told me he never told Wolf about the pick and never played with one again. Hubert's story doesn't happen if he doesn't improvise without the pick and gamble along the next day in the rehearsal. And that story doesn't get relayed tonight if Anne and I don't go to New York, young, in love.

See, we can plan it—whatever *it* is--all we want, but we all just gamble along and improvise. It doesn't mean that we have no ability developed from years of disciplined study and practice in various areas of our life. Rather, it means that when we take a chance, the ability we do have will be valued when placed in new situations, when we trust and love the people who are there for us when we improvise and fail and when we improvise and succeed. So, I'll leave you this evening and leave this College that has been pretty damn fair to me with a line from Ray Charles, followed by one more improvisation at the piano. Please find the beat and clap along if you wish and remember:

"Hey everybody, let's have some fun, you only live once and when you're dead, you're done, so Let the good times roll." Thank you!

(For the last tune, Click asks if someone from the audience plays drums and piano. A first-year student named Dominic comes up to play the beat on the podium. And another student Henry Nam sits at the piano and with Click they play four-hand piano. Audrey and Josh join in and the audience claps along.)

“The Anecdotal Mind in a Statistical World”

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Abstract

We live in an information-rich environment with books and journals, television, and the internet providing an inexhaustible supply of facts, figures, and findings. With this amount of information available, one might expect that we would see a corresponding increase in the quality of the thinking and decision-making that results. However, humans seem to be surprisingly poor users of these vast amounts of data. Personal experience, anecdotes, and mental heuristics often have a greater impact on human decision-making and judgment than logical analysis, probabilistic reasoning, and consideration of statistical data. This talk will examine some of the pitfalls that result from our reliance on experiential and anecdotal approaches to decision-making and judgment. It will also consider why we may have evolved to be predisposed to rely on these types of approaches.

* * *

What is the Anecdotal Mind? I'll be talking about the Anecdotal Mind in comparison to the Analytical Mind. Some cognitive psychologists who study reasoning and decision-making talk about system 1 and system 2 processing. For any of you who are familiar with that distinction, the Anecdotal Mind is system 1 processing and the Analytical Mind is system 2 processing. We could just use those terms, but I think it is mnemonically beneficial to use labels that are a bit more descriptive. System 1 (or anecdotal) processing is rapid, automatic, and heuristic-based; it happens without conscious attention. System 2 processing requires conscious attention, is effortful, takes time, and involves analytical reasoning. This is what I will refer to as the Analytical Mind. These two systems can work together with the faster system 1 processing leading to an immediate decision (what we might commonly refer to as intuition), and the slower system 2 processing analyzing and modifying that decision.

Where did the Anecdotal Mind come from and why do we rely on it? To answer those questions we need to consider how we learn and remember information. Learning and memory can happen through multiple systems. Virtually all species can learn associations between stimuli via classical conditioning and most can learn associations between responses and their consequences via operant conditioning. The principles of classical and operant conditioning make it possible for us to learn from our personal experience. However, learning from personal experience can have drastic consequences. As Ben Franklin noted “Experience keeps a dear school, but fools will learn in no other.” Fortunately, and contrary to the second part of Franklin’s quote, many species including humans can also learn through observing the behavior of others and the consequences that result. Observational learning is adaptive in that it protects us from the harsh conse-

quences of learning solely through personal experience. We can learn the lessons without paying the price.

Because of our language skills, humans have an advantage that other species do not. We can learn, not only through our own experience and observation of the experience of others, we can also learn from the stories that others tell us. This is what the Anecdotal Mind excels at. This is a tremendous advantage—providing access to information that otherwise we would only occasionally have direct access to. So our language skills give us a learning tool that no other species possesses. The fast and effortless operation of the Anecdotal Mind also provides us with a second advantage. In the environment of our evolutionary ancestors, being able to make quick decisions was critical. When assessing danger from a potential predator, time spent deliberating could have deadly consequences. The quick intuitive guidance of the Anecdotal Mind helps protect us from the inaction that might occur while the more deliberative processes of the Analytical Mind assesses the situation.

So the Anecdotal Mind sounds pretty good. It can learn not only from personal experience and direct observation, but also from stories told by others, greatly expanding the breadth of learning beyond the immediate environment. In the environment where it developed, the speed of its quick, intuitive decisions may more than be compensated for any gain that might be achieved through a slower more analytical approach. As a consequence, we have evolved into a species that is strongly affected by anecdotes and testimonials. After all, the learning that resulted from those anecdotes is what helped keep our ancestors alive long enough to reproduce and pass their genes along to the next generation—including genes that may influence how we learn and use information. However, the environment that we currently live in is very different from the one in which our mental habits evolved. The decisions that we make occur on a different timetable and the sources of information have similarly changed.

If we look at our immediate response to threat, we can see how a process that was once adaptive and useful can become a liability in a new environment. Many species have a similar physiological response to threat: what is known as the fight-or-flight response. When threatened, the body responds in a way that prepares the organism to either flee or defend its self. When the primary stressors are encounters with immediate threats to one's life that are resolved one way or another in a matter of minutes or seconds, this fight-or-flight response is adaptive and helps keep the organism alive. However, in our current environment the stressors are different. Most of the stressors that we encounter today are less immediate and more long lasting. Many of the stressors that we encounter in our current environment are not resolved by either fighting or fleeing and the physiological response that facilitates both of those alternatives has negative health consequences when continuously triggered by a long-standing threat. So the response that was adaptive for our ancestors may not be as useful in our current state.

Similarly, the Anecdotal Mind may be outdated for our current environment. The changes in the types of decisions that we must make and the wide availability of statistical rather than anecdotal information, may make reliance on the Anecdotal Mind a liability that can have serious consequences for the quality of the decisions that we make. Most of the important decisions that we make no longer have the immediacy associated with avoiding a predator. And the widespread availability of statistical information makes analytical reasoning a much more important tool in our mental toolbox.

However, even though our environment has changed, our mental habits have not. These habits have kept our species going for many generations and in many cases may be more or less hard-wired into our patterns of mental response. Because of their immediate, automatic, and effortless nature, they are likely to play a role no matter how hard we try to avoid them. However, awareness of their pitfalls and deliberate use of more analytical approaches may compensate for at least some of the dangers that they entail.

Biasing in Anecdotal Reasoning

Of course, the power of anecdotes is well-recognized. Listen to the speeches of political candidates and they are regularly punctuated with anecdotal examples. In the recent presidential race, the Republican candidate made frequent references to Joe the Plumber and all the other Joes that inevitably arose. Similarly, the Democratic candidate's grand address in the Mile High Stadium was prefaced by personal life stories from half a dozen or so "ordinary" Americans. Even the annual State of Union address spends more time on stories about exceptional individuals rather than addressing the true state of union in a much more representative way. A presentation focusing on economic data, statistics related to the two wars that we are involved in, and data on any number of issues from global warming to world food availability to energy supply and sources might give the audience a better informed view of the state of union. However, anecdotes are what we get.

A similar phenomenon arises when we look at broadcast news and print media. The pattern is familiar. A news story begins with a general statement about the topic of interest. Let's say that the story is an economic one about problems created by home foreclosures. The story begins with a general statement like "An increasing number of middle-class American families are losing their homes to foreclosure." Then the story jumps to the anecdotal account of a "typical" family who recounts the hardship it has suffered because of the crisis. Sometimes, a few statistics are sprinkled in at the end to provide a bit of useful information. Other times, there is little additional information that is provided.

The way these anecdotes are selected can have powerful effects on our understanding of the phenomenon being described. Moser, Patnick, and Beral (2007) asked women in Great Britain, "When is a woman most likely to get breast cancer...when she is in her 40s...when she is in her 50s...when she is in her 60s...when she is in her 70s...when she is in her 80s or older, or ... age doesn't matter?" (p. 404). Over 50% of the respondents indicated that age does not matter. In fact, age does matter and it matters quite a lot. Incidences rates for 80-year-olds are more than double the incidence rate in 40-year-olds. However, in their study, Moser, Patnick, and Beral found that less than 1 percent correctly identified the risk as highest for those in their 80s with the largest percentage of respondents that selected an age group, selecting the 50s. Why are the perceptions so far off?

One possible reason for the perception that the risk is higher at younger ages may come from the anecdotes that are used to illustrate the dangers of breast cancer. Burke, et al. (2001) looked at the depiction of breast cancer in popular U.S. magazines. They identified articles in these magazines that were about breast cancer and then further analyzed those that contained anecdotal vignettes about individuals who were suffering from the disease. They looked for information regarding the age of the individuals who were featured in these vignettes and found that 84% were diagnosed before they were

50-years-old. None of the vignettes featured women in their 70's or 80's and only 2.3% were in their 60's. This is in stark contrast to the population data that find the majority of breast cancer cases occurring in women who are older than 60-years-old. Therefore, the examples being presented through these anecdotes are much younger than the actual age of the typical woman who is diagnosed with breast cancer. However, it is these vignettes that the Anecdotal Mind is likely to use to form its impression of the age at which breast cancer is most likely to occur. So having examples that are not representative of the population may contribute to our inability to accurately estimate how age is related to breast cancer. This can have important consequences for how people make health decisions and how they assess their own risks of various diseases.

Statistical vs. Clinical Prediction

Imagine that you are serving on a parole board that is reviewing candidates for early release. In one case, an expert criminologist reports on a series of meetings he has had with the prisoner being reviewed. Based on those meetings and his review of the prisoner's criminal and prison records, he maintains that this person is a poor candidate for early release and is highly likely to re-offend. On the other hand, a statistician, who has analyzed recidivism rates from a national database that tracks the behavior of parolees, disagrees and claims that the prisoner is an excellent candidate for early release. However, you also learn that the statistician has not even met the prisoner and his recommendation for early release is based solely on a statistical model that only takes into account the prisoner's past criminal record and his record while in prison—information that was also available to the expert criminologist. Which recommendation would you give more weight?

If you are like most people, you would probably be more heavily influenced by the expert criminologist who had personal knowledge of the prisoner and as a consequence could evaluate the person's unique character rather than relying solely on the prisoner's records. After all, both individuals have the prisoner's records to examine but the expert criminologist has his personal experience with the prisoner to add to the statistical record. However contrary to our intuitions, extensive research examining the accuracy of statistical and clinical prediction suggests that the statistical model is more likely to result in an accurate prediction.

A major element of making good decisions is being able to make good predictions about the possible outcomes of the alternatives being considered. The statistical approach to prediction is based on membership in broad classes associated with the outcome that is being predicted. The statistician in our example is using this statistical or actuarial approach. Insurance companies use this sort of approach to predict whether a driver is likely to have an accident. They examine how factors like age, gender, education, past driving record, etc. are associated with the likelihood of having an accident. Using these factors and a statistical model, they can predict who is likely to have accidents and they adjust their rates accordingly. The clinical approach goes beyond membership in broad classes, past records, or tests. It involves understanding the uniqueness of the individual and often requires "expert" judgment as the basis for the clinical evaluation. The expert criminologist in our example is using his meetings with the prisoner to form the basis for his clinical judgment.

In well over 100 studies, psychological researchers have compared clinical

prediction to statistical prediction. The near universal finding of these studies is that statistical prediction outperforms clinical prediction in a wide variety of domains. This finding holds true even when the experts providing the judgment are given the outcome of the statistical model and only have to make adjustments where the statistical model is clearly wrong (Dawes, Faust, and Meehl, 1989). In other words, when they make adjustments to the statistical model based on clinical judgment, they are more likely to make a poorer prediction than if they had made no adjustment at all. If the findings are so clear, then why is belief in expert clinical prediction so widespread?

One factor that contributes to our belief is the confidence that we have in the Anecdotal Mind. We feel much more comfortable with an approach that emphasizes first-hand knowledge. We are familiar with this approach, while a statistical model has a cold impersonal feel to it. However, what differentiates the statistical approach from the clinical approach is not the type of information used. It is how that information is used. A statistical model for early prison release decisions could be developed that had as a factor the rating of an expert criminologist who had interviewed the potential parolee. That rating might be useful if it turned out to be predictive of the likelihood of that the parolee would re-offend. However, developing a statistical model requires determining which factors truly are predictive of success—as opposed to which factors we *think* are predictive of success. It also weights those factors in an ideal way to best use that information to make a prediction. Clinical judgment weighs the information based on the expert's own biases and intuitions and can not be counted on to combine the information in an ideal way.

If clinical judgment is not as good at making predictions, then why does it seem like it is? Here the problem is that we frequently don't have the data we need to assess the quality of the predictions. When we seek clinical prediction, it is usually because we need to make some sort of decision. That decision may influence what information we have. If we follow the recommendation of the criminologist and do not release the prisoner early, we will never know whether the prisoner would have re-offended or not; he was never given the chance.

In the academic world, we are often called upon to interview and make hiring decisions regarding new colleagues. We can become quite confident about our ability to make good hiring decisions based on those interviews as we continue to hire individuals that turn out to be excellent colleagues. However we often fail to consider that in order to get an interview, the applicant's paper credentials had to put that applicant amongst the top three or four applicants. Those doing the interviews rarely see how the individuals that they did not select turn out and so they fail to realize that they probably would have been happy with any of the top applicants. The Anecdotal Mind looks back at our past successes and attributes those successes to our expertise in making judgments based on interviews. It fails to consider whether the decision might have been just as good, or even better, if the interview had not been a part of the process.

The Availability Heuristic

One of the tools of the Anecdotal Mind is the availability heuristic. The availability heuristic relies on memory to assess the likelihood of various outcomes. If instances of a class of events are readily available in memory, then the Anecdotal Mind concludes that that class of events has a higher likelihood than another class of events for which instances are less available in memory. The classic illustration of the effects

of this heuristic is the drop in air travel that usually follows a well-publicized airplane accident. The accident is highly available in memory and causes the Anecdotal Mind to assess the likelihood of another accident as higher. Consequently fewer people fly. However as time passes without further airplane accidents, the memory grows dim and patterns of flying go back to their previous level.

The availability heuristic is far from an irrational tool. For a decision-maker that is primarily guided by personal experience, observational learning, and learning from anecdotes, it makes perfect sense to use the availability of these instances in memory to guide judgments about likelihood. Those threats that have rarely been experienced, observed, or told of in stories are likely to be low probability threats. Those that are more available are also likely to ones that need to be attended to and may also require changes to behavior. So in our evolutionary past, relying on the availability heuristic probably served our ancestors reasonably well. However, availability in memory is influenced by more than just frequency and so it may be systematically biased to overestimate some types of threats and underestimate others. In particular, spectacular threats that are likely to stand out in memory may be seen as more likely and more mundane threats that occur with similar frequency may nevertheless be seen as less likely. However, the information age has introduced another biasing factor that makes availability less useful today than it may have been in our evolutionary past.

Media coverage gives us access to many more instances which can influence likelihood judgments that are based on the availability heuristic. If media coverage represented a random sample of the events occurring in the larger environment, it would just give us a larger basis for making those likelihood judgments. Of course media coverage is anything but random. In some sense, the definition of news implies in it that the event is atypical in some way. On the nightly television news, we hear about the handful of people who were murdered, were in a major accident, or committed a major crime. We hear nothing about the millions of individuals who had an entirely uneventful day. As a consequence, if we rely on the availability heuristic we are going to see the world as a much more dangerous place than it really is. We will also tend to underestimate the dangers that we don't really hear much about like injuries and deaths due to household accidents rather than the wrong-doing of others.

Gigerenzer (2004; 2006) looked at a real world example and tried to estimate the consequences of allowing the availability heuristic to drive decision making. He looked at the impact that the 9/11 terrorist attack had on travel choices made by American travelers. As the availability heuristic would predict, Americans drastically reduced their reliance on air travel after the attack. Data from the Office of Highway Policy Information regarding vehicle miles driven both before and after the attack also showed an increase in travel using automobiles. Gigerenzer followed this pattern through 2002 and found that the increase didn't return to prior levels until October, 2002. He also looked at automotive fatalities over this same time period and estimated that 1595 additional fatalities occurred as a result of people driving rather than flying after the 9/11 attack. Reliance on the Anecdotal Mind drove people away from the much safer air travel which was associated with this dramatic tragedy and to the more mundane but less safe alternative of the personal automobile.

Medical Treatment and the Anecdotal Mind

Benjamin Rush was a physician treating Yellow Fever in Philadelphia in 1793.

His treatment was blood letting. Today we might not think that it is a good idea to drain someone's blood when they are sick but at the time it was the treatment of choice. Rush treated over 400 patients and he was treated himself. At the end of the epidemic he was more convinced than ever of the effectiveness of blood letting. With this large amount of information why didn't he come to the conclusion that blood letting was ineffective even if he was only relying on the Anecdotal Mind. Surely the anecdotes collectively provide a database sufficiently large to draw conclusions regarding the lack of effectiveness of blood letting. The problem in this case is that there is no comparison group. If Rush had compared those treated with blood letting to a second group that was not he would have had an experiment that could begin to answer the question of whether blood letting was an effective treatment. Without that he really had no evidence regarding the effectiveness of blood letting regardless of the number of instances he had to review. A second problem that may arise here is the ability to have different explanations for different outcomes. If the patient improved, it is evidence of the effectiveness of blood letting. However if the patient dies, it is evidence of how terrible Yellow Fever is. In this case no outcome could be seen as evidence against the effectiveness of blood letting.

We often hear individuals who have tried what are sometimes called alternative or complementary medical treatments tell the story of how the treatment worked for them. The Anecdotal Mind tucks away these testimonials as evidence that the treatment works. The problem is that from an objective standpoint an individual can never determine whether a treatment worked or not based only on personal experience. Rush believed that blood letting worked and he had a much larger experience base to judge from. Individuals can determine whether their condition improved after treatment but they never know what would have happened without the treatment. Diseases tend to have variable courses with period of improvement and periods of relapse. We tend to seek something new when the condition worsens. If the condition subsequently improves, we attribute the improvement to the new treatment. However the bottom line is that the person who claims a treatment worked for them based on their personal experience is making a claim that goes way beyond the evidence.

One medical treatment that developed around the same general time that Rush was treating Yellow Fever is homeopathy. The treatment is based on two principles. The first is the Law of Similars which says that "Like treats like." Hahneman believed that to find treatments you should look for substances that produce the symptoms that you are trying to treat. Then the Law of Infinitesimals kicks in. This law says that in a diluted form the treatment will alleviate the symptoms that it causes when it is in full strength. The Law of Infinitesimals further claims that the more diluted the treatment, the stronger the effect.

The Law of Similars fits the Anecdotal Mind quite nicely. Because one of the main things the Anecdotal Mind is designed to do is find associations and patterns, it is particularly sensitive to characteristics that might be predictive of an association. While frequency of occurrence is one factor in assessing likelihood, another important characteristic is similarity. Similar situations frequently produce similar consequences. As a result, the Anecdotal Mind is particularly sensitive to similarities—a characteristic of the Anecdotal Mind that may also contribute to development of superstitions.

Let's take a look at a popular homeopathic treatment for influenza.

Oscillococcinum is widely used to treat flu-like symptoms. On the Oscillo.com website, they report that the product has been in use for over 65 years and has been used by 14 million people worldwide. You will also find advertising that seems to appeal to both the Anecdotal Mind and the Analytical Mind. There are numerous testimonials that tout its benefits. However, there is also a link to a review of research studies examining its effectiveness and some summary conclusions from a couple of studies of its effectiveness.

What you won't find on the site is information about the principles of homeopathy or how they are applied in the preparation of this medicine. There is a clue but you have to know what you are looking for to find it. The label does list the active ingredient as *Anas barbariae hepatic et cortis extractum 200CK HPUS*. The most recent version now explains the Latin indicating that it is a Homeopathic preparation of the liver and heart of the Muscovy Duck. In order to make sense of this we need to know a bit more about how this medicine is prepared.

The extract is produced by "incubating" the liver and heart for 40 days. The law of similars suggests that in full strength the extract will produce the symptoms it is designed to treat and after rotting for 40 days I have little doubt that it would produce a wide variety of symptoms including flu-like ones. However, here the Law of Infinitesimals enters the picture. The 200CK indicates the process of dilution that is being used. The C indicates that the dilutions should be in a ratio of 1 to 100. So one drop of the extract is mixed with 100 drops of water. The 200 indicates that the dilutions will be repeated 200 times with each dilution mixing one drop of the previous dilution with 100 drops of water. As a consequence, the final solution is diluted in a ratio of 1 to 10⁴⁰⁰. At this dilution, there is virtually no chance that there is even a single molecule of the extract remaining in the final solution or for that matter in any of the last 190 or so steps in the dilution process.

Advocates of homeopathy generally acknowledge that the final preparation no longer contains the "active" ingredient. However, they argue instead that the water that was used to dilute it has "memory" that it was there. It is this memory that is responsible for the medicine's effects. They make an analogy to vaccines that have a partial, weakened, or dead version of the infecting agent and argue that a similar process is at work here with the diluted active ingredient. However, the analogy breaks down for a variety of reasons not the least of which is the fact that vaccines generally need to be taken prior to infection for them to be effective while homeopathic treatments claim to be effective when the disease is already present. They also fail to provide any realistic account of how water memory, if it really existed, might produce its effects in the body of a person who has a disease.

Hopefully by now it should be pretty clear that homeopathic preparations are nothing more than placebos. To their credit while homeopathic medicines probably don't produce any more effect than taking a placebo, when they were first introduced at least they didn't do as much damage as the sometimes deadly alternatives like the blood-letting of Benjamin Rush. However, once again the varied course of disease, the self-limiting nature of a disease like influenza and reliance on personal experience lead the Anecdotal Mind to see the treatment as effective. What the Anecdotal Mind notes is that I was sick and I took the homeopathic treatment. After I took the homeopathic treatment, I got better. Therefore, the treatment must have worked. This makes perfect

sense to the Anecdotal Mind which is not concerned with double-blind clinical trials or statistical analysis of outcome data. Those are foreign concepts to the Anecdotal Mind and so they have little chance of standing up to the persuasive power of the familiar trusted evidence from personal experience.

In today's talk, we have examined the nature of the Anecdotal Mind and have seen some of the ways that it has been useful but also how it can lead us astray. The Anecdotal Mind was well suited to the demands and sources of evidence available in our evolutionary past. However, the current environment provides vast amounts of information, creates different demands, and provides different sources of evidence. That requires a new set of mental tools and it introduces new sources of bias in the operation of the Anecdotal Mind. The use of non-representative anecdotes, the limited information that some situations entail, the biasing effect that media coverage has on the availability heuristic, and the Law of Similars all illustrate ways that the Anecdotal Mind can be biased. Because of the rapid and automatic nature of the processes that underlie the Anecdotal Mind we aren't likely to be able to get rid of the mental habits that are entailed. However, knowledge of these biasing effects will hopefully help us recognize when they are likely to impact decision-making and to be more analytical when these biases are likely to be strongest. We may not be able to get rid of our fear of flying when contemplating air travel following a spectacular plane crash. However, hopefully we can recognize the fear as irrational and, though trembling a bit, go ahead and board the plane.

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“VOICES” Reading

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Writers of creative nonfiction are at a big disadvantage at literary readings. For one thing, essays are long. The nonfiction writer doesn't have the poet's luxury of sipping Perrier or offering snappy patter between poems. Nor does the audience get mini-breaks in which to shift positions or cough. And if the piece that you're reading falls flat, there's no hope that the next piece will be better received: at nonfiction readings, there usually *isn't* a next piece. Essayists also have it harder than fiction writers, but for another reason. In creative nonfiction, there's no fictive narrator to hide behind. In essays, the voice on the page is *you* – a revised version of you, but you nonetheless. And so, if your audience doesn't like a piece, the conclusion is inescapable that they don't like *you*: how you see things, how your mind works, how you use language. Writers of creative nonfiction are sometimes accused of narcissism – and in bad creative nonfiction, this charge is usually true. We're not often accused of being masochists. But whenever we give readings, that's exactly what we are.

My new book is called *Small Comforts: Essays at Middle Age*. It loosely addresses the condition of being no longer young but not yet really old. Although you students are not the core demographic for this book, it might interest you as a confrontation with generational otherness. If you've ever suspected that your middle-aged parents are nuts, this is the book that proves it. Plus, you were all kids once – and for this reason, the piece that I'm reading tonight might offer something that you can relate to.

“Bad Scouts and Nervous Indians”

A powerfully traumatic event in my childhood was the celebration of Boy Scout Sunday at the Howard Methodist Church on Cherry Street in Findlay, Ohio, when I was in fourth grade. I sensed trouble as soon as our family arrived and I spotted other boys in their Boy Scout uniforms. To be dressed differently from the other kids was bad enough, but the worst was yet to come. At the close of the service all the Scouts in the congregation were called to the front of the sanctuary, where they stood like soldiers at parade rest, their somber faces gazing out into the middle distance. These, the minister proclaimed with a sweeping wave of his hand, were the fruit of America's youth, pure and upright in the sight of the Lord.

At that moment there were only two kinds of boys: the Scouts, who were serving God and country, and the non-Scouts, who were apparently serving something *else*. My agony was reinforced by a popular TV commercial of the time, which began with a pre-teen boy, sloppily dressed in a T-shirt and rolled-cuff blue jeans and walking along some railroad tracks, aimlessly chucking stones into the woods. It wasn't hard to imagine what the commercial didn't show: that he would soon be swilling beer, smoking tailor-mades, and cursing the forces of light. Scouting offered a way out of that grim future, a fact that became clear enough when the ad cut to the same boy in a crisp Scout

uniform, beaming and saluting at the camera. Clearly, this was a boy who had become pure in the Lord's sight, like those kids who stood in front of the Howard Methodist congregation that Sunday. From the big ones in khaki to the little ones in blue, these were America's good sons, a *tableau vivant* of virtue arranged by height. And where, at that precise moment, were America's *bad* sons, those track-walkers whose corruption gave poignant contrast to the goodness of Scouting? One of them, hot and red-faced, was slumped low in a pew, flipping through a hymnal in an attempt to appear unconcerned.

It took forever – or so it seemed – for the minister to recite the Scouts' achievements over the past year: merit badges earned, projects completed, victories wrested from the world's sin and indifference. The minister probably said something about America's future resting in capable hands, though it would be unwise to give much credence to my memory. There were too many self-condemning scenarios coursing through my mind for my memory to be reliable. What I recall is everyone looking at me and thinking: what's wrong with *that* one? Is he too soft to be a Scout? Too sneaky? Given my broader recollection of those Methodists as mostly nice people, the congregation probably wasn't looking at me at all. Given my wish to become invisible, such insight would have been a blessing.

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The unvoiced reproaches that I felt on Boy Scout Sunday were, of course, of my own making: I suspected *myself* of being too soft and sneaky to be a Scout. I was afraid that if I ever joined the Scouts, I would be the first kid in Ohio to be kicked out for failing to master the requisite skills. I knew from my Scouting friends that you had to do things. If you succeeded, you worked your way up through the various rankings until you could climb no higher. And then there you'd be, your limitations exposed for all to see. There were some boys who *had* no limitations. In that time and place, Eagle Scouts – the few and the proud who had earned every honor and recognition available – were revered. These were the winners, and since winners required losers, I was pretty sure what my Scouting role would be. Chubby and unathletic, I had vague imaginings that I would be drummed out in disgrace and remembered only as the archetypal anti-Scout, the one boy who was not prepared and never would be. My new Cub uniform, crisp and blue, would hang in my closet as a reproach for years to come.

I knew about merit badges and what some of them were for. Although I could identify stars and fossils with the best of them, the competitive aspects of Scouting frightened me. I imagined myself struggling to tie knots under the judgmental stare of a stern scoutmaster with a clipboard – not a pleasant fantasy for a kid whose shoelaces kept coming undone. Then there was that “Polar Bear” thing. Spending a night in the woods in the dead of winter did not sound like fun. And who would be the first boy to break, the first to beg to go home in fear and shame? Worse, I heard that all Scouts had to know how to swim. Given my terror of water, along with my conviction that the heavier the boy the quicker he'd sink, that particular challenge seemed insurmountable. What if my troop was camped in the woods and a scoutmaster ordered us, on a whim, to dive headfirst into the Blanchard River just to see what we were made of? And what, exactly, would a boy be made of if he clung to a tree and cried like a baby, resisting all efforts to pry him loose?

I masked my fear of joining the Scouts by claiming that I liked playing alone. Like most excuses, this one contained a kernel of truth. My mother, who worried that I was becoming one of those loners who end up committing lurid crimes, kept suggesting that I'd have more fun if I joined the Scouts. These talks prompted a rare occurrence in our house: my father, who was even more obsessively solitary than I was, did not rush to back Mom up. His uncomfortable silence suggested that he knew full well where I had acquired my reclusive habits. Dad's politics were also tangled up in the Boy Scouts issue. A New Deal Democrat, he associated the Scouts with the conservative brand of patriotism that prevailed in our small town. I suspect that he saw the Scouts as training ground for what he routinely called the "rich bastards," people who minded the main chance and didn't give a damn about anyone else. It didn't help that the Scouts pledged their loyalty to "God and Country." Although Dad was a Navy veteran who had no problem with the "country" part, his thinly veiled disdain for religion made it pretty clear that the "God" part bothered him. He had heard enough Republicans claiming to know how Jesus would vote to last him a lifetime.

There was no denying that the Boy Scouts held considerable appeal: the camping trips, the songs, the crafts. But for a kid like me, these attractions came with more togetherness than I could handle. I figured that I could do most of these things on my own anyway, without being judged on how well or poorly I did them. If a handmade tomahawk came apart because I had used the wrong knot when tying the handle to the sharpened stone, I didn't need a scoutmaster telling me that my tomahawk was lousy and giving me demerits for it. If I tried to identify the constellations on my own, nobody had to remind me that some of them were more difficult to spot than others and that I should try harder. Besides, I figured that if somebody was *telling* me to find the constellations, it wouldn't be much fun in the first place.

I came by these solitary habits honestly, but my resistance to Scouting also had a darker side: an unstated and perhaps unconscious desire to retain the freedom to be lazy, to indulge an innate sluggishness that seemed threatened by the Scouts and everything they stood for. The Scouts seemed to believe that useful things were all that mattered. There were no merit badges, so far as I knew, for drawing dinosaurs, finding weird shapes in the clouds, or stirring a creek bed to watch crawdads scatter. The one clear thing I knew about Scouting was that it took up lots of time – sometimes even my Scout friends complained about that – and I wanted to keep my days as open and unplanned as possible. My mother, an energetic woman who was active in politics and community affairs, found my reluctance to commit to specific activities irritating, and even my father puzzled over why his youngest child never seemed to *do* much of anything. Eventually, Scouting became less an enticement than a threat, our family's equivalent to military school. My mother frequently said, "If you don't shape up, I'm going to make you join the Scouts." Dad's words were scarcely more encouraging. "If you don't shape up, your mother's going to make you join the Scouts."

Although I liked how the uniforms looked, they had a scary side because they reinforced my growing association of Scouting with all things military. Given my mother's threats, I increasingly saw the Scouts as an army into which I could be drafted at any time and ordered to do difficult and dangerous things. I didn't have misguided fantasies about this: no visions of the Whittier School troop marching south to attack the Jefferson School troop, no fears of newly initiated Cubs being issued BB-guns with which to shoot the lazy and the godless. But wasn't the Scout motto "Be Prepared?" And

didn't such a call presume the approach of a terrible thing that required such preparation?

I knew what that terrible thing was. In the late Fifties, when everyone assumed that we might someday be fighting the Communists in our streets, not joining the Scouts was tantamount to hiding nuclear secrets under a pumpkin for a Russian spy to pick up. Much of what the Scouts supposedly did "for God and Country" seemed linked to precisely this kind of patriotism. It puzzled me, though, that God would need defending, let alone by a pack of boys. And while I loved America as much as the next kid, I preferred preparing to defend it alone and unobserved. I figured that since American boys could hardly be expected to fight Russian men, our best defense against a Communist invasion would be to lie low and bide our time, probably in the woods, until we all grew up and could kick the Reds out. I admired my friend Dick's Scouting gear: his canteen, his dinner set, his first-aid kit. He was obviously ready to head for the woods when the Russians came, taking his bearings from the stars and drawing strength from edible roots until he got big enough to carry an M-15, like his G.I. Joe.

To be sure, the notion of surviving in the woods was attractive to a solitary kid. I even bought a used copy of the *Boy Scout Handbook* so that I, too, could learn first-aid, build an overnight lean-to, execute the two-man chair carry, and identify poison ivy and poison oak so I could clean up with non-poisonous leaves after fouling myself, useful knowledge if a platoon of Borises were closing in. Still, the idea of preparing for the Russian invasion scared me mightily. I was the kind of boy who went out of his way to avoid fights, talking my way out of tight spots by making would-be opponents laugh. What few fights I got into, when jokes and fast talking didn't work, were pathetic affairs, two- or three-punch fiascos that left me nauseous even when I "won." The Boy Scouts seemed a constant reminder of this other fight – the big one. And since I didn't know any Russian, no amount of preparation was going to keep those Communist soldiers from rounding me up. "Hyoo, fett booy! Eento de truck!" I wouldn't even be able to make those guys laugh.

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One purpose of Scouting, of course, was to get fathers and sons more involved with each other. My father and I, who shared a passion for baseball but not much else, knew that we loved each other even though we found the fact mildly embarrassing – and certainly not something to be openly acknowledged. Our differing interests made us develop a habit of keeping a wary distance from each other except during baseball-talk, which compensated for our usual reserve by being enthusiastic to the point of mania. One barrier between us was the fact that I loved to read – a solitary activity to begin with, and one that could not often be shared with my father, whose reading was pretty much limited to the newspapers. Another was Dad's impatience with male ineptitude in anything practical or mechanical. Since this was precisely the sort of ineptitude that I had been born with, I carefully avoided doing anything in his presence that would further expose my clumsiness. Whenever he interrupted my reading to ask me to help out with a chore, I inevitably embarrassed us both by screwing up. One time he fell off a ladder that I had neglected to steady while waving to a friend. Another time he got a nasty shock because I put a circuit breaker in the wrong position. Mere survival, not to mention having to yell "Jesus H. Christ" once too often, dictated that he do the house maintenance on his own.

We didn't feel hostility toward each other, just a powerful sense of difference. Nevertheless, Mom worried that a gulf was developing between us, and constantly suggested joint activities for us to do. I suspect that she was also impatient with the fact that neither of us seemed to get out of the house very much. By the time Dad finished reading every word of the *Findlay Republican Courier* and the *Toledo Blade*, including the box score of every major league game, Mom must have felt that he had been sitting in his recliner for a very long time. Whatever her motives, that Boy Scout Sunday brought several issues to a crisis. I was apparently unsuccessful in concealing my anguish, because not long afterwards, Mom insisted that Dad and I give the Indian Guides a try.

The Indian Guides, established in 1926 in St. Louis by Harold S. Keltner and an Ojibwa named Joe Friday, were affiliated with the YMCA. Fathers and sons gathered in small "tribes" to reaffirm family values and togetherness with the aid of a half-digested stew of popularized "Indian" imagery and ceremonies. The shifting demographics of the American family prompted the Y to add groups for mothers and daughters ("Indian Maidens") and father and daughters ("Indian Princesses") in the early Fifties; groups for mothers and sons ("Indian Braves") were established in 1980.

This history is a product, of course, of the hindsight afforded by research. At the time, my father and I simply saw the Indian Guides as a more appealing alternative to the Boy Scouts. It was hard to picture Indians as Republicans-in-training, and I suspect that their status as the losers in America's westward expansion spoke deeply to my father's identity as a beleaguered Democrat. The Indian Guides must also have struck him as less burdened than the Scouts with the overt God-talk that made him so uncomfortable. For my part, the Indian Guides promised to provide a less militaristic – and thus less frightening -- way to be a good American. The Guides also seemed to offer an unusually efficient preparation for the Russians. If a kid had to get ready for life in the woods, who better to turn to than people who *routinely* lived in the woods? Maybe Dad and I could be good Americans by emulating those original good Americans whom those later good Americans replaced.

This was long before most people acquired an unvarnished recognition of what actually happened to the Native Americans. If I knew then what we all know now, I would have expected the first ceremonial act required of white fathers and sons joining the Indian Guides to be pretty straightforward: "Braves, slit your throats." History finally caught up with the stereotypes fostered by the Indian Guides some 40 years later, when the YMCA dropped most of the Indian content from the program after extensive protest by leaders of the American Indian Movement.

But Findlay, Ohio, circa 1959, was firmly within the Pleistocene Era. Most Findlayites – kids and adults alike – pictured Indians as wise nature-people who had unfortunately gotten in the way of Manifest Destiny. I think I saw the Indians as an old-fashioned variety of "Americans" who had to give way to the new-fashioned Americans, and so we were all Americans together, sort of. It never occurred to me that our vanquished predecessors might resent us. On the contrary, the Indian Guides made them seem willing to help us reconnect with the great outdoors and thus prepare for the Russians.

The first meeting of the Indian Guides that my father and I attended confirmed that the Great Spirit's intentions were benign, that many forest-forged adventures lay

in store, and that our father/son bond would grow stronger if we walked in the Indian Way. I didn't know any of the other boys, who went to different elementary schools. Dad didn't seem to know any of the other fathers, either, and even at that age I could sense his awkwardness when the host father asked us to "tell us a little about yourselves." I don't remember what Dad said, but I'm guessing that he didn't mention his politics. When my turn came, I couldn't think of anything to say except that I liked dinosaurs. I remember being relieved to learn that no brave's uniform was involved, only a ceremonial headband and a vest. When Dad and I received our gear, we were told that we had to find a single feather in the wild for each headband before the next meeting. We would also have to choose our Indian names, based on whatever animal seemed fitting as our "totem."

I met the first Indian Guides challenge by prying two relatively unbent gray feathers from a large mourning dove that had been flattened on Route 15. The fact that I threw up afterwards only assured me that I was being appropriately toughened to meet the Communist challenge. My father, who was impressed and alarmed in roughly equal measure, said that if I had told him about that bird, *he* would have gotten those feathers. I guess we were already learning Indian selflessness. It was Dad who came up with our Indian names: "Big Beaver" and "Little Beaver." The association with earnest industriousness seemed just right for him, and the animal's chubbiness seemed to match me. The beaver also fit the nervous, toothy grin that we had in common whenever we were in awkward situations.

The subsequent meetings, which took place once a month at various homes, are a blur, though I do recall that we beat a drum and sang hymns and offered prayers to the Great Spirit, following the words in a little pamphlet. I remember one meeting, devoted to crafts, when Big Beaver and Little Beaver cut and stitched a genuine "Indian wallet." It never occurred to me that a coin-purse designed to hold American dimes and nickels would be of limited use to real Indians during their seasonal migrations following game. But weren't we toughening ourselves for the future? A kid fleeing the Russians would be damned grateful to have an Indian wallet if he chanced upon a Coke machine in the woods.

Although the Indian Guides were preferable to the Boy Scouts, I never really warmed to the program. There was something forced about those meetings, an awkward solemnity that was beginning to make them seem not much better than church. The closing prayer to the Great Spirit, offered by the host father, was extemporaneous, and I found myself getting confused during its delivery. If the Great Spirit was the same as God, it seemed strange that we were giving him this new name. And if the Great Spirit *wasn't* God, then what, exactly, were we praying to? Things always got a little tense as a father stumbled through this closing prayer. I now suspect that the ambiguous theology of the Indian Guides made the dads uncertain about what a guy was supposed to say to the Great Spirit. Since they couldn't use the usual phrases like "O God our Father" or "In the name of thy Son, Jesus," they struggled to come up with Indian-like petitions, usually different versions of asking for a well-marked path through the dark forest of the world. It probably felt more appropriate, given the setting, to pray for something like "many fat deer," but what kind of a prayer would that be for 20th-century Ohioans? My father was uncomfortable with prayer of any sort, let alone praying in the Indian-like language that the Great Spirit demanded. Someday, we both knew, Dad would have to offer his own words to the Great Spirit, and his horror at that was palpable even to me.

When it was finally our turn to host an Indian Guides meeting, my father could scarcely eat his dinner. After we finished and washed the dishes, Mom got busy readying things for the Indian Guides: setting up TV trays, opening small tubs of chip dip, and pouring potato chips into several large bowls. As usual, Dad headed for the recliner with his two newspapers, but instead of reading them, he just sat and stared out the window. Every so often he asked what time it was.

I don't recall much about that meeting except for its very end, when we all stood in a circle with joined hands and waited for my father's benediction to the Great Spirit. We stood with bowed heads for what seemed like an eternity while Dad kept clearing his throat. With a resigned expression on his face, he finally opened his mouth to speak. "O Great Spirit," he began, "who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done. . . ."

My father, realizing that he had been trapped by his own panic into reciting the only prayer he knew, allowed that helpless, toothy grin to spread across his face. The other fathers smiled, the sons giggled, and my mother stared in disbelief at the sight of her religious-skeptic husband reciting the Lord's Prayer to a circle of men and boys wearing feathered headbands. The familiar words, once started, could not be stopped, and Dad dutifully followed them to their Protestant conclusion: "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever." At this point, making a last-ditch effort to get things back on a proper Indian Guides footing, he rapidly added: "And may the Great Spirit give us all a good night's sleep. Amen."

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It hardly seems necessary to add that this was our last night as Indian Guides. The door had scarcely closed on the last father-son pair when Dad and I looked at each other and started to laugh. When he said "I'm through," I couldn't say "me too" fast enough. We turned on the TV to catch the closing innings of a Tigers game. Half a bowl of chips were left over from the meeting. All it took was a Budweiser for Big Beaver and a Coke for Little Beaver to make us feel that we had achieved, in record time, the goal expressed in the Indian Guides slogan: "Pals Forever." It was a very good night.

If the Indian Guides were indeed Christian propagandists in buckskins, as later Native Americans claimed, my father could have served as Exhibit A, despite the fact that he wasn't even a committed Methodist, let alone a committed Christian. Plus, his desperate prayer seemed to prove that there was no getting away from standing up for "God and Country" in one form or another. Our problem, it seemed, was finding a way to stand up for them – for country at least – without feeling like phonies. Dad and I knew in our hearts that we were as patriotic as anybody, but in Findlay, Ohio, in the late Fifties, this was a difficult thing for non-Boy Scouts and other loners to demonstrate. So was the notion that a person could be both a patriot and a Democrat. This latter possibility would not become publicly acknowledged, at least in our town, until a year later, when JFK's election vindicated our family's politics by proving that we weren't the only Democrats in America.

Our brief time as would-be Indians seemed to confirm another truth that would shape the rest of our lives: my father and I were not the kind of people who feel com-

fortable in groups, and never would be. My growing awareness of this fact – and that it was somehow all right – finally led me to see that there was nothing wrong with the Boy Scouts except for the fact that they were plural. This, in turn, made it seem okay to continue working through that *Boy Scout Handbook* on my own without feeling that I was prying into secrets meant for other, more sociable boys. Even today I'm reasonably confident that I could tap tree sap in order to survive in the woods as efficiently as any other middle-aged man, even a former Eagle Scout, provided I had the *Handbook* to remind me what a maple tree looked like. I can still find both Dippers and the North Star with the best of them, though I never earned a badge for learning to do it. You don't have to be a joiner to scan the night sky in awe. And since confidence always goes overboard, I'd go so far as to say that a joiner can't really scan the night sky in awe – not, at least, as a joiner. To do some things right, you have to be alone. Maybe there should be a Non-Boy Scout Sunday to acknowledge this.

As for my father's Pater Noster to the Great Spirit, there's something deeply American about that kind of goofy eclecticism, where disparate things get weirdly juxtaposed. It's also deeply American, of course, to object to such glib appropriations if it's your stuff that's being appropriated. The cheerfully half-baked mix of Christian and Native American traditions that the Indian Guides posed could not survive later sensibilities, and as a result, the Indian Guides are now called the Adventure Guides. Braves are now Explorers, tribes are now circles, headbands have been replaced with caps, and that manly slogan – "Pals forever" – has been replaced with the more gender-neutral "Friends forever." The Great Spirit – that vague figure who proved impossible for my father to address – is now "Our Creator." I suspect that even an exceedingly lukewarm Methodist might have found something to say to Our Creator, even if he didn't really believe it.

Although such changes are undeniably for the good, I'm grateful to the Indian Guides. They helped me realize that I didn't need to be a Boy Scout to feel like a good American, or at least a not-so-bad American. More accurately, of course, it was my father as an Indian Guide who conveyed this lesson. While that Boy Scout Sunday propelled me into the depths of shame, Dad's ambiguous prayer to the Great Spirit provided the vehicle of recovery. It may even have been that very night, if such a point can be identified, when my outlook on life turned profoundly and permanently comic.

Now that I'm 15 years older than my father was at that last Indian Guides meeting, I can attest that a solitary temperament only gets more pronounced as a person ages. The fierce privacy of the man, so deeply ingrained, was something that he was willing to violate in order to give his son more fun. But by submitting to the ordeal of being watched doing a goofy thing, Dad was trying to fix precisely that part of my makeup that was most fully his. There is much to be said for a father and son doing something together, even if that something is being lousy at doing something together. And although Dad left for the Happy Hunting Grounds, or wherever the Great Spirit resides, two years ago at the age of 89, his legacy remains. Our lifelong habit of non-bonding, a product of the intense love of privacy that we shared, turned out to be precisely what bonded us. Could two men who remained non-joiners and never voted Republican in their lives be linked by anything other than an understated closeness? If the Russians had invaded and we had been forced to head for the woods, I think that we would have done just fine – bad Scouts and nervous Indians that we were.

