

Faculty Lectures on Campus

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1. J. Jordan Price, Assistant Professor of Biology
Remarks to the Faculty
at the Faculty Laurels Dinner
“Poker and Scientific Scholarship”
January 20, 2006
pp. 1-2
2. Zachariah Messitte, Assistant Professor of Political Science, and
Director of the Center for the Study of Democracy
“Last” Lecture (by student invitation)
February 16, 2006
pp. 3-8
3. Sue Johnson, Professor of Art, and Steven Muller Distinguished Professor of Art
Acceptance of the Norton T. Dodge Award
for Creative and Scholarly Achievement
“The Muse, the Pencil, and the Propane Tank”
April 29, 2006
pp. 9-12
4. Elizabeth Charlebois, Assistant Professor of English
Remarks at Senior Convocation
May 12, 2006
pp. 13-18
5. Jeffrey Hammond, Professor of English, and the George B. and Willma Reeves
Endowed Chair in the Liberal Arts
Remarks at New-Student Convocation
“The Freedom to be Uncool”
August 25, 2006
pp. 19-21
6. Jeffrey Hammond, Professor of English, and the George B. and Willma Reeves
Endowed Chair in the Liberal Arts
The Annual Reeves Lecture
“Writing Like Weasels: Place-Writing and Creative Nonfiction”
September 16, 2006
pp. 23-28
7. Charles Holden, Associate Professor of History, and
Aldom-Plansoen Honors College Professor
“Last” Lecture (by student invitation)
“Lessons from Home”
September 20, 2006
pp. 29-41

Poker and Scientific Scholarship

Remarks to the Faculty at the Faculty Laurels Dinner

J. Jordan Price
Assistant Professor of Biology

As a junior faculty member, I was flattered when I was invited to join in the monthly poker game—a 30-year-old tradition—by some of my senior colleagues. Later, of course, I realized this wasn't quite the honor that I thought it was: they were mostly just looking for people who aren't very good at cards and who have a steady paycheck. However, I still enjoy playing and, believe it or not, the experience has led me to discover some interesting parallels between poker and scientific scholarship.

First, both involve a bit of gambling. Some research projects end up working and some don't; it can be a real challenge to decide which ones to pursue and which ones to abandon. (I've found that I'm much better at this in research than I am at poker.) Second, both can involve late nights . . . and alcohol (for preserving specimens, of course). Finally, if you play your cards right, you can actually do both without spending a tremendous amount of money.

Not all types of scholarship work well at a small liberal arts college like St. Mary's, and this is especially true for scientists. Many of us need resources that we just don't have here, and we have to go elsewhere to do our research. Some of the projects I'm involved with could not be done without collaborating with people at much larger institutions. Some of my colleagues at larger universities look on my choice of coming here as a compromise in which I've given up research opportunities so that I could devote more time to teaching.

On the contrary, however, I have found St. Mary's to be an excellent place to do research largely *because* of this emphasis on teaching and students. Many of the research projects I'm interested in require a lot of labor, which our students are often very happy to provide. It also turns out that many of the questions I'm interested in are ones that students find interesting, too, and which can be addressed in year-long undergraduate research projects.

My adviser in graduate school was sort of unusual in that he didn't have a large, grant-funded, research program that students cycled into and out of. He had broad interests and encouraged his students to pursue just about anything they wanted. I ended up traveling to Venezuela and doing a project

on a tropical bird, which eventually got a lot of attention in the media. I wouldn't have been able to do that without the kind of creativity and self-reliance that my adviser encouraged.

This is the model I've tried to follow here at St. Mary's. While undergraduates need a lot more guidance than graduate students, I've been amazed at some of the things our students have accomplished when steered in the right direction (or even in the wrong direction!). Along the way, I have been pleasantly surprised to observe how my personal research program has become interwoven with my students' research.

Much of my research is focused on animals, particularly on birds in the field. In this place of marshland, water, and woods, topics for research projects seem to practically fall from the sky. For example, a student and I recently discovered that the red-winged blackbirds in Southern Maryland have a song dialect not known to occur in most parts of North America. The birds here sing a long, slow drawl, unlike the rapid songs of other areas. The dialects spoken by local watermen may be disappearing, but this blackbird dialect is still going strong. A student and I are working on this now.

A bunch more projects are ongoing. Some of them will probably work out, but many won't.

But unlike with graduate students, if an undergraduate research project doesn't work, it's really no big deal, and the students still get lots out of it. As for me, it's like playing poker with someone else's money.

My “Last” Lecture (at invitation of student body)

Zach Messitte

Assistant Professor of Political Science, and
Director of the Center for the Study of Democracy

To give a “last” lecture is no small task. I’ve been thinking about how I would approach this talk for the past several weeks: usually on the car ride between my home in Leonardtown and St. Mary’s City – but sometimes in the shower or when I take afternoon walks at the College. It has been a cathartic process for me. To be honest – this talk today, and the process of organizing my thoughts – will likely be more important for me than it will be for you.

I teach political science at the College, and every spring I offer “Introduction to Politics.” Now, this is a class that is a General Education requirement and usually filled with freshmen, sophomores, and many students who don’t always have much interest in politics. So I try and make the course as lively and accessible as possible.

The spring semester begins – as it did this year – the day after Martin Luther King’s birthday. And so, I play the entire 16-minute “I have a dream” speech to open the class. It’s the first thing I do. No roll. No introduction. Just straight to the speech. And, of course, everyone knows the speech, but very few people have ever heard anything more than the last 90 seconds of it – the crescendo that ends with “Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty we are free at last!” And of course the end of the speech is magnificent. But the whole speech is amazing. King was 32 when he gave it, and it’s brief – only 15 minutes—and there are so many remarkable turns of phrase.

When listening to it this year, one line jumped out at me: “the fierce urgency of now.” Of course, King was speaking about not accepting gradualism in integration but about the need for equal rights today.

However, to me – listening again this year – “the fierce urgency of now” meant something entirely different. And that is what I want to talk about today.

For this we need to go back in time, and I need to open up and tell you a bit about myself and explain my “communities,” if you will. And what I mean by “communities” are the constructs, real or imagined, that one creates in their life of friends and family. So, let me introduce you to my world.

First, and most importantly: I have a wonderful family. My mom and dad are smart, urbane, sensitive, caring people who gave me a beautiful childhood, full of trips to the beach and an appreciation for art and music, civic life, and the importance of friendship, loyalty, and responsibility.

My sister is three years younger than me. We took a lot of family vacations growing up and played too many games of Yahtzee and Sorry and Monopoly. She now runs a very trendy art gallery in Manhattan. From the beginning, she has always been an important part of my life.

My wife, Julia, is a strong person who I know loves me more than anything. We did not “have each other at hello” because what drew us to each other was that we did *not* complete each other as people. We already were complete. Jerry Maguire had it wrong. It is better to complement than complete each other.

I have two young sons: Sam (4) and Jules (one and a half). They are good, and sweet, and pure. Every weekend the past month I have watched “The Wizard of Oz” with Sam – but he requests that we fast-forward through any scenes with Miss Gulch, the Wicked Witch of the East, and also skip over the flying monkeys. It’s kind of a G+ version of the movie. And he asks a lot of questions, like “Why does the Tin Man need a heart?” Answer: “Because he does. And, “Why is the Wicked Witch so mean?” Answer: “Because she is.”

I also have an amazing extended family, full of aunts, uncles, cousins, and in-laws, scattered around Maryland and the country, and I keep up with them, too. My 90-year-old grandma – who we call “Grammy” – is sharp as a tack. She still reads The Washington Post and The New York Times every day. She is also an avid C-Span watcher. I am sure she is calling for Dick Cheney’s resignation right now and may have theories that link Chandra Levy, OJ Simpson, Monica Lewinsky, and the vice-president’s mishap all into a single conspiracy.

Second, everywhere I have ever gone to school, I have kept up a network of friends. There are dozens of people from Bethesda-Chevy Chase high school (where I graduated exactly 20 years ago) that I still talk to on a regular basis. From college at Bowdoin in Maine, and through graduate school both at the Johns Hopkins Nitze School of Advanced International Studies and then New York University, there is a circle of friends that are important to me. This is not unlike many of you in this room who have started this same kind of network – except that you all have a facebook, too.

Third, everywhere I have ever worked (Capitol Hill, CNN, the United Nations, and now St. Mary's) I have formed relationships with colleagues that have transcended the office.

Fourth, and finally, there are a few special people that don't fall into any of these categories. Perhaps they were people I met when I lived in Italy for a year after college, or friends of friends, or neighbors.

These are my four worlds, my four communities: family, school, work, and those who don't fall into those categories. Creating and nurturing these four communities is the most important thing I have done in my life. I now know this, but I did not know it until August 2004. Let me tell you why.

Let's go back to the end of the summer of 2004. My life is so beautiful it hurts. In May of that year I received my Ph.D. in politics from NYU. It had taken me five years and too many late nights and sunny afternoons in the library. But I completed it. On July 1st I was given two appointments at St. Mary's College – a place, by the way, which I adore. In addition to being the director at the Center for the Study of Democracy, I would now also be a member of the Political Science Department. On August 7th, our second son, Julius (named after my grandfather) was born at St. Mary's Hospital. On August 7th, I received word that the Center for the Study of Democracy had been awarded a \$500,000 grant that I had submitted six months before. I lived in a nice house in a beautiful part of the country. I had a wonderful wife and family, amazing friends, and colleagues who were passionate about making the world a better place. I had enough money to live comfortably. I was in good physical shape. I ran. I lifted weights and played basketball once a week. I was 36 years old.

And then I had cancer.

A tumor in my tonsils had spread to my lymph nodes. I was told that my chances of beating it were pretty good – but only if I submitted to the most aggressive treatment schedule possible. This meant chemotherapy once a week for 10 weeks, radiation every day (Monday through Friday) for three months, to be followed by a radical neck dissection. Hence, the tough-guy scar. They also told me I needed a feeding tube because I wouldn't be able to swallow. I resisted this and never did request it.

There was a chance that the surgery would restrict my ability to move my head and that I might never be able to use my voice again.

Perhaps I had already delivered my last lecture.

I need to tell you about my cancer treatment so that you understand why so many people who go through this ordeal find it to be a defining event

in their lives. I received chemo through an IV in my arm every Friday. The drugs entered my system along with medicine to keep me from vomiting. It often burned as it went in. It used to make me sleepy, and I'd read the sports page and then drift off. My mom or my wife would drive me home. They gave me steroids which hopped me up for 12 hours or so, but by the second day I just wanted to sleep.

The radiation was particularly dehumanizing. The doctors made a mesh, mask-like contraption for my face (similar to a fencer's), and tattooed my chest to get the exact correlation for the laser beams that would burn out the tumor. I would be bolted to a gurney, all the doctors would leave the room, and a machine would whirl above me for 15 minutes every day.

The chemo made my hair fall out, and I lost my appetite. The radiation burned my throat and did make it difficult to swallow. I lost 50 pounds. I got pneumonia. I got depressed. I took prescribed drugs that were so strong it made smoking pot seem silly. One evening I was so high I begged my wife to call Lance Armstrong to see if I could wear his biking-leader yellow jersey.

When I was told I had the disease, a certain clarity descended on me that, I think, is not uncommon among cancer patients. Naturally, it brought my own mortality into focus. I mean, you know with certainty you will die one day – and perhaps even soon.

And while I didn't sit around and ask, "Why me?"; I didn't feel particularly heroic, either. I couldn't relate to all the parables of acting like a fighter. To be honest, I just wanted this awful thing out of my neck. I wanted my life back.

But here's the beautiful thing. When I got sick, I turned to my four worlds. I asked for help. And these four communities reacted in ways that kept me physically, mentally, and spiritually strong. It clarified, for me, "the fierce urgency of now." So I want to share just a few of these stories.

Of course, my family was there. My mom made me coffee milk shakes and wonton soup – the only things I would eat for two months. My wife stayed home from law school; she watched movies with me and reassured me when I got down. When I lost my voice and could only whisper, my son Sam thought it was a game and whispered back. On Tuesdays, after radiation, I would visit my 90-year-old grandma in Bethesda and we'd play two hours of Scrabble. When I got too sick to go to her house, she would come visit me. My sister came down from New York and drove me to Annapolis for the announcement about the Center's \$500,000 grant. My dad and I watched the

entire American and National League championships and the World Series together for the first time since I was 12.

My childhood friends rallied. My friends Hadley and Karen took me to lunch every Wednesday – and even when I couldn't eat, we'd go out. Hadley, who lives in D.C., came down for the St. Mary's County fair in September when I was still doing pretty good. At the fair, she noticed how much I enjoyed a sno-cone which felt good on my throat. Three days later a package arrived: she had sent me a sno-cone machine with a dozen different flavor packets.

My friend Cole – who is a millionaire and lives in Los Angeles and occasionally dates Marisa Tomei – flew across the county and went to doctors' appointments with me.

My in-laws in Alabama prayed for me in Christian churches. Some members of my family prayed in synagogues, and Asif Dowla (who teaches economics here at the College) along with my friends from grad school who are Muslim, prayed for me at the mosque. I am not a religious person, but when the cleaning person at the courthouse where my father works told me that she had said a prayer for me at her Baptist church, I felt stronger.

I received hundreds of cards and messages from students, work colleagues, friends, friends of my parents, and family.

My friend John Deeken, who I had worked with on Capitol Hill – and who had left politics to study medicine and oncology – called me weekly to check on my status. He'd tell me new things he'd learned about neck cancer and tell me about other patients who had it worse than I did. John and my wife were the first two people I saw when I woke up from surgery. John has decided to specialize in neck cancers – something he says I did for him.

My buddy Tim, who I worked with at the U.N., started to cry on the phone when I told him I had cancer. Oftentimes he was too upset to talk with me, so he would call my wife to make sure I was doing okay. His kids sent me gift certificates for Dairy Queen because they knew it would be good for my throat.

One day I came home from radiation to find my next-door neighbor – Mike Luginbill, father of Beth who is in the senior class – raking my leaves. I tried to thank him but I started bawling like a child.

Despite my requests to go on unpaid leave, St. Mary's would not accept this. My colleagues – your professors, administrators, and staff – pooled their sick leave so that I wouldn't officially have to take any days off or miss a paycheck.

St. Mary's became a place I would go to in my head when I got scared. Just before my surgery – when they told me to count backwards from 10 – I had already put myself in a state far away. I was flying over the horseshoe bend in the St. Mary's River . . . I was taking my son out in kayak

As a political scientist I had been trained to see people as self-interested, rational, sub-atomic particles. Thomas Hobbes famously said that life was “nasty, brutish, and short.” But where was the self-interest in cleaning my gutters or buying me sno-cone machines, or donating sick leave?

And so, my lessons?

1. Well, people are fundamentally good and they rise to the occasion.
2. Your relationships with other people – and in the creation and nurturing of your communities – are more important than any amount of money, success, or fame you may achieve, and once you make peace with that, it sets you free.
3. I want to try to live the rest of my life with a spirit of what Martin Luther King called “the fierce urgency of now” – because there is not enough time to do all the wonderful things life has to offer.

The Muse, The Pencil, and the Propane Tank

Acceptance of the Norton T. Dodge Award
for Creative and Scholarly Achievement

Sue Johnson
Professor of Art, and
Steven Muller Distinguished Professor of Art

I am very humbled by this award; there are so many faculty members here at St. Mary's who do remarkable, groundbreaking, and inspiring scholarly work – AND teach. AND participate in the life of the College and community. As faculty I think we seek the perfect balance between all the things we do that make up who we are – with the goal that we might lead lives that are more connected than compartmentalized. To balance a professional life with a life devoted to teaching is a significant goal and ongoing challenge.

Recently I've been reading a book, *The Creative Habit*, by the great choreographer, Twyla Tharp. In her own work she melds together modern dance and ballet with popular music – and has created over 130 dances for her own company and the Joffrey Ballet, the Paris Opera Ballet, and London's Royal Ballet. She has collaborated with Mikhail Baryshnikov, Billy Joel, and Milos Foreman, among many others. For her work in television and film, as well as the Broadway stage, she has won Tonys, Emmys, and a MacArthur Fellowship.

In her book she describes the importance of rituals as a way of getting the process of creative work underway. That is, an empty room, a bare desk, a blank canvas can be energizing rather than demoralizing. Making mistakes leads to new ideas and addresses the precarious relationship between perfectionism and procrastination, illuminating the difference between being in a rut and being in a groove. One of my favorites, as she says it, is "Before you can think out of the box you have to start with a box."

Tharp makes a box for every project she works on, labels it, and puts it on a shelf. She adds to it as she goes along, working on several projects simultaneously, tossing in notes, clippings, photographs, film footage – whatever becomes part of the fabric of her work on that project. When she says, "Before you can think out of the box you have to start with a box," she means you've got to prepare and have some raw materials to work with. You've got to have starts of ideas, half-baked ideas, learn about your subject,

understand what's been done before – do your homework, as it were, and only then are you ready to make a solid, creative move.

She talks about subtracting things from her life rather than adding them, and suggests subtracting a particular distraction for one week. She confesses her own largest distractions: movies, multi-tasking, background music, and numbers. She's pretty literal, too, so when she suggests eliminating numbers she means to stop counting and to stop looking at anything with a number on it. In this way she shuts down the left side of her brain so that the more intuitive right side can get a chance to come into its own.

The premise of the entire book is that “creativity is not just for artists. It's for business people looking for a new way to close a sale, it's for engineers trying to solve a problem, and it's for parents who want their children to see the world in more than one way.” She rejects the fictions of “natural” geniuses and comes down on the side of hard work and good work habits. In her book, Tharp offers an example from Paul Auster's essay, “Why Write?” He describes growing up as an eight-year-old in New York City and being obsessed with baseball, particularly the New York Giants. The only things he remembers about attending his first major league baseball game – with his parents and friends – is that he saw his idol, Willie Mays, outside the player's locker room after the game. The young Auster screwed up his courage and approached the great centerfielder. “Mr. Mays,” he said, “could I please have your autograph?”

“Sure, kid, sure,” the obliging Mays replied. “You got a pencil?”

Auster didn't have a pencil on him, and neither did his father or his mother or anyone else in his group.

Mays waited patiently, but when it became obvious that no one present had anything to write with, he shrugged and said, “Sorry, kid. Ain't got no pencil, can't give no autograph.”

From that day on, Auster made it a habit to never leave the house without a pencil in his pocket. “It's not that I had any particular plans for that pencil,” Auster writes, “but I didn't want to be unprepared. I had been caught empty-handed once, and I wasn't about to let it happen again. If nothing else, the years have taught me this: If there's a pencil in your pocket, there's a good chance that one day you'll feel tempted to start using it. As I like to tell my children, that's how I became a writer.”

For myself, I am fascinated by how we connect with “the muse.” Or put another way, how to channel creative thinking, or become a creative problem-solver. This is at the central core of what I teach. But where exactly

does the muse live, what's his address, does he keep regular store hours? Should one be patient and wait for the muse to visit, or should one just boldly knock on the door? I've known for many years that simply waiting around for the muse doesn't work – and the muse won't pester you when you're multi-tasking. Conversely, I am always amazed that when I do physically walk into my studio and just let my mind be there (rather than at the myriad other places my mind could be) that in very short order, I am into my work with a mental clarity that just moments before was utter fog.

I'm thinking about where the muse lives especially now as I head off on sabbatical leave, a time when the juggling act of teaching, scholarship and service shifts into the background, and creative work can take the front seat. And then it happened; I was holding my pencil as I was thinking about whatever I might say today, and a flash of an idea came to me –

Would I rather be a tube of toothpaste OR – something the opposite of a tube of toothpaste – a refillable lighter, a spray bottle of some sort – no, a propane tank. Go ahead – give it quick ponder. Would you rather be a tube of toothpaste or a propane tank? I'll leave it to you to identify more as this brand or that type: whether you're a barbecue tank or the larger type that sits at the side of a house. So as I think about it —

It's easy to feel like a tube of toothpaste, especially at this time of year. Squished out, misshapen, wrung out – a twisted thing, not resembling how excellent I looked when I was first came out of my box. I feel used, used up. Sure, I've been useful, but the built-in emptiness that is my life as a tube of toothpaste seems unnecessary and flawed, when I could have very easily been designed for refilling.

Yes, I'd rather be a propane tank. Sure, I'm combustible, but that's just what comes with territory. Sometimes if I'm not watched carefully I can run terribly low on fuel, sputtering and hissing my energy without real effect, but I am, in theory, refillable to infinity. Now, of course that doesn't take into consideration unchecked human consumption of finite natural resources, but the plan for my usefulness is better than that of a disposable tube of toothpaste.

– Stapler or a bottle of glue? I'd rather be the stapler. I'd like to be able to connect things together, see the connections, and be able to rearrange things as necessary. And there's that cool tool that removes staples from all sorts of situations where you would think it would be really hard to get a staple out of – like a bulletin board – but in fact it's totally easy. Glue is a little too permanent, and it also dries clear so you can't see what's holding things together.

Then – would I like to be a tire or the car itself? That’s a hard one. Would I rather be inside, all comfortable and listening to music, or would I rather be in direct contact with the road, living the experience with all its bumps and mud puddles? Maybe a good position inside the wheel-well would be a compromise, or maybe I could be part of the air-venting system – my mind strays as I put my pencil down.

At the heart of what I want to say today is that I agree with Twyla Tharp that creative work happens because of two things: we are prepared for the work with a pencil in our pocket, and instead of just hoping for the muse to arrive we have actually set the table for him. I also hope I am more like a refillable propane tank than that disposable tube of toothpaste; that I possess the ability not only to expend energy but also to replenish it. For those of us who are refillable propane tanks, I’d like to think that teaching is a source of energy even as we acknowledge the tension in the relationship between teaching and the demands of our professional work. And as a propane tank I’ll admit I’m a little low on fuel right now, but still full of combustible potential.

Maybe that’s why it’s a good idea that I’m going away on sabbatical leave – soon!

Thank you.

Remarks at Senior Convocation

Elizabeth Charlebois
Assistant Professor of English

May 12, 2006

Thanks, Mark. I'm so very honored to have the opportunity to speak to you on the eve of your graduation. When Mark asked me to write up a personal blurb for the ballots that you seniors used to vote for tonight's speaker, I was a little sheepish. I felt a bit like I was being asked to write a personal ad for a dating service. Since I teach Shakespeare and Renaissance literature, I decided to conclude my "personal ad" with the following: "Professor Charlebois enjoys walks on the beach at sunset and poetry, preferably in iambic pentameter." And, truth be told, I *am* rather fond of iambic pentameter and couldn't imagine talking to you tonight without a good bit of Shakespeare to keep me afloat.

On an occasion such as this, advice and wisdom are expected to be dolled out in abundance, not that you will follow any of it. Advice from elders typically comes unsolicited and is usually met by sleepy-headed indifference at best. You are young, and like Romeo who ignores the Friar, you will not go "wisely and slow" despite the prosaic truth that, "They stumble that run fast" (2.2. 94). Shakespeare knew that advice is more often and more easily given than taken – and often given by those who don't have a shred of moral credibility, let alone the good sense to follow their own advice.

Hamlet is a play chock-full of advice. Big brother Laertes gives his sister Ophelia a stern talking to, telling her not to trust her fragile reputation to sweet-talking Prince Hamlet, warning her to stay "Out of the shot and danger of desire" (1.3.35). Ophelia recognizes the potential hypocrisy of such preaching, shooting back that it's easy for him to "Show [her] the steep and thorny way to heaven" while he himself skips along "the primrose path of dalliance" (1.3.48-41). Laertes, it's important to remember, is on his way to France, for a loosely-structured study-abroad experience . . . and is telling his sister to be a very good girl while he's gone. Ha! Let's just say, she's got his number.

Laertes' and Ophelia's father, Polonius, doesn't miss the opportunity to lecture his son before he leaves for France. Polonius is perhaps the most famous advice-giver in all of Shakespeare. His speech is filled with phrases that we still recognize as conventional wisdom.

In ways that might serve as justification for all of you who didn't speak up in class discussion for the last four years, he counsels:

"Give thy thoughts no tongue." (1.3.59)

And . . . along the same lines . . .

"Give every man thine ear but few thy voice." (1.3.68)

This fatherly lecture on the importance of reticence of course comes from a character infamous for his chattiness, the man who claims, at great length, that "brevity is the soul of wit" (2.2.91). He is so prone to fanciful and convoluted speeches that at once point an exasperated Queen Gertrude interrupts him, telling him to quit rambling and to get to the point: "more matter with less art" (2.2.97).

Polonius offers Laertes a little advice that might be part of that seminar they offer here at St. Mary's – what is it? "Bookbag to Briefcase" – telling him to dress to impress because the "apparel oft proclaims the man." He covers economics and financial planning easily enough, "Neither a borrower or lender be," which, as anyone of you who went through your Exit Interview with Financial Aid this week knows, is a pretty unrealistic expectation. Besides, lending and borrowing, being in someone's debt and letting them be in yours, is more than about money; it's about living in a world of relationships, about not indulging the self-aggrandizing pretense of self-sufficiency. We need people and others need us, too.

Of course, the most oft quoted lines from Polonius are a version of the classical injunction to "Know Thyself":

This above all – to thine own self be true,

And it must follow, as the night the day,

Thou canst not then be false to any man. (1.3.78-80)

But if anything *Hamlet* is a play that is practically obsessed with the difficulty of pinning down just what the "self" is or what it could possibly mean to be "true" to it. As the play's famous first line suggests, it's pretty hard to figure out "who's there?," not only on a cold night in Denmark, but even when you're looking in the mirror on any given morning, let alone after you've been drinking at the Green Door until closing.

The adages that pepper Polonius's speech look great on Hallmark cards or office motivational posters – and make great fodder for graduation speeches, very like this one. We mistakenly read it as freshly-minted Shakespeare when, in fact, it's filled with shop-worn clichés that his original audience would have recognized as hackneyed and passé. My guess is

Shakespeare would be horrified that Polonius often gets cited as if he were speaking for the playwright himself. (Embarrassingly enough, I even had that old “to thine own self be true” bit elaborately calligraphied on a poster in my high school classroom fifteen years ago – with “William Shakespeare” identified as the “speaker.”) While preparing this talk, I found that Bartlett’s book of *Familiar Quotations*, that compendium of “Advice Through the Ages,” cites 18 of the 26 lines of Polonius’s advice speech to Laertes, carved into four discrete nuggets of wisdom. Cut and pasted they are indeed great and – very quotable. But in the life of the play they ring false. And that’s the thing: in literature and life – context is everything. Polonius’s admirable words don’t jibe with his actions.

Like lots of parents – present company excepted, of course – Polonius doesn’t necessarily trust his son to follow his advice while he’s studying abroad with his father’s credit card. Practically before Laertes’ ship is out of the harbor, Dad hires a spy to follow his son to France to make sure that he’s not partying too hard in Paris. So much for honesty and integrity: Rather than simple virtue, Polonius embraces a strategy that is more policy than Plato: He wants to “by indirections find directions out” (2.1.65).

Spying is Polonius’s *modus operandi*. In a particularly excruciating scene, he orders his daughter Ophelia to break up with her boyfriend Hamlet while he and the King covertly watch their private conversation – all in an attempt to figure out the cause of Hamlet’s madness. It’s not a surprise Polonius meets his end in the act of spying, stabbed by Hamlet as the old man eavesdrops while Hamlet talks to his mother. Like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet’s spying, turn-coat, childhood buddies, Polonius is “hoisted with his own petard” (3.4.186), and so are all of us who dispense advice And so I’m understandably a little reluctant to do so tonight.

Hamlet himself advised the band of traveling players who had come to perform at the royal court, “Suit the action to the word, the word to the action” (3.2.16) – it may be inherent to acting, but it’s almost antithetical to the nature of advice which almost always comes in the form of precept not example. *Hamlet* is a play about “words, words, words” (2.2.192) and their lack of efficacy. Hamlet himself spends the whole play talking, “unpack[ing] [his] heart with words” (2.2.563), while constantly lamenting that he can’t “do” anything. (You may feel a bit like that as a graduate of a liberal arts college, and it’s important to remember that Hamlet does all this tortured talking while he’s home on an extended break from college himself.) Hamlet’s unabashed contempt for Polonius in part stems from the fact that they are more alike than not, although like most young men he would be

loath to admit that he had anything in common with the old man. Hamlet is also a great talker and not a great doer.

Hamlet was too hard on Polonius, and admittedly I'm being a little hard on the guy, too. He is trying to offer some sound advice to his children. He's an anxious parent whose daughter is dating his very powerful boss's son, a son who is, frankly, a gloomy gus, sulking around in black all the time. Polonius is a parent whose son is leaving home again, after having been away for a long time – a scenario that may sound eerily familiar to some of you parents out there. What is a parent – any parent – (or college professor, for that matter) – going to say to a child, a young man or woman, who is going away from home, who is trying to make his way in the world? Like Polonius standing on the dock while Laertes is about to set sail for France, I am finding myself looking for the right words. We all try to say something at these monumental leave-takings that will stick, but we know, deep down, that words evaporate and you won't remember a word of this a year from now. Still, I want to know what to say to you. I want to tell you that I believe in you, that you will be all right.

If Shakespeare taught us one thing it's that you can't go home again – no, not even if your old room is still available, rent free, in your parents' house. Both Laertes and Hamlet come home to a world without their fathers – to a profoundly changed place where they had to take charge and weren't quite equipped to do so, despite lots of years of college and studying abroad. When you go home this weekend after Commencement, you'll likely not be greeted by change as cataclysmic as Hamlet and Laertes faced – and I hope, for your sake, that you won't be. I hope that unlike Hamlet you'll be patient with yourselves in asking those questions that you can't answer now, about what you should “do,” and patient with your parents who will give you advice they honestly can't help themselves from giving.

You will find your way. I know it. Over the last four years, I have seen some of the very best that you have to give. You are intelligent, creative, generous, and kind. You are strong. Just this semester some of you have moved me beyond words with your strength and your courage in confronting incredibly difficult and painful things that, in all my years, I have never had to face, and I'm nearly twice as old as you are. I hope that I have the wisdom to follow, not your advice, but your example. You have taught me much, and I am blessed in having known you.

Right now you are most likely fixated on the imminent change you face in leaving this place. What I want you to see also in this moment is the awesome continuity of your experience. Your connection with Hamlet,

Laertes, and Ophelia – and yes, parents and faculty, with old prating Polonius, too. We have all been passing along advice for generations without much of a clue how to be a guide for anyone as they head out toward an uncertain future. It's really about faith. Believing, like the poet Rainer Rilke once wrote in a letter to an anxious young man looking for advice, that you will *live your way* into finding answers to the questions that baffle you now, questions that, hopefully, we taught you to ask here.

When the Ghost of Hamlet's father appears to him, he leaves his son not ultimately with the violent and simple command to "revenge his . . . murder" (1.5.25) but with a curiously moving and more ambiguous charge: "Adieu, Adieu, Hamlet. Remember me" (1.5.91). The verbal link between re-venge and re-mem-bering is there for sure; the father wants the son, his namesake and heir, to reconstitute, to literally re-mem-ber or put back together – what has been lost through the father's untimely death, but it begs the question of what it means to remember, which is part of what we define as indispensable to the human experience.

Here on campus there is even the Garden of Remembrance, a place of great beauty and reflection, a place near the water where you are encouraged to see yourselves as part of the larger picture, a landscape that spans the centuries, a place that asks, I think, for you to connect to something larger, something beyond yourselves, beyond today. To see yourselves as part of a pattern that encompasses– parent and child, teacher and student, past and present, a pattern that, most of all, encompasses the mysterious paradox of continuity and change.

When I first came to St. Mary's five years ago there was a luncheon for new faculty during which senior faculty members offered pieces of advice for us junior folks just starting out. I can't remember anything of what was said that day except the advice of my wise colleague, Economics Professor Ho Nguyen. Professor Nguyen stood up from his chair at his table in DPC and simply said, "My advice is only three words: 'Remember the River.'" His advice is something that I often return to, a perspective-giving anchor that reminds me of where I am, not only in this *particular* place but in the deeper tide of time, that tide that encompasses all who came before me and all who will come after. It is, what I, yes, Polonius-like, would like to leave you with tonight, before you set sail.

That River, as it ebbs and flows, changes and remains the same, is your legacy and mine.

Remembering it is our charge.

Thank you. Congratulations. I will remember you.

The Freedom to be Uncool

Remarks at New-Student Convocation 2006

Jeffrey Hammond

We are gathered here to celebrate the start of a new school year at St. Mary's. For some of you, the newness of all this is even newer than it is for the rest of us. I mean, of course, those of you for whom this is the beginning of your first year in college. This is a singular moment in your lives. Think about it: you will never have another first year in college. You're the ones who deserve the warmest welcome today – and so I'll be talking here mainly to you.

I want to start with this very ceremony. The word “Convocation” comes from Latin, and it means a calling together. We are called together here. The word echoes the root meaning of another word that pertains to this day: “college.” *Collegium* meant a collected body, a group of people joining together for a specific purpose. It originally applied to craft and merchant guilds. In medieval times the word got attached to a particular type of guild: a group of people joining together for the purpose of teaching and learning.

A teaching and learning community is exactly what you are joining today – what you've signed up for. You are coming together with us – we are all joining together – to make something happen here: something that we hope will change your life.

What will this change look like? How will it feel? I don't know how it will be for you, but I *can* tell you how it was for me. What I remember most about my first year of college is a blur of barely controlled chaos: a swirl of new friends, new ideas, and many afternoon naps necessitated by early-morning classes. After nearly four decades, the one certain thing that I can say about my “freshman” year, as we called it then, is that it marked the boundary between the boy I once was and a person whom I can still recognize as “me.”

As a first-generation college student, I had no idea what the experience would be like or what I was supposed to gain from it. I only knew that it had to be better than high school, with its depressing array of ingroups, outgroups, crowds, and cliques – all defined with almost tribal clarity. There were the nerds, the jocks, the art-and-theater crowd, the

rockers, the greasers, and, of course, the “popular” kids who presided over the rest of us by some unstated fiat.

The teen culture of our small Ohio town was part rat-race and part fish bowl. A drummer in several bands, I was also a serious student who got bored at parties because they were always the same. The nerds were my natural tribe, but I distanced myself from them because, well, they just weren’t cool. I tried to fit in with the rockers, but my Methodist-boy lifestyle just didn’t cut it with them. And so I hung out mostly with other kids who also had no clear place in the scheme of things. We were a clique, I suppose, of the un-cliqued.

College offered the perfect escape from this claustrophobic world, and not a moment too soon. When my father dropped me off, he reminded me that I was there “to learn.” But learn what? And to what end? I had no idea. I lacked the so-called “sophistication” to distinguish between what was worth learning and what wasn’t. As a result, I just couldn’t make that common but foolish decision *not* to learn something. When I took geology, for instance, I figured that rocks were simply there to be learned about – and there was no good reason not to do exactly that.

Still captive to that high school desire for popularity, I kept this attitude under wraps because I was just smart enough to realize how uncool it was. Before long, however, my first-year professors put my nerd-shame to rest. A fairly odd bunch, they taught me – unintentionally – the very lesson that I most needed: that the time in our lives when being cool matters is really, really short.

This insight wasn’t on any syllabus; my professors taught it simply by being who they were. And just who *were* they, according to my high school’s social standards? Total and unrepentant nerds. In *Western Civ*, Professor Goldthwaite glowed as he connected Egyptian and Mesopotamian cosmologies with flood patterns of the Nile and the Tigris-Euphrates. In *Introduction to Philosophy*, Professor Hoffman gleefully exposed the fallacies in our arguments for or against abortion, the Vietnam War, and the legalization of marijuana. In *Freshman English*, Professor Null made it seem as if Ionesco had written his absurdist plays just to get young Ohioans to think.

What do I still remember from these classes? In terms of substance, not much. Their deeper impact lay in the liberation they offered from my high school anxieties. Once I observed grownups who loved learning and weren’t the least bit ashamed of it, I felt relief and even joy. It was like when a longstanding headache finally goes away.

Of course, that first year saw screw-ups as well as epiphanies. After inadvertently inviting two girls to Homecoming, I got dumped by both of them. I got a D in French because I thought my accent was too goofy to talk in class. I mangled a xylophone part while Aaron Copland was guest-conducting our college orchestra. I was endlessly teased – this was the Sixties – for having no interest in getting drunk or stoned. And with pick-up lines like “Alexander the Great was really something, huh?” I never did become a world-class party animal. But these difficulties were offset by the realization – prompted mostly by those passionate, oddball professors – that I didn’t have to fit in anywhere. I just had to find my own way, whatever that was.

Now, any high school student can tell you that at any given moment, there’s only one way to be cool. There are, by contrast, infinite ways to be uncool, to indulge those unfashionable traits that end up clarifying our genuine selves precisely because they *are* unfashionable. For people fresh out of high school, the capacity for remaining open to new knowledge and ideas without prejudging them – that’s one of those unfashionable traits. So is the courage to resist groupthink and find your own way, however hard that may seem.

Students nowadays are a lot more savvy than my college friends and I were. But the power of conformity, reinforced as it is by commerce and the popular media, is even greater than it was back then. This means that being uncool today demands more courage than was ever required of us. Still, some of you will make the choice to leave those high-school anxieties behind. You will find your own Professor Goldthwaite or Professor Hoffman or Professor Null. You will watch as they show you – even when they aren’t meaning to – lots of ways to lose old fears, to escape the treadmill of peer pressure. I really hope that you do that – and that you experience the freedom it brings – as early as possible in your college career. To each and every one of you, welcome and good luck.

Writing Like Weasels: Place-Writing and Creative Nonfiction

Annual Reeves Lecture

September 16, 2006

Jeffrey Hammond

Thank you, Maggie. And thank you all for being here. For this year's Reeves Lecture, I'll be reading "This Place Where We Are," the title essay from my little book about the College and its mission. This particular essay is about the St. Mary's landscape, which seems a perfect topic for Family Weekend because for many of you, this is still a new place. I realize that some of you already know the piece from Orientation, but I'm hoping that *hearing* it will give it a kind of newness for you, too. I also want to preface the piece with some thoughts about place-writing and creative nonfiction writing in general.

Writing my little book, *This Place Where We Are*, and thinking about *this* landscape – social, historical, and physical – got me thinking about how we experience places and how we write about them. For me this is new turf, so to speak: the people who do this professionally are specialists in environmental literature and theory. Now, I'm coming to topographic experience not as a scholar, but as a creative writer – and everyone knows that writers make lousy theorists. When we're writing, that's actually a good thing, because we don't want to be too conceptual, too head-heavy. But this doesn't mean that we can't learn from people whose thinking about the relation between words and places is more disciplined than ours. My colleague Kate Chandler does this, and so does my partner Norma Tilden, who teaches environmental literature at Georgetown. If you have any questions about environmental theory as a result of my remarks, I sincerely hope that you will ask them – and not me.

My interest in all this got aroused for a simple reason. In writing this book, I had to trade places. Much of my creative nonfiction has had to do with Ohio in the 1950s and 60s, the time and place where I grew up. *This Place Where We Are* forced me to leave that remembered landscape, at least for a while, in order to confront a living landscape that exists squarely in the here and now. Writing about *this* place has helped me better understand how deeply places affect us, whether we know it or not. As Barry Lopez puts it, "The interior landscape responds to the character and subtlety of an

exterior landscape; the shape of the individual mind is affected by land as it is by genes.” It’s easy to miss this impact. On most days, our lives unfold within what environmental writer Scott Russell Sanders calls “unspectacular landscapes,” both literal and figurative. And as Sanders affirms, “to know the pleasures of an unspectacular landscape. . . requires an uncommon degree of attentiveness and insight. It requires one to open wide all the doors of perception.”

The kind of writing that I do – creative nonfiction – explores the imaginative possibilities of actual, everyday experience. It lives precisely within these landscapes of the ordinary, and it, too, draws on “all the doors of perception”: logical and emotional, imagined and sensory. I’ve discovered that place-writers can teach us a great deal about creative nonfiction generally. Place-writers are facing – head-on and explicitly – issues that many other writers only dimly recognize.

No one knows better than place-writers the following truth: writing is so much an activity of the head that it pulls us away from actual material reality. Environmental critic Lawrence Buell succinctly frames the issue when he asks, “Must literature always lead us away from the physical world, never back to it?” For the place-writer, this is a constant challenge. The goal, after all, is to heed writer Wendell Berry’s reminder that “the subject of poetry is not words, it is the world.” Given the postmodern recognition that discourse shapes our perception of all realities, including natural ones, how can writing lead us back to the physical world?

The difficulty lies in the fact that we cannot separate external reality from ourselves, and vice versa. Joan Didion once remarked that “Certain places seem to exist mainly because someone has written about them.” Didion’s comment points up the inseparable bond between words and places – how language shapes our perception of landscapes. It’s no accident that “topography” literally means place-writing. And yet, as environmental theorists point out, our relation to physical places contains a deep paradox: we cannot write them – or even see them – from a position outside of our thoughts and words.

Buell and others have noted that space becomes “place” – land becomes “landscape” – the instant it registers as something seeable. Even an uninhabited site, once perceived, is a landscape: in the very act of looking at it, we are already bending it to our minds. Natural environments can never be imagined or written in “pure” form, apart from the self, because subject and object – the topographic perceiver and the topography perceived – are inseparable. And so, in an environmental version of Heisenberg’s principle,

we don't see landscapes so much as we collude in their construction. As ecocritic Bonnie Costello affirms, landscape "is a figure for our real and symbolic entanglement with the earth as we take the view of it. Landscape is something we build as well as see, inhabit as well as escape to, put meaning into and take meaning from."

The cold truth that physical reality eludes objective representation reminds us of Annie Dillard's poignant reminder that "Nature's silence is its one remark." Nature is also silent – unreadable in its pure state – because what we see there is changing even as we look: language can approximate the sensory impressions of a natural site at a moment of seeing, but the site itself has already moved on – and way too fast for our sentences to keep up. Always and inevitably, how we see places reveals the fact that our minds and senses are not infinite. There is always something left over in natural or material reality, an excess of signification that cannot be encompassed by words or perception. Literary theorist Elaine Scarry states this well: "language can seem inappropriately quick and cavalier," she writes, when it is placed beside "the problematically concrete" – that is, when it butts up against extralinguistic reality.

Faced with these challenges, how can anyone write what critic Angus Fletcher calls a "literature of the surround" – literature that conveys something of the world that lies outside and around our selves and our words? We can – and usually *do* – write places in accordance with how we *want* to experience them, but the result is an idealized postcard: nature reduced to our need for uplift, beauty, or escape. Or we could write places as we *normally* experience them, but the result might be nearly invisible. A key revelation of environmental awareness is that in our everyday lives, we rarely notice place at all.

The place-writer's paradox is one shared by all writers of creative nonfiction. By trying to write about the real world and actual experience, we are constantly using words to assert that words are not all there is. The human habit of living inside our heads makes this obvious truth easy to forget. As Scott Sanders attests, "It requires a spiritual discipline to root the mind in a particular landscape, to know it not as a visitor with a camera but as a resident, as one more local creature alongside the Red-tailed Hawks and sycamores and raccoons." It's important to note that Sanders's "spiritual" discipline embraces sensory, raccoon-like ways of knowing. Annie Dillard calls it "living like weasels." The "discipline" here is not to let our human rush toward abstractions and generalizations cloud the weasel-like knowledge that comes from a sensory experience of reality.

Maybe the first credo of any nonfiction writer should be that we don't exist just in our minds any more than weasels do. This is a deeply environmental insight – and it suggests that the writer's usual rage for order needs to be tempered a bit. Environmental humility is a more specific form of the humility demanded of anyone who wishes to engage the real world through writing. It offers a wonderful antidote to the chief occupational hazard of essayists and indeed all first-person writers: narcissism. To write honestly about places is to see oneself as a small part of a larger system – and that's hard for people to do. Wendell Berry states this eloquently: “How, having a consciousness, an intelligence, a human spirit – all the vaunted equipment of my race – can I humble myself before a mere piece of the earth and speak of myself as its fragment?”

If Berry's question is asked honestly and directly, the result might be place-writing – and reality-writing generally – that confesses its own position, its own limited perspective. Such writing would embody the conviction that pure objectivity is impossible – that no observer speaks from a God-like, everywhere-and-nowhere spot. Such writing would not try to pin places down, but would instead concede their deeper unmappability, the disorienting effect of their refusal to stand still. Such writing would pursue a kind of realism that might be *more* realistic, not less, precisely because it concedes its own fuzziness and provisionality. It would also embody a conviction that when it comes to external reality, including physical places, there's always more than meets the eye. I think this is what Leslie Marmon Silko is getting at when she says that “a lifelike rendering of an elk is too restrictive.” As Silko explains, a static, photo-like depiction reveals “no more than the surface particularities of a single creature.” It would not convey the elk's depth, richness, or history as a living thing in a living environment.

In addressing reality, creative nonfiction writers want to tell the truth about it. Or at least, most of us do. If we take seriously the nonfictive contract to say something true for us about the real world, then the aesthetics of a piece of writing – its verbal craft – cannot be separated from its ethics – its veracity. Buell speaks of a “dual accountability” that is embraced by the environmental writer: on one hand, to the poetics of the text as a shaped artifact, and on the other, to an extratextual reality for which the writer has equal responsibility. This dual attentiveness serves as a reminder to all writers, but especially writers of creative nonfiction, that we are accountable to the truth, even if we can speak only *our* truth, as it appears from our place on the ground. And if we're *not* grounded, and thus lack a point from which to see things, we will have no truth to share – no “take” on reality. Words get precious and pretentious when they loop solely within our own

26

minds, when they fail to work their way through an external reality that encompasses other things and other selves. This is an ecological view of writing, and it's a perspective that the nonfiction writer cannot do without. A positioned speaker is part of larger ecologies that are social, economic, regional, religious, cultural, racial, ethnic, gendered, and linguistic. To write about reality is to realize that ours is not the only voice talking. We cannot address real things and actual experience without realizing that our stories are always shared stories, linked with many others.

Surprisingly, the writer's awareness of being in the world reflects a kind of homecoming for the essay, a return to its origins. Nonfiction writing – and the essay in particular – had its roots in the scientific revolution and in the mission to record minute observations of external reality. Although Montaigne worked the inner side of this street and Bacon worked the outer side, both pursued the French sense of *essai* as an “attempt,” a testing of reality. This reflected a commitment to perceived substance over rhetorical flourish, to what rhetoricians used to call *res* over *verba*, matter over words. In addressing perceived reality, the prose that accompanied the development of “natural history” did not neglect weasel-like knowledge, sensory experience. In keeping with the empiricist agenda, the language of scientific description was, as the Royal Society's spokesperson Thomas Sprat put it, to be brought “back again to our very Senses from whence it was first derived to our understandings.”

“Back again to our very senses”: advice meant for seventeenth-century scientists, but still useful for any writer who pursues what John McPhee calls, in the title of his creative nonfiction seminar at Princeton, “the literature of fact.” When Scott Sanders speaks of “all the doors of perception,” he is describing a wholistic mode of seeing and of writing suggested by the oxymoron contained in the label “creative nonfiction.” By resisting the essay's usual rush toward mental templates, such as traditional “unity” and “coherence,” the writer tries to bring to the surface what theorist Douglas Atkins calls the “essential *tension*” of nonfiction: between a writer's rage for order and an observer's passive receptivity to the material at hand. The result might be prose that foregrounds what Chris Anderson identifies as the principal theme of contemporary nonfiction: “its own rhetorical dilemma.” Faced with the dilemma of writing a landscape, it might indeed be useful to give up some writerly control – thereby enacting what Buell calls a “relinquishment of ego” in the recognition of one's place in a place. The result might convey something of the disorienting richness of reality, its stubborn irreducibility to our words and constructs. That was the aim, at least, of the essay that follows. By trying to replace the authority of an

essayist with the responsiveness of an environmentalist – or maybe a weasel – I tried very hard to let this place itself tell me what to say about it. So much for the theory: what follows is the result.

[Professor Hammond then read the title chapter from *This Place Where We Are* (St. Mary's City: St. Mary's Press, 2006).]

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Lessons From Home

(In Memory of Eddie Holden and Max Naylor)
"Last" Lecture (at invitation of student body)

Charles Holden
Associate Professor of History and
Aldom-Plansoen Honors College Professor

Thank you for inviting me to give one of the "Last" Lectures. I am truly saddened to be leaving St. Mary's College. But, when Bono called and explained how he and "the lads" needed me to help U2 finish the Vertigo Tour, I really felt I couldn't say no. And so I leave you. But not before imparting, hopefully, a few final lessons.

Lesson One: We are Not the Center of the Universe

I'm from Iowa, from a farm in Iowa to be more precise. When I close my eyes and think of Iowa, the first thing that comes to mind is the sky – the big, active, open sky. I remember how you could be driving a tractor in the middle of a cornfield and look off to the southwest and see a thunderstorm moving in hours before it hit.

In fact, you develop a sense of timing about the weather – where you'll see a storm moving in and you'll think to yourself, "Well, it looks like that'll be here in about two hours, guess I'd better get the cattle fed now."

Or you take note of the color of the storm – are those clouds tornado dark? Or just thunderstorm dark? Worst of all, is there hail in those clouds? For us, hail is worse than a tornado. When it falls, it falls all over the place and can mow down an entire field of corn or soybeans in minutes.

But as for lesson one, in Iowa the land only takes up a small portion of your field of vision. If you can, imagine yourself standing in the middle of one of our pastures and then taking note of all you see.

It pretty much boils down to a strip of land below and around you and the vastness of the sky above you. This is different from other places I've lived or traveled where the small mountains of central Pennsylvania or the trees around here – or, say, the buildings of D.C. or Baltimore – all compete with the land and sky in one's field of vision.

But not in Iowa – small strip of land where we humans happen to be, and the vastness of sky that is infinity. That ratio has always struck me as appropriate.

We can get to the point of lesson one – that we are not the center of the universe – in another way. Through the life of cows, for example. My family raised cows. Still do, in fact. Raising cattle, like farming generally, requires a kind of matter-of-fact brutality along with a sense of the absurd.

First off, for my city friends, not all “cows” are cows. Only cows are cows. Within the bovine family you have the bull (the papa), the cow (the mama), the heifer (a young lady), and the steer (a boy who has been . . . adjusted, shall we say?). Steers are castrated male cattle. Moving on quickly, my family raised cows – we had about 130 cattle mamas who would make about 130 little baby calves every summer.

Now for those of you who are animal lovers, these next couple of stories might be a little difficult to hear. But there it is.

One summer when I was about 16 one of our cows had twins. I thought this was pretty cool until my Dad explained that it’s actually a bad thing. Cows don’t normally have twins and when they do it puts too much strain on their bodies. So they sometimes end up not being very good mothers for the twins. Well, sure enough, having twins overloaded this poor cow’s system and she went a little crazy.

Once a calf was born, we needed to catch the calf and put in an eartag designating who the mama was, weigh the calf, give it a pill to help its tummy start working, and give it a shot to prevent various diseases. And so we had to do all this for the twin calves, too.

But as my older brother Mike and I went out to treat and weigh these newborn twins, we quickly discovered that mama cow was not going to let us even near her babies. Now, cows are often nervous and protective when someone comes around their newborn, but this cow was taking this to new heights.

We eventually got her calves tagged and treated, but over the next few days we observed how she wouldn’t even let the other cows near her babies (usually unsuspecting cows who had wandered near while eating grass – wham! She’d charge into them with a head-butt and they’d give her a look like, “What the hell’d ya do that for?”) And so she pretty much spent her day fighting with other cows and causing trouble out in the pasture.

So, after about two weeks of this, my Dad, afraid that with this crazy cow picking fights all day that eventually one of these fights would crash through the fence and then all the cows would get out, decided that Crazy Twin Mama Cow and the twins had to be moved away from the herd and

left alone. My brother Mike, who was about 20 at the time, and I exchanged glances that said, “Oh crap.”

Here was the plan: we’d move Crazy Twin Mama Cow and her babies out from the main pasture, down the big driveway that ran through our farm buildings, across the gravel road, and into another pasture, a smaller pasture, that she could have all to herself. Dad was hoping the solitude would calm her down.

Normally when you want to move a cow in a certain direction, you simply stand in the opposite direction. The cow doesn’t want you around and so, usually, she will start walking away from you. And that’s perfect since that’s the direction you wanted her to move in the first place. But not Crazy Twin Mama Cow.

We learned – I learned especially, I should say – that just the opposite held for her. She was so nervous and crazy that she’d just start chasing you as soon as she saw you. This led to a profoundly humbling moment in my teens.

My dad and Bill, a man who worked on our farm for forty years, decided that the best way to move this cow was to use me as bait. “Chuck,” Dad said, “go out there in the pasture and start waving and yelling. Then when the cow sees you and takes off running toward you, *you* take off running through the driveway, and lead her toward that other pasture.” Okay, I said.

Now here’s where I have to interject a little more about myself at age 16. I was, back then, a pretty fair athlete. Played four sports in high school. I was pretty fast, pretty quick. I was a wide receiver on our football team. Had the letter jacket and everything. And as I was 16, I fancied myself generally a *pretty cool dude*. So as I’m standing waving and yelling at this cow, getting ready to take off running, I’m thinking this will be easy.

Sure enough Crazy Twin Mama Cow finally spotted me – cocked her head a bit – and bolted in my direction, snorting and cussing. Well, what I imagine to be cow-cussing.

I turned and, per my instructions, started running at a leisurely pace toward the driveway through the farm buildings, heading toward the gravel road, and the new pasture on the other side. Then things started to happen very quickly.

After about thirty seconds I had this sensation that, well, I was not alone in my leisurely jog toward the new pasture. Crazy Twin Mama Cow was closing in *fast!* Snorting, cussing, ***thump-da-da-thump-da-da-thump*** – Crazy Twin Mama Cow was hauling ass and coming straight for me.

I remember vaguely hearing my Dad or my brother, I don't remember who it was, yell something truly helpful like, "You'd better hurry!"

Now I'm sprinting, not to get Crazy Twin Mama Cow to the new pasture, but just to get away from Crazy Twin Mama Cow! I was at top speed in a matter of seconds, running down the driveway through the farm buildings, looking for some place to hide. Finally I spotted one of our old pickup trucks parked outside our machine shed.

I broke off course and headed toward that pickup truck, Crazy Twin Mama Cow right on my heels. Thirty yards to go, twenty yards to go, (is that hot breath, is that *cow snot* I feel on the back of my shirt!?), ten yards to go and now she sounds like a freight train (it's amazing how much noise one angry cow running at full speed can make) and then . . . I was airborne.

At about five yards away, I dove for the back of the pickup, flying, completely horizontal, clearing the tailgate, and landing with a thud in the back. Wham!!! Crazy Twin Mama Cow couldn't stop in time and she went slamming headfirst into the tailgate behind me.

So there I was. Chuck Holden: 16 years old, cool guy football player, *hiding from a cow*. Staying low in the back of a pickup truck while this angry old cow stomped and cussed around outside. I remember hiding back there, panting, sweating, shaking, and thinking, "This is not one of my cooler moments."

By that time the other guys had figured out that the better way to get her to move was to bring another pickup along and then stand outside the truck until she started running at them. Then jump in the truck and drive toward the new pasture and she'll follow. So, before I dared to venture out of the back of the pickup, they pretty much had her across the road and into the new pasture.

Once I caught up with them, my brother Mike managed to get out, "Nice work, Chuck" before they all busted up laughing.

Lesson Two: The Wheels of Justice Do, in Fact, Turn

Now while a certain amount of rough-handling was often required working with the cows, it was always very clear to me that one did not engage in roughness with the animals just because one could.

But to help sear that lesson into my mind, my Dad told my brother, my sisters, and me the terrible, terrible story of a local man named Fuchs [rhymes with "dukes"].

This story went back to the WWII years, which was still fairly recent history for folks in the mid-60s. (I hate to point this out, but WWII was to them what the '80s are to us.) Young Fuchs' father ended up going off to war, leaving Young Fuchs behind to watch the farm. Now, by all accounts Young Fuchs was not a nice kid – trouble-making, always up to something, no good.

On the old farms, the two main buildings were “the house” of course and “the barn.” Barns in the 1940s were really important to the whole operation. These were massive wooden structures. Often very beautiful, painted red with the white trim.

Farmers used their barns for various purposes – and that's why they were so important. So, you used the loft above to store hay. Then during the winter you'd throw the hay down to feed the cattle and horses. Then on the ground floor, you could store equipment in one part of the barn, and generally you still had some room left to use as shelter for the animals.

Well, the story goes, one day Young Fuchs was sitting up on the porch just messing around, again up to no good. Nearby some of the family cats were lounging around. Now here comes the really bad part. Young Fuchs decided it would be funny to light one of the cats on fire. And he did it!

And you know what happened? That poor cat, sparking and flickering away, ran straight into the barn. The barn caught fire and within minutes the whole thing burned down. The barn burned so fast that Young Fuchs didn't even have time to get the stupid, shocked look off his face. That, my friends, was a measure of justice.

And I like to think that after that cat sensed that something was terribly, hideously wrong, and then figured out it was in mortal danger, that for just a split-second it eyed up Young Fuchs and thought to itself, “You little shit, I'll show you.”

Now here's what I mean by farm life consisting of a brutal matter-of-factness, mixed in with the absurd. To this day, when my brother and I talk about the boy who grew up to be known locally as “Firecat Fuchs” (I swear I'm not making that up), we laugh. Why? Certainly not because setting cats on fire is funny. It's not. It's terrible. It's a terrible, terrible thing to do. No, we laugh because his barn burned down *as a result* of setting his cat on fire. The wheel of justice turned. Or as we would say back in the Midwest, “Yeah, well, there ya go.”

Lesson Three: Sometimes It's Best to Leave Well Enough Alone

Back in my small town of Scranton there was this fellow named Fly. Fly was sort of a ne'er-do-well kind of guy. Fly and his family ran the local junkyard on the edge of town and they had a little piece of land up north along the Raccoon River. This land was not good farmland, however. Sandy soil and heavily wooded. No good for crops, but, it was theirs.

Well, late one hot, summer night Fly was arrested for drunk driving. And he was guilty. He'd been at our local tavern drinking way too much and then hopped in his pickup and headed for home. The county sheriff nabbed him easily.

Fly lost his driver's license as a result and, as you would expect, this made it difficult to get back and forth between the junkyard in town and his house out in the woods. His brothers got tired of having to pick him up, haul him into town, take him back home at night. It was just darn inconvenient.

So, Fly began riding one of his favorite Jumping Mules back and forth to town. What's a Jumping Mule, you ask? The folks like Fly who live out in the woods along the river make a little extra money by hunting raccoons. Now the tricky part of hunting raccoons is that you have to do it at night and it occasionally involves having to chase down the little critters. A good Jumping Mule can be very valuable if a hunter comes upon a fence during the middle of a chase. The mule can just jump the fence and off you go after the raccoon. Jumping Mules.

Anyway, Fly began riding his Jumping Mule back and forth to town. This seemed to make perfect sense. And I have to admit it was quite a sight to see Fly atop his mule riding down Main Street during the middle of the day. You could tell Fly loved it: he'd be riding along nodding hellos to everyone on the sidewalk – very grand indeed.

But there was a problem, it turns out. Scranton's seemingly permanent mayor, B. A. MacDonald, pointed out that it was actually against some obscure town ordinance to ride mule-type animals within town limits without permission. Something like that – who knew? Apparently B. A. did.

So at first B. A. just tried to talk to Fly. “Fly, you can't ride that mule through town.” But why? “Because it's against the law, that's why. And besides, it's an ugly mule.” Oh, well now B. A. crossed a line there, didn't he?

I have to interject another personal note here, this time on behalf of the mule. It was *not* an ugly mule. I got up close and personal with that mule

myself on one occasion. Some friends of mine were having a campfire and singalong. We were all having a lovely time when someone noticed that if we were to continue this into the wee hours that we were going to have to buy more beer. So I volunteered to run to the tavern to buy some more.

The tavern (that's right *the* tavern) in our town has only one entrance and that's off the back alley behind Main Street. The alley entrance. I always liked that. It made you feel like you were sneaking in. Anyway, on this night, I parked on the street and then walked around back and down the alley toward the tavern door. Just as I got to the door I, once again, sensed that I was not alone. I paused and as I paused in the darkness a very tall mule gave the side of my face and head a snort and a slurp.

Holy crap! I jumped back and was face-to-face with Fly's Jumping Mule. Fly had ridden him into town for a few drinks and had tied him up to a utility pole outside the bar. Once I figured out what it was I said hello and went inside to make my purchase. And I have to say that as far as mules go, this was not an ugly mule.

Well, back to our lesson. The point is that Fly wasn't supposed to ride his mule in town and that B. A. had made this little tiff personal.

Fly continued to ride his mule to town over the next few days. In fact, he made a point to ride it past B. A.'s office window (in addition to being mayor, B. A. also sold insurance). B. A.'s irritation grew daily.

Finally B. A. called in the town cop – that's right, *the* town cop – his name was Mike – Mike the Cop – and said, “Dammit Mike, get Fly to stop riding that mule. Give him a ticket if you have to.” Okay, Mike said warily.

So later in the day, Fly received a citation for violating such-and-such ordinance against riding mule-type animals in town.

After a few days of apparent calm, the mule reappeared. One morning Fly walked the mule down Main Street and tied it up to a light pole directly across from B. A.'s office – the ass end of the ass, if you will, sticking out and facing the traffic. And facing B. A.'s window.

After a while a small crowd gathered on the sidewalk outside of B. A.'s office. There seemed to be much laughing and high spirits. Some people seemed to have cameras with them. What was going on?

It didn't take very long for B. A.'s secretary to stick her head into B. A.'s office and say, “You'd better come out here and take a look at this.”

B. A. hadn't noticed the commotion and didn't know what on earth was going on when he stepped out of the office and out onto the sidewalk where

the crowd was gathering. He looked around at everyone and then someone pointed across the street.

B. A.'s heart fell. There, tied up to the light pole, was that damn mule. And on the mule's rump, Fly had shaved in unmistakable letters B on one side and A on the other. B, A right there on the ass's ass for all the world to see. The crowd now howled in laughter. That mules don't use indoor plumbing, didn't help the scene one bit either.

B. A. stormed back inside and called Mike the Cop. Mike the Cop was instructed to tell Fly that he can ride the mule back and forth to town as long as he stayed off Main Street. And so the Scranton Mule Incident was resolved.

Lesson Four – Be Not Afraid

Growing up, my room was in the basement – in a dark, cold, musty basement. At the bottom of the stairs leading up to the kitchen, there was a furnace room. It always seemed especially dark and had the added dimension of the low rumbling of the furnace.

One time when I was still really young – maybe four, maybe five – I woke up in the middle of the night to the sounds of a classic Midwestern thunderstorm. As you can tell, I love weather. I still love to watch the Weather Channel. You know what I really love about the Weather Channel? It's the sidekick giving facial reactions while the other broadcaster gives the details about that high pressure system that just won't leave New England. Oh, that pesky high pressure system!

Anyway, on this night lightning, thunder crashing angrily, wind driving the rain against the window. I was scared. I decided I had to get out of there. So I jumped out of bed and made my way past the furnace room and up to the safe harbor of my older sisters' room.

My sisters Rosemary and Mary Jo and I huddled together to ride out this vicious storm, when suddenly my brother Mike appeared with grave news. He'd just looked out the kitchen window and saw an honest-to-god Viking sitting on our porch. Whoa. And I remember how as a five-year-old that that struck me as utterly plausible. I could see why a Viking would want to get out of this storm.

But these basement fears actually lead me to my fears of knives. I began to nurture this fear that if, in the middle of the night, I had to go up the stairs for, say, a drink of water, that someone was going to leap out from the darkened furnace room – as I was going up the stairs – and throw a knife, hitting me right between the shoulder blades –tthhhhp! Argh, argh – I'd

struggle, lurching forward to get to the top and to the safety of the kitchen, but it'd be no good.

My family would come out for breakfast later and find me crumpled, tragically of course, at the top of the stairs. Well, except for my brother, of course. He also had a room in the basement and I could see him stepping over me and announcing casually, "Mom, I think someone killed Chuck."

So, to prevent that horrible outcome, I began to serpentine up the stairs, moving from side to side and sometimes ducking as I climbed – which is not easy to do, I might add. It must have made a sight, I realize now – this little kid ducking and veering his way upstairs at 3 a.m.. But hey, I didn't want to give him a straight shot at my back!

It turns out that my brother-in-law, David Hoyt, had a similar fear growing up. David's family lived way, way out in the countryside and their place seemed especially vulnerable to all sorts of strange happenings.

As a kid, David's room was upstairs in their old wooden farmhouse, so he had to come down the steps to go to the living room or kitchen or dining room. David's fear was that in the evenings, when the upstairs was dark, if he happened to be coming down the steps alone, a crazed murderer would suddenly materialize at the top of the stairs and whoosh the knife into David's back and, again like me, killing him tragically.

So, the challenge for David was to maintain control going down – take the steps slowly, deliberately. If he didn't panic, the bad guy would not materialize and the knife would not find its way into David's back and he would live to see another day to play basketball or run around with his dog Tippy.

But the self-control required to descend those stairs without signaling panic to the crazed murderer in the upstairs of the Hoyt household occasionally proved too much for young David.

And so, he recalls, on several occasions when he'd get halfway down the stairs, he'd slowly, slowly, start to tremble just a little, and then what was that? A noise? The knifeman has sensed his fear!! – gotta go, gotta go now Dave!!! . . . and whoooooosh!!! Again, more young Iowans flying through the air in terror! There goes David, flying Superman style – horizontal, arms stretched out before him and landing flat on the hardwood floor.

His momentum would then carry him down the hallway and past the doorway into the living room where his family was watching TV. At the end of his slide, of course, David would stand up, dust himself off, and saunter

into the living room very coolly, very casually, as if absolutely nothing in the world was amiss or unusual.

Life in the country was filled with all kinds of strange sounds and spooks. David remembers that one time, before the family was about to turn in for the night, his dad saw that someone had left a light on in the barn. So, he sent a young David and his older brother Gary out to turn off the barn light.

Now on their farm, the barn is way at the other end of the homestead. So the boys had to walk clear across the yard, past the hog lot, past a machine shed, and then finally to the barn. And then back. At night. Late at night. On a dark, mysterious night.

So, Gary and Dave, good soldiers that they were, headed out toward the barn. Once again, the key here was not to show panic. “They” or “He” or whatever it was that was out there waiting to mangle them – I mean, most likely it was the crazed murderer that lived in the upstairs of their house – had to sense their panic before he could act and carry out the treacherous deed.

Gary and David walked, slowly, toward the barn. Steadily they made their way across the yard, past the hog pen, past the machine shed, finally, calmly, reaching the barn. They pause. Gary flicks the switch and turns out the light. Of course, now it’s even *darker*. But no mind. No mind.

Now they must calmly, slowly, courageously even, make their way, walk, back to the house where then they can maybe grab a cookie before bed or . . . RUN, RUN, RUN!!!! A noise – or it might have been a noise – who knows? – *something* set them off and the two boys were now *sprinting* – elbows and knees flying every which way – back toward the house.

Gary, being older, was faster than David. But not on this night! As they bolted toward the house, Gary took the lead. But David then realized he was *catching* his older brother!! In fact – now making their way beyond the barn, now past the machine shed – he was *passing* his older brother!!! – amazing!! Elbows, knees flying everywhere!!

So what does older brother Gary do?? *He trips David!!* His own brother!! Sacrificed to the crazed murderer who no doubt was bearing down on young David right this moment as he went sprawling in the gravel, somewhere near the hog pens.

But of course there was no crazed murderer. Not in David’s house; not in mine either.

Lesson Five – Pay Attention

This lesson takes us off the farm. A few years ago my younger sister Ann and her husband Gary, both fresh out of law school and working crazy hours, decided with a bunch of friends that they would take one of those cheap flights out to Las Vegas for a weekend. They all had been working like mad, 70 hours a week, burning the candle at both ends, and they just decided that they needed to let off a little steam. So out to Sin City they went.

They all flew out of Des Moines on a Friday night and got into Vegas while the evening was still pretty young (especially for Las Vegas). They first met to decide where to go. Some wanted to gamble, but they decided it would be nice to, as a group, go get something to eat and check out some musical entertainment.

The group found this very cool piano bar and restaurant. They got a table, they started to have a few adult beverages, they ordered. There was a wonderful piano player performing. Really, perfect. Just exactly what they had in mind for their Big Weekend in Vegas. Well, a few hours go by. The food was excellent, a few more adult beverages go by the wayside, and now everyone's *really happy*.

Then the piano bar's main attraction began. The room was divided into two sections. And on stage there were two pianos. The deal was that when the musician at the piano on your side of the bar played, you all cheered and hoorayed, while the other side booed and jeered. And then when the other guy played, your side would boo him and so forth. Supposedly at the end of it all, the side with the most enthusiasm won free drinks, or something along those lines.

Well, the contest finally came to an end. Then the emcee announced something along the lines of, "Okay, we're going to quiet things down now and enjoy the musical stylings of Ray Flowers and his tribute to love ballads. Take it away, Ray." And Ray breaks into a moving rendition of "Sometimes When We Touch"

By this time, it had been a long night for our little group of Iowans. They'd worked all day, flown out to Vegas, enjoyed their meal and a few cocktails. Maybe more than a few. And, well, my brother-in-law Gary didn't quite get the message that the contest was over.

And as Ray Flowers was located on the other side of the bar, Gary promptly stood up and, with both hands pointing at poor Ray Flowers, began shouting at the top of his voice, "*YOU SUCK!!!! YOU SUCK!!!!*"

BOO!!!! BOOO!!!!” while my sister and the rest of the table watched in stunned disbelief. Finally they recovered their senses and pulled Gary back down to his seat. “Gary!!! We’re not doing that anymore.” “Oh,” he said. “Sorry about that.” It was time to call it a night.

Final Lesson: Don’t Fake It – Your Professors Know More Than They Let On –

Okay, now we go back to Scranton, Iowa for one last lesson. We had a guy in our high school named Jerry, who was actually the youngest son of the guy named Bill who worked on our farm. It’s a small town. Anyway, for some reason everyone called Jerry “Wilbur.” Wilbur was a year younger than me and he was a terrific athlete, especially in football.

It was the spring semester of my senior year and I was on the track team. Wilbur decided he would go out. Not because he wanted to run track, but because our track coach, Coach Howard, was also our football coach, and Wilbur wanted to make sure the coach knew he was working out and getting ready for the football season in the fall.

The way things worked on our track team was that Coach Howard would post at the beginning of the week what event everyone would be running at that week’s track meet. Well, one week, for some reason, Coach Howard decided to put Wilbur in the mile run. This was *not* what Wilbur had in mind going out for track.

So at practice all that week, Wilbur hatched one scheme after another to try and get out of running the mile. We were all sympathetic to Wilbur’s plight and so this really became a team effort. For a few days the leading idea was that Wilbur would fake pulling a hamstring. Have you ever seen this? Watch the guys who run the 100 meters – invariably someone will pull a hamstring. Wilbur spent much of the week perfecting his “pulled hamstring” technique.

But then right before the meet one of our teammates made two important points: first, no one pulls a hamstring in the mile run. Hamstring pulls are for sprinters. And second, if Wilbur faked a hamstring pull, he was also going to have to fake treatment for that hamstring pull. And that could last weeks. The plan was too complicated and it wasn’t going to work.

Desperate, Wilbur hit on a last-minute plan. He was going to purposely false-start and get himself disqualified. Back then runners didn’t get any free false-starts. If you false-started once, you were out. This was it, Wilbur decided. It was the best he could do.

So, the day of the meet arrives. Leading up to his event, Wilbur had gone through his “preparations” for the mile run with deadly seriousness. You would have thought he was aiming to break the four-minute mile. Stretching, jogging, shaking the stress out of his arms, short sprints, exhaling loudly, even – and this was the topper – pulling away from the crowd to be alone so he could “concentrate.”

Finally the starter called the mile runners to the line. He explained that there would be just two commands: “Runners, take your mark” and then the “bang” of the starter’s gun. Very good. All the runners line up in their assigned lanes. Wilbur’s right there in lane six with a fierce look of determination on his face. It was a look that said to the other milers, “I’m going to crush you guys.”

The starter held the pistol over his head. “Runners, come to your mark . . .” But OH NO!!! Wilbur jumped before the gun went off!! OH NO!! “Lane Six,” the starter announced, “You’re disqualified.”

Then, in a virtuoso performance, Wilbur proceed to stomp around, kick the track, let loose with a few “Oh man, I can’t believe it” and then finally, dejectedly, made his way off the track. Coach Howard didn’t say a thing. On the bus ride home, still nothing from Coach Howard.

Fast forward to next Monday’s track practice. As we looked at the workout schedule for that day, we all nearly fainted. There was the toughest workout any of us had ever seen. Looking back, it probably didn’t help that when Wilbur false-started, the entire Scranton track team doubled over in laughter on the infield of the track. And, that Monday Wilbur was singled out for a little extra training, to boot. As we were getting ready to go outside, Coach Howard passed through the locker room. He didn’t say anything to us and we didn’t say anything to him. We went and did the workout.

