

## STATEMENT OF MY PHILOSOPHY OF TEACHING

In my judgment, an excellent educator is one who not only leads students from ignorance to knowledge, but also creates an environment within which educational transformation can occur. Such a transformation engages the students at intellectual, psychological and, I would argue, spiritual levels. During the Spring 1999 semester, I enjoyed an experience that exemplified my pedagogical goals to a greater degree than I had ever known. Because of the significance of this experience for me and for my students, I have chosen to begin my statement on teaching with a brief description of the class.

The setting was an inter-disciplinary seminar on the thought of Hildegard of Bingen, 12<sup>th</sup> century “renaissance woman.” The students were from the Honors program and the Philosophy department. From the first class meeting, I realized that here was a group of fourteen students eager to take on the challenge and excitement of entering the world of the medievals, of stretching their own notions of rationality, and of preparing for a student-led conference in April. As the semester progressed, I increasingly turned the content and discussions over to the students. They too increasingly saw themselves as emerging experts on a woman known for her musical, scientific, and theological insights. By the last week of the semester, the students had grown in their own ability to master the material and appropriate the insights of another era. For my part, I had grown in my appreciation for their insights, their unrecognized gifts and their potential for scholarly work.

The crowning achievement of the semester’s work was the conference sponsored by my class and Dr. Jane Crawford’s Medieval Latin class. The students prepared invitations, organized the conference, chose topics and format, conducted the proceedings and, most importantly, fielded questions like professionals. The three-hour conference was a stunning example of the gifts and talents of our students. It was an edifying and uplifting experience for all who attended. The students themselves recognized that they “had what it takes” to go on in graduate studies. They realized that they were ready for the next level of educational development.

The experience of that class was, for me, the culmination of my years of teaching. During that semester, all aspects converged: talented students, challenging content, my willingness to let them be led by the thinker and not by me. Together we struggled to understand the texts, to critique the insights, to be transformed by the music and the visions of Hildegard. The semester was also a wonderful opportunity for me to illustrate the relevance of medieval thought. On the occasion of her 900<sup>th</sup> birthday, Hildegard has enjoyed international celebrations, among which figures our own student conference. It is not often a medievalist has such a prime opportunity to speak to popular culture.

This experience was also the culmination of my own development as an educator. I suppose I could claim to be a “natural teacher.” I have always loved the classroom, the interaction with the students, the moments of real breakthrough when I see the light of recognition shine in a student’s eye. My teaching has always been a high priority for me, possibly because my self-definition has more to do with the role of teacher than that of scholar. During the Hildegard seminar, I was finally able to achieve what all educators long to do: to place the content completely in the students’ hands, with the certainty that they will engage it at a level worthy of the material. As I turned the class over to the students, they rose to the level of the texts. Together, we were led by Hildegard to see things differently: rationality, the cosmic order, the human condition, the role of women and the presence of God to all that exists.

I began teaching high school in 1974, eighty years before I would go to graduate school. During those years with secondary students, I learned the “art” of classroom education. My students taught me the timing and patience necessary to survive six classes per day, sometimes four preparations, not to mention extra-curricular activities. They helped me understand the role of humor in the classroom and as a learning device. When we can hold ourselves lightly, when we can hold the activity of understanding as part of human creativity, then we can both wonder and be amused at the rational discoveries we make together. During those years teaching increasingly became my “ministry,” my manner of service to my students. I have come to see the teacher-student relationship as one which is sacred and in which God is revealed to both. The Hildegard class exemplified this to an eminent degree.

Throughout my graduate studies, the spiritual dimension of the philosophical vocation had the most appeal for me. The study of philosophy is both training in critical analysis and a serious reflection on what it means to be human. This reflection can be sustained at an introductory level or at a level of advanced study in which critical skills are demonstrated in a more sophisticated manner. In all my classes I seek to develop an atmosphere within which students develop important intellectual skills which are not limited to the study of philosophy. My students grow in respect for the views of others through close and attentive reading of the text and listening to one another. They demonstrate critical thinking skills of analysis through assignments which challenge their assumptions and encourage their self-awareness and self-correction. They develop their writing skills and ability to synthesize in sustained assignments which are completed over an entire semester. For the most part, assignments in my classes build upon one another throughout the semester.

At the foundation of my pedagogical approach is a deep and personal commitment to the intellectual as spiritual. To me this means that any journey toward truth is, whether we know it or not, a journey toward God. My deep commitment to this insight expresses itself in my area of philosophical expertise, Medieval Philosophy. In teaching about medieval thinkers (who themselves shared this insight about the journey toward truth and God) I am fed both as scholar and as teacher. Because our understanding of truth depends upon our experience and reflection, we can claim that no single human mind could ever grasp or contain the entirety of all that is. As a result, truth does not become the private possession of some, but rather the common goal of all who are inspired with wonder and awe of what it means to be human and of the divine. Like the medieval thinkers, I hold that the ascent to truth involves the creative interaction of several vantage points. This approach is *intercultural* or *transcultural*, not in any sense of relativism, but in the sense that no human mind is competent to understand the depth and breadth of all that is. In existential terms, this insight should result in a profound humility before the truth, a sense of awe before what is most sacred in reality.

As I express this personal and intellectual commitment in the classroom, I strive to bring the philosophical insights into my students' lives. I never consciously depart from a pedagogy which seeks to make the connection between the ideas and the real lives our students live. This goal is particularly well met in my introductory course: Philosophy of Human Nature. Over the years, my students have helped me to develop an assignment which transforms their lives. They are asked to reflect upon and articulate a philosophy of life worthy of a human person. They argue for that sort of life and defend it against possible criticisms (which they themselves must raise). Finally, they consider what that life would be like if everyone lived it. The assignment takes the entire semester and requires an enormous amount of writing and interaction with me and with one another. At its best, the effect of this assignment is life-changing. At its worst, it is an exercise in critical reasoning. The impact on the students depends largely on their attitude and ability to appropriate questions to their own life. For me, this assignment is enormously satisfying. I read with great joy the insights which come from sustained reflection on the "realm of the spirit", the internal world of ideas to which the students rarely come. Indeed, helping students discover language as a tool for personal growth and expression is most rewarding. Many of my students go on to minor in philosophy; some declare a major. Whatever the outcome relative to our student numbers, nothing is as important as the internal turn they are able to take in writing the assignment.

In my upper-division classes I try to help the students enhance their skills of attentive reading and critical reflection. This is more difficult than it sounds, since the texts we read are all primary texts from late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. My elective classes focus on the many perspectives revealed within these texts. I take a special interest in non-European cultures and in their history of philosophical reflection. My Medieval Philosophy class is inclusive in my efforts to bring Arab and Jewish thinkers into textual dialogue with their Christian colleagues. As historians of philosophy know well, medieval intellectuals had a high regard for one another. This admiration crossed ethnic lines and religious lines in ways that we would do well to imitate today. I am especially pleased to see the surprise on the faces of those students who accept uncritically the contemporary prejudice against anything "old" as being monolithic and patriarchal. They assume St. Thomas was the only person who could think during the Middle Ages, or that everyone thought the same thing. They are quite intrigued to find there was as much (and perhaps more) disagreement among the mainline philosophical voices during the Medieval era as there is today. I am also pleased to introduce them to a broader arena of questions than they find in the contemporary philosophical discussion.

I am also concerned to make my field interesting and relevant to our students, especially our majors. In an era called "Post-Modern" I can use medieval thinkers as examples of "Non-Western" thinkers. They are "non-Western" to the degree that they pre-date the Cartesian and Kantian era of "Modern" thought. Because they fall outside the standard categories of rationality identified by the Enlightenment, they do not easily fit into our contemporary model of what counts as intellectual activity. This Enlightenment model is falling apart, however, and I am pleased to have a field in which to mine the precious resources of an intellectual tradition linked to a spiritual understanding, a field which is part of our Christian patrimony and which escapes the Post-Modern critique because it is itself profoundly "un-Modern." As a 12<sup>th</sup> century "pre-Renaissance Renaissance woman," Hildegard herself defied the normal categories of philosophical analysis, at least those from the Enlightenment. She represents an excellent example of pre-Cartesian manifestation of rationality. One might even call her (for this reason) a non-Western thinker.

Because all my classes use primary texts, my courses are extremely challenging. In my electives, the students read material that is difficult both linguistically and culturally. For this reason, I do everything in my power to help them: I develop reflection questions to help prepare for classroom discussion; I distribute essay questions in advance of exams to enable them to prepare their answers in the greatest depth possible; I offer to discuss multiple drafts with students. But along with all this, I try to inspire my students with confidence that they can do this sort of work.

In educating and advising my students, I take a particular interest in the young women. Just recently, I was able to help one of our students spend a semester in Paris, studying at the Institut Catholique and the Centre Sevres. For me the effort was a genuine manifestation of the Marymount tradition; placing university resources before young women and enabling them to realize their dreams. The student, Jennifer Lobo, was recently awarded a Teaching Fullbright in France. She is currently working in Chantilly, a city outside Paris. I am extremely pleased to have been able to help Jen work to realize her dream of study abroad and work in France. I have also been involved with the New Europe program as Academic Director. This program has been significantly re-configured to emphasize international education and the future of Europe.

For me to consider myself a successful teacher is to know that I have opened doors for my students they never thought possible. These doors are both spiritual and international. There are other worlds waiting for these young people. As my teachers encouraged and supported me, so I hope to continue to encourage and support my own students in continuing the life-long journey of intellectual and spiritual growth.