

Teaching Statement Dr. Michael Genovese

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The following remarks were delivered last fall (1995) to a gathering of faculty, students and friends.

My Teachers Rode with Jesse James

Receiving this award which recognizes achievements in teaching and scholarship is a very special honor, and I thank the University for this endorsement of my work over the past fifteen years. I am humbled by this honor – of course, some of my colleagues would argue that I have a lot to be humble about . . . But I am most grateful, and I have a great deal for which to be grateful: a close family, good friends, a career with meaning . . . I am a very lucky guy.

When I was informed last May that I had won this award, I was told that I was expected to give a speech on teaching sometime in September. But as summer arrived and my wife and I went to Oxford to teach, and I continued working on my new book, the speech completely slipped my mind.

In late August, Birute Vileisis called and asked, “What’s the title of your Fritz Burns speech?” Not wanting to let on that I hadn’t given it a thought, I told her the first title that came to my mind: “Teaching Are Good!” After a brief pause, Birute politely suggested I come up with an alternative. Thus, “My Teachers Rode with Jesse James,” a title I will explain in a moment.

I went into a minor panic. After all, I had less than a month until I was to deliver the speech, I hadn’t written a word, I hadn’t even given the speech any thought. And the speech came at a particularly bad time because my father was in the hospital dying of complications from Alzheimer’s disease. About three years ago my father was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, and he had been in a convalescent hospital for the past two years.

Towards the end of his life, Alzheimer’s had stripped him of himself – of all he was as a person. His mind was all but gone and his body resembled that of a Holocaust survivor. One by one, his vital organs ceased to function, and that breakdown eventually led to his death on September 7.

The doctors kept giving my dad 24 hours, then 36 hours, then 24 hours to live – they did this for eight weeks! One evening, while sitting beside at the hospital, alternately praying that he would recover, and praying that he would die, I began to see connections where perhaps none existed; connections between my father and myself, between the Alzheimer’s and my vocation.

Alzheimer’s disease, as you know, slowly destroys the mind, rips out memory, attacks the brain, and robs a person of those attributes which give life meaning. It is the cruelest, the ugliest of diseases.

I thought of my father of three years ago – when the disease was first setting in, first making itself known in strange and painful ways. Surely he saw what was happening, he felt it, knew it. The simple things become difficult; the difficult things, impossible. And I thought of the irony – here I am devoting my life to the mind, to

filling, sharpening, and improving minds, and I was helpless as my father slowly lost his. As effective and empowered as I feel in the classroom or at the writing pad, I felt ineffective and powerless as my father drifted away – as I began to lose my father. I, who must find sense amid so much nonsense, was lost. Shakespeare's lines from King Lear were no solace:

We are not ourselves
When nature, being oppress'd commands
the mind
To suffer with the body.

The life of the mind, the examined life, a life guided by reason – how much of that I owe to my father. It wasn't easy for him. You see, I was not what you would call a model child or a model student. Not even close.

I remember sitting upright, always upright, in my little chair at St. James Catholic School in New Jersey, and the nuns, while never using the word "dumb," made it very clear that Michael was "different." I went through school, always hanging on to the bottom end of the bell curve. This of course made me very popular – by comparison to me all the other students seemed so smart. As a child I was suspected of swimming too long in the shallow end of the gene pool.

I had other interests; first sports, later girls. I got into high school because of sports, got into college because of sports, and then, the GPA hit the fan. At the end of my freshman year in college I had "earned" a 1.4 grade point average. The paperwork for my academic expulsion from college was on the desk of the academic vice president, but the baseball coach intervened and saved me from being thrown out of school.

Then I turned it around. But why? How?

I dropped baseball and I picked up books. And devoted myself with equal determination and discipline to academics as I had to baseball. And you know, it was fun. Mikey liked it.

There was some really good stuff in those books – some really bad stuff to, but it was fun poking holes in that. I was impressed by these really smart guys (we didn't read books by or about women back then) tackling impossible problems, and asking grand and complex questions, trying to make sense of a mixed up, upside down world. It was fun and it was a challenge.

But when I was young(er), I harbored no small amount of resentment – even hostility towards my teachers and school. We always seemed to be heading in different directions. School wanted to train me, stifle me, inhibit me, impose order and control. Their motto seemed to be: "Stay between the lines, the lines are your friend!"

We didn't get along very well. This was, I confess, as much my fault as theirs. They usually meant well, I often didn't.

But I found school confining, claustrophobic. I wanted out. I wanted to play ball, they wanted me to read about Dick and Jane. I wanted to run, they wanted me to sit. I wanted to explore, they wanted me to follow orders. I wanted to sing, they wanted me to be quiet. I wanted to fly, they wanted me grounded. They tried to teach me how to submit. (As a teacher, I don't think I would have wanted someone like me as a student – I could be a bit difficult.)

Today, when I think about my attitude towards school, I am reminded of the lines from a Mark Powers play: A father makes a surprise entrance into the living room and

finds his daughter and her boyfriend – just home from college – making out on the sofa. Upset, the father cries out: “Did you two sleep together?”, to which the daughter replies, “only during class lectures.”

With such animosity towards school, why did I become a teacher? Revenge? A psychotic need to punish students? Perhaps.

In all seriousness, I don’t have a good reason why I was drawn to teaching. There are however four things of which I am aware that seemed to have an impact on my decision. First, while in college I read Neil Postman’s book, Teaching as a Subversive Activity. Postman argued that teaching – when done properly – is a truly subversive activity. By subversive, he meant, to challenge orthodoxy, to question established paradigms. “I can do that!” I said.

Secondly, I was profoundly influenced by a few great teachers, who were also great people. Harold Winkler, Steve Dale and others served as role models for what great teachers can be. They did more than merely talk to me in a classroom. They lived lives I admired, faced problems with courage and character, tried to do the right thing. I began to see how one could live an honorable life amid a world which seemed so often to conspire to make us into selfish, greedy creatures. Later, mentors such as William Lammers, Bill Fitzgerald and Thomas Cronin continued to move and inspire me.

Thirdly, and this brings me to the title of this missive, in college I read a poem by Richard Brautigan, a simple poem, perhaps it wasn’t even a good poem in the academic sense, but a poem which spoke volumes to me. It was a short poem which hit me like a brick.

Memoirs of Jesse James
-by-
Richard Brautigan

I remember all those thousands of hours that I spent in grade school watching the clock, waiting for recess or lunch or to go home.

Waiting: for anything but school. My teachers could easily have ridden with Jesse James for all the time they stole from me.

I know I am a better teacher for having been a terrible student. So many teachers stole so many hours of my life, instilled in me, not a love of learning, but a fear of learning. I didn’t want to be like them: sour, boring, blindly conformist, dead. And so, I became determined not to steal time from my students, but to try to help liberate and empower them; to be for others, what a few exceptional teachers were for me.

Finally, my father, an influence I alluded to earlier. My father, who never even graduated from the eighth grade – who had to leave school to go to work and raise his brothers and sisters – placed a great emphasis on education. And in spite of his lack of a formal education (cynics would say because of such a lack) my father was an extraordinarily educated man, a true gentle man. He achieved, with apparent ease and a naturalness quite extraordinary, a grace of mind and a mastery of intellect to which I still aspire. He was a truly educated man.

In the hospital, as he lay there, thin, emaciated, a blank look on a face that used to light up a room with his energy, wit, and intelligence, I saw the opposite of all that I was

trying to build for myself and for my students. And I realized that I was losing more than a father, I was losing a hero and a role model.

All of this leads me, in a rather circuitous way, to my thoughts on teaching. How can we develop in our students an appetite for education, a love for knowledge, a hunger for the “examined life” – a life of the mind, a life of reason and a life of the heart?

Teaching is a challenge. That is why it is so much fun. To be a good teacher is a demanding, difficult, time-consuming task. It requires the combination of a wide range of skills. It demands a great deal of us. But its rewards are many.

Being a good teacher doesn't come naturally. It requires a great investment of time and self. It requires work. One has to have self-awareness, and other-awareness, professional skill, and personal skill, insight, and imagination, daring and humor, commitment and character.

This is good news and bad news. The good news is there is no great mystery about what makes for a good teacher. The bad news is that we do not know what makes a good teacher great. I suppose it is something transcendent, some form of a magical connection between teacher and students.

Our primary questions as faculty members are: How can we help students to learn more effectively? What are the best ways to teach in the classroom, to teach outside the classroom, to advise (on matters academic and otherwise), to promote intellectual curiosity and development, to challenge students to become scholars and gentlepersons?

I would argue that the key to answering these questions rest in the following: Enthusiasm. The most memorable teachers I have had were men and women who were enthusiastic about their subjects, who taught with joy, intensity, and a love of their subjects. Such enthusiasm is contagious. Great teachers are curious, they are explorers, they are puzzle solvers. They convey the importance and relevance of their subjects, and the amazement of discovery.

As Thomas E. Cronin, president of Whitman College, has written: “Great teachers not only know their subject well, they radiate it. What invariably touches the hearts and imaginations of students is a professor's personal devotion to learning and to truth. For great teachers their subject is compelling, and their students are aroused by their commitment to it. According to an old proverb: the mediocre teacher tells; the good teacher explains, the superior teacher demonstrates; and the great teacher inspires.”¹

High Expectations/High Standards. Teachers who are demanding, who challenge, who expect much, demand much (and give much), are teachers who get the most out of their students. Great teachers are always persuading students to move forward, take the next step, meet the next challenge, jump the next hurdle. Better to ask more of your students than less: better to expect more of your students than less.

John Stuart Mill once said, “A student of whom nothing is asked that he cannot do never does all he can do.” If we expect top performance and demand top performance, we are more likely to get top performance. Great teachers demand that students extend themselves beyond where even they believe they can go.

Professional Competence. A very high degree of professional competence is another essential ingredient of outstanding teaching. We cannot assume that possession of a Ph.D. guarantees either competence as a teacher (because “teaching” is not taught in

¹ Thomas E. Cronin, “On Celebrating College Training,” PS: Political Science and Politics, September, 1991. pp.482-491

graduate school), or competence as a scholar. Therefore, we need peer review systems, classroom visits, institutional support (i.e., teacher training programs), and outside confirmation of competence (i.e., review of written and presented work by professional peers). As a Catholic University, we have a special mission to promote integrity and excellence. Not only must we do what great universities do – educate for excellence – but we must do so within a framework sensitive to values and aimed at developing the whole person. Our mission is to serve as excellent examples of achievement and effort. We serve God by serving our community with skill and compassion. Therefore, we aim high as teachers, scholars, people.

Personal Engagement. We teach about our subject matter, but we also teach about ourselves, about ways of life, about ways of seeing the world. Alfred North Whitehead said, “There is only one subject matter for education, and that is life in all its manifestations.”

By far the best thing about teaching is the personal contact with students. Good teachers share themselves with students, are open to them, see themselves as co-travelers. Contact with students can be the most valuable educational experience of a college career for both teacher and student. Students benefit from such contact in a variety of ways, but the most important benefit is that students can see if and how our ideas are embodied in our lives. They can understand, via direct experience, the benefit of an examined life.

Personal contact can be very demanding on a teacher, but studies repeatedly demonstrate that the students who grow academically and personally are those who spend time with faculty members. Relationships built around academic work and social events can help students develop a sense of community, a sense of importance, a sense of self.

Today, part of my lifelong learning finds me switching places with many former students, as they are now teaching me lessons about character, caring, and commitment. Outstanding graduates of our university such as Paul Kan, Mary Chambers, David Herbst, and Barbara Ulmer, and other continue to inspire and influence me by the power of their example.

Encourage Multi-Dimensional Student Life. As the preceding suggests, not all learning takes place in the classroom. Studies demonstrate that those students who are active in a wide range on college activities – sports, plays, student government, etc – are happier, better adjusted, and do as well academically as students who concentrate their time on solely academic learning. The social dimension of learning thus must become a centerpiece of the learning experience. We strive, after all, to educate the whole person.

Humor. Teaching should be fun, It should be a joy. One can take one’s work seriously but not take oneself too seriously. Humor is a key ingredient in my approach to teaching. I see the world (and politics) through a slightly jaundiced eye, and I try to convey the irony of politics on many levels, and retaining a sense of playfulness is one important dimension to my pedagogical approach. As Cronin has noted, “Teaching and learning should be fun. If it isn’t, then the teacher ought to take a day or two off (or a year or two if need be) and decide what’s important, what one’s life is all about.”

For many people, life is a burden to be endured. Such an outlook is deadly in a teacher. We need to feel the joy of life and convey that to our students. We must revel in the joy of learning, of puzzle-solving, of the mind. If what we do isn’t fun for us, it will be deadly for our students.

The Importance of Scholarship. Teaching is tough, demanding, and all consuming. It can lead to burnout. One of the best ways to keep a lively mind and avoid the pitfalls of burnout is through active scholarship. As Harvard University Dean Henry Rosovsky has written,

“By far the healthiest and most efficient method of fighting burnout is research. Unlike the somewhat grasping and passive bookworm, the researcher invests in him or herself while interacting with an international world of critics and colleagues. These are not activities congenial to deadwood or burned-out cases: they cannot share in the stimulation of give and take. A research oriented faculty is less likely to be the home of intellectual deadwood. Active, lively, thoroughly current minds that enjoy debate and controversy make better teachers.”²

Active scholarship (which I understand in a broad sense as “doin’ stuff” appropriate to one’s discipline) is an essential component to our profession. We cannot be “College Professors” if we are not scholars. Our obligation is to explore new areas, new ideas, new relationships, new possibilities and to share our pursuits with professional colleagues outside our university. Professional scholarship and effective teaching are highly correlated – especially for those teachers who share their research, their findings, their professional puzzles with students. As Cronin writes,

“Scholarship and research freshen and enliven the substance of teaching, and they usually also enhance one’s teaching by setting the example of an inquiring mind that relishes the challenge of new questions and knows how to go about getting answers.”³

Good teachers are almost always good scholars. They are “lifelong students” who generate knowledge, search, probe, inquire, question accepted wisdom. Good teachers have a hunger. We teach, research, and write because we have to. We are curious (and, curiosity didn’t kill the cat, stupidity did), we are interested, we do not settle for “less.”

Dreams and Possibilities. Ours is a liberating profession. We break chains. Again, to quote Thomas E. Cronin,

“Great teachers give us a sense not only of who they are, but more importantly, of who we are, and who we might become. They unlock our energies, our imaginations, and our minds. Effective teachers pose compelling questions, clarify choices, explain options, teach us to reason, suggest possible directions, and urge us on. The best of teachers, like the best of leaders, have an uncanny ability to step outside themselves and become liberating forces in our lives.”⁴

We are also dreamers and dream-makers, thinkers, and think-makers. We open eyes and minds. This sometimes means we must make our students uncomfortable by confronting and challenging their most cherished ideas. But so be it.

Teaching to “all” students. It is easier to teach to the A student than to the C student, but we must avoid that temptation and teach to all students. If we can do this, we can often identify C students who are really A students waiting to be liberated. This is one of the most difficult challenges in an already difficult job, but I know that I get more joy bringing the A out of a C student, than bringing the A out of an A student.

Students as Rebels and Conformists. Students are an odd mixture of the rebel and conformist. On the one hand, they are at the age and stage where they feel compelled to

² Henry Rosovsky, The University: An Owners Manual, New York: Norman, 1990.

³ Thomas E. Cronin, “On Celebrating College Teaching” op. cit.

⁴ Thomas E. Cronin, “On Celebrating College Teaching” op. cit.

chart their own course, “find” themselves, celebrate their individualism. On the other hand, they can be amazingly conformist, trying to fit in, to belong.

The classroom is one of the last places on earth where free speech is truly honored. We must create environments in which our students feel comfortable exercising free speech and inquiry, where they can try out new ideas, new approaches, new ways of seeing old problems. Students, in short, must feel free to make mistakes. If they fear that every “loose” idea will incur the wrath of a professor, they will usually remain silent. Teachers can insist upon high standards, crisp logic, and solid argument, while still creating an environment in which students do not feel threatened or intimidated. We must help our students learn from mistakes and overcome fears. They must feel that it is OK to reach high, to stretch themselves, to take some risks, to think bold thoughts, to chart new paths.

Thus, as teachers we need to be open to our students, respectful of their persons (especially where racial and gender differences may intervene in the learning process), and respectful of their intellects. At the same time, we can – and must – demonstrate that while all persons have equal value, all ideas do not. Thus, we must get to the core of ideas, expose their roots, their genesis, follow the logic of thought through the application of ideas to social problems, delineate strong ideas and arguments from weak ones, expose the rationale and justifications of ideas (examples of particularly sticky issues might be, how does one deal with racist and sexist ideas).

Truth to Power. Lamentably, we cannot teach courage. But we can teach about courage and moral conviction. In a world which often seems to conspire to make us into compliant sheep, we can seek to imbue our students with a sense in which there will be times in which they must make a moral choice, and prepare them to face up to these tough choices. As novelist George Steiner reminds us, “We are those who come after. We know that a man can read Goethe and Schiller in the afternoon, play Bach and Mozart in the evening, and go the next day to his job at Auschwitz.”

I find the best way to do this is through example. I often rely upon the examples of Thomas More and Martin Luther King to illustrate the difficulty of moral choice, as well as the integrity and honor of choosing the right path against great odds. If we produce students who are ethical illiterates, the educational experience will have been morally bankrupt, and we will have failed. Our goal is to help develop an educated person.

What does it mean to be an “educated” person? The art of teaching is not a mere job to be performed. Teaching is designed to enable. It strives to produce a person educated into a concept of “a coherent whole.” What is this coherent whole?

An educated person is able to think critically. He or she leads an examined life. The educated person displays a deep curiosity, develops a hierarchy of values, thinks in degrees, not absolutes. The educated person is comfortable in the world of ideas, is familiar with the various methods for knowing truth, is familiar with other cultures, religions, and ways of knowing. The educated person knows the ways of science, the essence of beauty, the pursuit of truth. The educated person has pondered the important and perennial questions of mankind. He or she has read the great works of the world and is comfortable discussing the great ideas upon which humans have reflected. The educated person thinks with the head, and feels with the heart. The educated person is capable of loving deeply, and committing wholly.

An educated person should be able to communicate with precision, and force. He or she should have an informed acquaintance with the mathematical and experimental methods of the sciences; with the historical and quantitative techniques needed for investigating the workings and development of society; with some of the important scholarly, literary, and artistic achievements of the past; and with the major religious and philosophical conceptions of what it is to be human. An educated American could not be provincial; he or she should know about other cultures, languages and times, have some understanding of, and experience in thinking about moral and ethical problems. An educated person should have high aesthetic and moral standards, be able to reject shoddiness in all its many forms, and defend those views effectively and rationally.

The educated person defends truth and justice, even when (especially when) it is unpopular to do so. The educated person knows that knowledge is deserving of sacrifice, and that if cultivated, it may grow into wisdom. He or she believes in the dignity of each person, and honors human courage.

What I have outlined, if you have not already guessed, is an impossible dream. No teacher or student could possibly reach the heights I have outlined. But that is our goal, our ideal, our windmill at which we can tilt.

If we ask our students to aim high, to seek much, to take risks, we must be prepared to do so ourselves. Teaching is an exhausting, time consuming, demanding, difficult vocation. It is also intensely satisfying, enriching, and rewarding. To see the spark light up in a student's eyes, to know one has made a difference, is richly rewarding. Much is expected of us, but much is returned as well. In a phrase, we teach students to learn.

In trying to come up with an example of how an educated person might respond to a real-life problem, I was drawn to a response Robert Kennedy gave to a question about the state of the nation, circa 1968. At a time when our prosperity was measured by numbers of telephones and televisions per household, Kennedy said this of our gross national product:

It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It allows neither for the justice in our courts, nor for the justness of our dealings with each other. The gross national product measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to country. It measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.

I wrote most of this speech in the hospital while sitting with my father. In fact, I wrote almost all of my last two books in the convalescent hospital with my dad. So in many ways he is responsible – for my work and for me – for my productivity and the product (me).

His lessons, about the value of work, discipline, of generosity and care; his pursuit of excellence, the deep and true love he displayed to my mother and me, these are the things I learned. These are the things I hope to teach my students – lessons of my father.

I am incapable of paying proper tribute to the memory and legacy of my father. He was what I aspire to: a success. Emerson defended a success thusly:

To laugh often and love much, to win the respect of intelligent persons and the affection of children; to appreciate beauty; to find the best in others; to give one's self; to leave the world a lot better whether by a healthy child, a garden patch, or a redeemed

social condition; to have played and laughed with enthusiasm and sung with exaltation, to know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived – this is to have succeeded.