

Nachbar Award Address---30 September 2011---Loyola University Maryland

First, I would like to thank the Humanities Center of Loyola University Maryland for this award. And next, I would like to congratulate all the students here today who are recognized for their intellectual achievement. I would especially like to thank their parents and other family members who have encouraged this achievement. All the students recognize the great debt they have to *you* in their life of intellectual inquiry.

It is customary at this convocation that the recipient of the Nachbar Award give a brief speech on the life of the mind. We often think of the mind as something personal and interior. It's *my* mind, *my* thoughts, *my* beliefs. But I think the mind always has roots in the ideas and ideals of others. This evening, I would like to discuss the debt our mind owes to others by sharing with you the debt *I* owe to different thinkers, artists, and institutions in pursuing my own scholarly life these past decades.

In grade school, I enjoyed reading biographies. The biographies of two people deeply moved me. The first was the life of Madame Curie. A chemist who twice won the Nobel Prize, Curie taught me that great scientific achievements demand extraordinary patience. Many of her breakthroughs in the discovery of radium require years of experimentation against poverty, exhaustion, and political opposition. Her life also taught me something about the tragic side of knowledge. Although her X-ray machines saved thousands of lives during World War I, she could not accept the truth that radiation was killing the members of her lab staff and that it was slowly killing her.

Mahatma Gandhi taught me that the struggle for justice required more than patience. It demanded a commitment to nonviolence. The means as well as the ends of our political struggles must be pure---and that purity can only arise at the end of serious prayer.

I should also recognize my first philosophical mentor---television's Soupy Sales. With the pie-throwing White Fang at his side, Soupy Sales showed me the comedy of human existence. He may not have influenced the substance of my later philosophy but he certainly influenced my style---especially when I run out of things to say in a long lecture.

High school was the time to discover the power of poetry. E.E. Cummings taught me the beauty of unchained language. I spent many a summer night writing imitations of the master. "All in green went my love a-riding...."

As an undergrad at Penn, I majored in English. My new literary hero was T.S. Eliot. It wasn't just his poetry. It was Eliot's essays on culture which opened my eyes to the complex relationship between literature and the Christian faith.

The poetry of Wallace Stevens, another college hero, taught me the power of the imagination to impose order on a chaotic world---and to delight in the beauty of that order only the human mind can create and cherish.

One night in my sophomore year, a Jesuit poet appeared who would change my life. As I read "The Burning Babe," a Christmas poem by Saint Robert Southwell, who died as a martyr under Queen Elizabeth, I suddenly felt the call to enter the Jesuits. To Saint Robert, I owe more than phrases in my mind---I owe so much of my Jesuit soul.

Once I entered the Jesuit order, I discovered the greatest Jesuit of them all: Saint Ignatius, our founder. Ignatius was neither a philosopher nor an artist. But his *Spiritual Exercises* taught me to seek, praise, and serve God through the intellect, through the will, and above all through the imagination. I learned how to pray through using the senses and imagination to picture God and to struggle with God. While some mystics have called us to abandon our mental powers to find God in complete poverty, Ignatius calls us to use those powers to the fullest to seek almighty God's glory and to point to God in our work.

My first studies in philosophy under the vow of obedience were not exactly an illumination. I came to the end of my studies at Fordham baffled. If all these great philosophers couldn't agree on anything, just what could we believe to be true?

Shortly after my first round of philosophy, I spent several months working at the L'Arche community in France. Founded by Jean Vanier, L'Arche is a Catholic community for people with mental disabilities. L'Arche taught me the evangelical truth that the poor, the disabled, and the ill are at the heart of God's mercy and of the Church's mission. L'Arche also strengthened my commitment to the prolife cause in its defense of the dignity of all human beings, especially the most vulnerable at the dawn and dusk of life itself, whom we too easily perceive as an intolerable burden.

During my first assignment as a professor at Wheeling Jesuit University in West Virginia, I found a twentieth-century philosopher who made sense. She was Simone Weill. Weill taught me the value of trying to defend partial truths about God, the soul, and justice even when we lose faith in the great systems. She also showed me how to teach. Following her example, I have always prized the composition of brief, original essays by students in my classes. She helped forge my conviction that we can only engage in philosophy and theology when we pass from commentary on the thought of others to the courage of presenting our own original ideas.

During my theology years in Paris, I often attended the lectures of Michel Foucault at the Collège de France. Foucault taught me to reflect on the relationship between power and knowledge. I think his expression here also shows what can go wrong when you do a bit too much philosophy.

The development of the mind not only requires great books and great communities. It also requires great places where the soul can expand. Paris provided two, which I love to the present day. The first is Saint-Severin, a medieval church on the left bank. Inspiration is relatively easily beneath this twisting pillar in the form of a palm tree.

The second is even more inspiring. This is the park of Sceaux in the south suburbs. This seventeenth-century garden was designed by the great architect Le Nôtre. He wanted to use trees, fountains, statues, and geometric walks to create a physical version of the infinite. He hoped that souls who basked in the park's artistic infinite would find themselves opened to the love of the divine infinite.

During my doctoral studies at Louvain, I discovered Jean Ladrière. In his teaching and the direction of my dissertation, Monsieur Ladrière showed me the immensity of the house of reason. Many of his own books showed how reason operates differently in empirical science and aesthetic judgments and moral convictions and religious arguments. He demonstrated the mutually enriching relationship between faith and reason. In his careful commitment to precision in argument and in his extraordinary generosity to his many students, he showed me how noble the life of a scholar and teacher could be.

After several years of teaching at Fordham, I stumbled across the works of an obscure seventeenth-century French woman: Madame de Sablé. She taught me how easily virtue can be a mask for vice. I presented a paper on her thought at a session of the Society for Study of Women Philosophers, whose members encouraged me to continue this line of research. Like every scholar, I owe a debt to colleagues in this professional organization, especially Mary Ellen Waithe, Cecile Tougas, and Eileen O'Neill.

The paper turned into a book: *The Suspicion of Virtue*, published by Cornell University Press. This was followed by two books from University of Chicago Press. The first was on Jacqueline Pascal, who taught me about the rights of conscience and the weapons of spiritual resistance against abuses of power. In the next book, Madame de Maintenon showed me how dialogue can lead to moral purification as well as a clearer grasp of truth.

As my research progressed, I discovered the nuns of Port-Royal, a convent devoted to the Jansenist cause. Here is Mère Angélique Arnauld, the reformer of the convent. In her own moral philosophy, she explained the noble virtue of suffering for the truth. In my book *Adoration and Annihilation*, from the University of Notre Dame Press, I analyzed the philosophy developed by these nuns, especially their exaltation of God's sovereign gift of grace.

My research on Port-Royal led me to study of the greatest Jansenists of them all: Blaise Pascal, the object of my current research and of my next book. The Jansenist emphasis on God's grace not only influenced my own philosophy and theology: it shaped my own preaching of God's Word in the pulpit. Against our dominant theology of good works, I find that the Jansenists offer a bracing account of our dependence on divine providence and God's gift outright of His saving grace.

Since arriving at Loyola, I have discovered a new vocation: that of playwright. Through my work in the Playwrights Group of Baltimore, I began to write and produce dramas on themes as different as physician-assisted suicide, political conspiracy theories, and White Island Cake---that's the official Maryland desert.

This is a scene from my play *O'Boylan's Finest*, produced in Chicago by Heartland Theatre. It concerns a dispute over avant-garde sculpture. This is a scene from *Final Arrangements*, produced by Run-of-the-Mill Theatre here in Baltimore. The characters are disputing the details of a funeral service for a friend who has died from AIDS. And this is the cast from Magis Theatre's production of *Song of Songs*, my theatrical version of the biblical book presented here at Loyola last year.

Like my books, these plays are written in solitude. But I am well aware that as I write and revise and fight with directors through rehearsals, I am touched by the playwrights who taught me to love theatre: Racine with his tragic psychology, Miller with his social criticism, Sarah Ruhl with her wild sense of fun. In the midst of the struggle to create are my fellow Charm City playwrights Rich Espey, Sue Middaugh, and Lee Sapperstein with their criticism as the plays go through different drafts.

As I grow older, I realize more deeply the debt to all those persons and groups who have nourished my own mind. Today is a moment to celebrate the intellectual achievements which all the hard work of our minds have attained---and nothing requires harder work than the labor of logical or creative thought. But this should also be a moment for gratitude to those who changed our minds forever: to the encouraging parent, the challenging teacher, the author who wrote the paperback book we found one day in the bus station, the small arts group which celebrated our first painting, or the library where we first stumbled on Shakespeare.

Again, congratulations to all our honorees. And to all those, present and absent, who have generously furnished our minds, thank you.