

THE NACHBAHR AWARD

THE 2000 NACHBAHR LECTURE

The Nachbahr Award for scholarly or creative contributions in the humanities is an annual award recognizing outstanding achievement in scholarship or creative work by a faculty member in the humanities. It is named in honor of Bernard Nachbahr, a long-time and much beloved philosophy professor at Loyola and the first Director of the Center for the Humanities. His career exemplified a deep commitment to the civilizing power of the humanities. The Nachbahr awardee delivers a public lecture during the weekend of Honors Convocation on the general theme of "The Life of the Mind" and receives an honorarium of \$2,000. A reception after the lecture and a dinner also honor the recipient. Former Nachbahr recipients include:

- 2000 Mark Osteen, Department of English
- 1999 Charles Marsh, Department of Theology
- 1998 Matthew Gallman, Department of History
- 1997 Robert Miola, Departments of English and Classics

ACCEPTING THE GIFT: THE LIFE OF THE MIND OR MINDING THE LIFE?

DELIVERED AT THE HONORS CONVOCATION,
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In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle tells us that the truly magnanimous person is pleased to "confer benefits, but . . . is ashamed of receiving them" (1124b). By this definition, I confess, I'm not very magnanimous, for I do not feel ashamed of receiving the Nachbahr Award. Nevertheless, I'm going to suggest today that the life of the mind helps to create magnanimous people.

So let me begin again. Thank you. There will be many expressions of thanks on this occasion of granting and receiving awards. The students receiving awards today, I'm sure, also feel grateful for them. In keeping with the spirit of the moment, I'd like to talk about thanks this morning—about what I'm going to call, borrowing from Lewis Hyde, the labor of gratitude (50). Gratitude is important because, as sociologists remind us, no gifts are really free: they all come with strings attached. Thus, for example, what you're listening to right now is the sound of me plucking the strings attached to my award. More seriously, I'm going to insist today that for those of us receiving awards the circuit of giving must not end here: now that we have received, we must give again, and more.

Gratitude has been in my thoughts because lately I have been doing research for a collection of essays called *The Question of the Gift*. In the reading in anthropology and sociology that I have done for this book—some of it enlightening—I have re-encountered the foundational text in gift theory: a brief 1924 monograph entitled *Essai sur le don* (*The Gift*), written by a French anthropologist named Marcel Mauss. Mauss's great insight is that in societies with an undeveloped market economy, gift exchanges con-

stitute a "total social phenomenon" that engages every member in three interlocking obligations: to give, to receive, and to reciprocate. I want to examine these principles this morning and apply them to the life of the mind.

To begin with, I want to assert two premises that follow from these principles. The first is that to accept a gift is to accept a vision of one's identity, a responsibility, a charge. When we receive we become grateful and therefore obligated. Gratitude is a good thing: according to Georg Simmel, one of the founders of sociology, it is the "moral memory of mankind" (45). Yet it is also dangerous because it is "irredeemable. It maintains its claim even after an equal or greater return gift has been made" (48): one can never repay the first gift. Hence, gifts are sometimes unwellcome. In his famous essay on gifts, Ralph Waldo Emerson notes that "We do not quite forgive a giver. The hand that feeds us is in danger of being bitten" (26). For Emerson a gift is dangerous because it violates the recipient's privacy and creates indebtedness; it seems to require connection and self-examination, even, perhaps, self-transformation.

The second premise that follows from Mauss's thesis is that the life of the mind, although it seems solitary, even lonely, is itself a "total social phenomenon" that involves giving, receiving and reciprocating. It isn't just a vocation, although it is that; it's also an ongoing conversation, a part of what Hyde calls "the labor of gratitude" (50). With these premises in mind, I want to assert that the life of the mind is dangerous because it is filled with irredeemable obligations.

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Let's try a thought experiment and conjure up an imaginary movie called *Books and Bytes: The Scholar at Work*. We zoom in on the diligent researcher doggedly going about her tedious business in dank, ill-lit rooms: here she peruses dusty library stacks; here she pores over ancient tomes; here she is, hunkering in adoration or abjection before a glowing computer screen. The cynical viewer thinks: all this effort to produce works that only a few other pitiful creatures will dutifully read (or pretend to have read). No box-office bonanza, this may be one of the dullest movies ever filmed. Where's the action? Where's the erotic interest? Oh, it's there, all right; it's just invisible. I hope to make it visible in a few minutes. But to all appearances, these activities are both dry and unsociable. Indeed, the scholar craves solitude; the presence of other people derails her train of thought. Her enterprise, moreover, is obviously hard work for which she receives remuneration, paltry though it may be, in the form of promotions, raises, grants and so on. Nor is the time free; rather, it is borrowed or stolen from other activities.

Now let us visit another scholar at home, living his personal sitcom. Now the weary bookworm gets to kiss his spouse, watch TV (PBS only, of course), read a story to his kids, garden, or play the piano. Whereas in his scholarly work the researcher participates in the marketplace, at home, social theorists argue, he enters the domain of the gift. Here obligations and payments, though they exist, remain implicit. Unless we are decidedly mercenary, what we give to our spouses or children is bestowed without expectation of reward. We might also think of these dual spheres in terms

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of Lewis Hyde's distinction between work and labor: we work for some external payment, whereas we perform labor because of internal or intrinsic compulsions or rewards (50-51). Whatever we name them, we seem to live in two distinct, even competing realms: the marketplace—where one does the work of scholarship—and the home, the site of labor or the gift. Minding the home life seems utterly divorced from the life of the mind, and may interfere with it.

Of course, this outline is too schematic. Home life is full of things that we do because we have to: completing household chores, taking the kids to the doctor or chauffeuring them to practice, feeding the dog, mowing the lawn, and so on. Conversely, scholarship is not merely lonely. First of all, it fuels what the scholar does in the classroom. When you become excited about a text, problem, or author, you burn to share it with others. Like a kid finding a really cool bug under a rock in the yard, you want to display the awesome thing you've discovered, to have your discovery validated, and to examine it further. You want to give it to somebody. Clearly, too, minding the life provides respite from the life of the mind and a sense of balance. But let's go further. What happens if we think of scholarship in terms of gifts? What if scholarship partakes not of work but of labor—bringing forth out of gratitude. Perhaps we'll see not a contest but a collaboration between realms. When we conceive the life of the mind as belonging to the sphere of the gift, we'll see that it is attended by obligations, so that when one is given something—a talent, a set of skills, a desire—one must reciprocate, give it back, pass the gift on.

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Let me begin to do the labor of gratitude. Obviously, without my parents' encouragement, financial sacrifices and discipline, I would never have gone to college, nor would I have cultivated the working habits required for scholarship. In virtually every way, my gratitude to them is irredeemable. But that's only the beginning. I have received much from James Joyce and Don DeLillo, whose works are the subject of my critical books. In *Ulysses*, Joyce portrays in astonishingly complex detail his home city through a single day in the lives of three very flawed characters, whose economic interactions—their purchases, gifts, and debts—drew my scholarly attention. But initially it was Joyce's delight in language—his wordplay, his outrageous humor, his stylistic virtuosity—that attracted me. In this episode, which takes place in one of Dublin's many pubs, Joyce narrates a near-brawl by alternating between the hilariously jaded observations of an unnamed barfly and a series of hyper inflated pastiches. Here is an example:

--Ah, well, says Joe, handing round the boose. Thanks be to God they had the start of us. Drink that, citizen. I will, says he, honorable person.

--Health, Joe, says I. And all down the form.

Ah! Oh! Don't be talking! I was blue mouldy for the want of that pint. Declare to God I could hear it hit the pit of my stomach with a click.

And lo, as they quaffed their cup of joy, a godlike messenger came swiftly in, radiant as the eye of heaven, a comely youth and behind him there passed an elder of noble gait and countenance, bearing the sacred

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scrolls of law and with him his lady wife a dame of peerless lineage, fairest of her race.

Little Alf Bergan popped in round the door and hind behind Barney's snug, squeezed up with the laughing....And begob what was it only that bloody old pantaloons Denis Breen in his bath slippers with his two bloody big books tucked under his oxter and the wife hotfoot after him, unfortunate wretched woman, trotting like a poodle. I thought Alf would split.

Such a work offers itself as a series of games. ("This is fun!" I tell my students, who regard me with the dazed skepticism that they bestow upon hypercaffeinated camp counselors.) Writing a book on this work is an epic adventure: an odyssey and a marathon.

My book on contemporary American novelist Don DeLillo presented a different set of rewards and mysteries. I had to learn about avant-garde film, the life of Adolf Hitler; about nuclear strategy, Renaissance masques, the history of mathematics, and early Greek epigraphs; about Pentecostal religious practices, Tibetan Buddhism, and postmodern visual art. DeLillo draws from these and other cultural fields to depict the peculiar blend of transcendence and terror that typifies twentieth-century America. For example, his 1997 novel *Underworld* weaves together the story of the fabled home run hit in 1951 by Bobby Thomson to win the pennant for the New York Giants, the history of atomic testing, graffiti, garbage, and the Rolling Stones! One scene in my favorite of his books, the 1985 novel

White Noise—about a haunted professor of Hitler studies and his family—shows this mixture of magic and dread. In this scene a man relates his experience in a barely-averted plane crash:

"When the steep glide began, people rose, fell, collided, swam in their seats. Almost immediately a voice from the flight deck was heard on the intercom: 'We're falling out of the sky! We're going down! We're a silver gleaming death machine!' This outburst struck the passengers as an all but total breakdown of authority, competence and command presence and it brought on a round of fresh and desperate wailing...."

Then there was a second voice from the flight deck, this one remarkably calm and precise, making the passengers believe there was someone in charge after all, an element of hope: 'This is American two-one-three to the cockpit voice recorder. Now we know what it's like. It is worse than we'd ever imagined. They didn't prepare us for this at the death simulator in Denver....In less than three minutes we will touch down, so to speak. They will find our bodies in some smoking field, strewn about in the grisly attitudes of death. I love you, Lance.' This time there was a brief pause before the mass wailing recommenced. Lance? What kind of people were in control of this aircraft?"

The plane eventually rights itself. But the worst trauma is that, when they land, there no media are waiting to report it. One character sums it up: "You mean they went through all that for nothing?"

Sure, writing about these authors was a lot of work. But the texts' most urgent demand was to make oneself worthy of their authors' achievements. These works, born out of enormous sacrifice, come to you as packages wrapped with binding ribbons: you have to exert labor equivalent to that of the authors in order to offer back something that may humbly stand next to their books on the shelf. These are works of immense generosity, and one's gratitude to them is in one sense clearly irredeemable. But engaged critical reading can become a collaboration between reader and author in which one repays the author with acts of attention. Indeed, the process of giving meaning to dormant words means that a reader, in taking up the gift, adds a kind of interest that enriches the value of the words. In doing the labor of gratitude—in striving to become a competent reader—one can turn literary criticism into a conversation: with the gracious colleagues with whom you discuss your work, but also with the creative laborers from the past and present with whom you engage in verbal exchanges. In this respect, at least, the life of the mind is not solitary but eminently social.

Let us return to my title for a moment and consider the word "accepting." In our society, with its highly developed capitalist economy, we are accustomed to thinking in terms of production. In contrast, societies organized around gift exchanges think in metaphors of arrival and delivery: beliefs and bounties are not made but given, and the duty of a person is to learn the art of acceptance. To accept may involve not exerting

the will but suspending it. Exploring the notion of acceptance may direct us to several other possibilities regarding the life of the mind.

First, it opens a new way to envision how writing and thinking operate. I have learned over the years that you can't will an idea into existence. No: insights visit you. To start or advance a project you have to open yourself to such visitations and accept them when they occur. The mundane work of scholarship is really all a way of creating a hospitable environment for such visits. When an intuition arrives at your threshold, to turn it away is a violation of intellectual hospitality; to fail to accept and return that present is a dereliction of duty, a crime against the creative spirit. At the same time, of course, one also learns to accept one's limitations, a fact that I face every time I pick up my saxophone and try to play a solo by John Coltrane or Charlie Parker. I'm open, I'm ready, I'm willing—but I'm not able. But at least I am grateful.

But learning acceptance is perhaps not so difficult for those of us whose labor involves art, because, as Joseph Conrad famously writes, "the artist appeals...to that in us which is a gift and not an acquisition." Hyde writes that, "Having accepted what has been given to him—either in the sense of inspiration or in the sense of talent—the artist often feels compelled, feels the desire, to make the work and offer it to an audience. 'Publish or perish' is an internal demand of the creative spirit" (146). The same is true of the committed scholar: for her as for the artist, to work authentically is to return the gifts that she has received. To accept a gift requires that one reciprocate. Good reading is a conversation and an act

of creation, and one that enables the scholar to pass on his or her reading on to other readers.

The German poet Rainer Maria Rilke writes in this vein that an artist's goal should be a "carefree letting go of oneself...a continuous squandering of all perishable values" (Hyde 150). Similarly, a life spent engaging such art—despite the apparent drudgery depicted in our imaginary movie—is a life lived dangerously, because it requires one to risk all: one's beliefs, one's energy, one's soul. Each book that the scholar writes demands that he or she acquire new skills, new interests, new strategies: like gift-exchanges, true scholarship is a process of regeneration, a labor of gratitude that is both irredeemable and irredeemably social.

To use another concept from gift theory, true education—both scholarship and pedagogy—becomes inalienable property. This book, article, or experiment has your name on it, and even long after you send it out into the world it remains in some sense yours. When others read it, criticize it, expand upon it, they give it back to you with enhanced value. Similarly, when you lead students to think imaginatively, their education has your name on it; they will take that property with them, and every time they use it they are giving a donation to the world in your name. Everything they do belongs, in part, to you. That's not just an awesome responsibility; it's also a tremendous reward.

I'll go even further: I declare that the life of the mind is erotic. Hold on—I don't mean what you think I mean. I'm thinking of the erotic in another sense, used by Freud, among others: the erotic aspects of culture

are the forces that bring people together. Thus Hyde writes that the "work of art is a copula, a bond, a band, by which the several are knit into one" (153). Similarly, I claim, the life of the mind is a commerce of eros that seeks to bring people together by celebrating what is most human—and therefore most divine—about us. A life truly lived in the mind opens a path toward transcendence, that mysterious domain of whatever is greater than the human. That's action—and that's the erotic interest that I earlier claimed existed in our imaginary movie.

This version of the creative life may be excessively idealistic because it omits all that unglamorous work that I also sketched in our imaginary movie—the innumerable trips to the library, the tedious tracking down of sources, the discipline and frustration involved in applying the seat of the pants to the seat of the chair, the determination not to accept anything but the most you can offer. Perhaps a more plausible way of presenting the scholar's condition is as a balance between managing materials and being directed by them; between receiving and shaping. In this model the life of the mind blends eros—the desire to bring people together—with logos—that fierce independence of thought and adherence to the demands of precision that engenders the best scholarship. The same blend operates in the classroom, where we try to guide students in accepting gifts that they may be unwilling to receive, to invite and lead them down the avenue of self-transformation that, as we have seen, constitutes the labor of gratitude.

The life of the mind, then, clearly exemplifies Mauss's three obligations to give, to receive, to reciprocate. What had seemed a solitary, even lonely enterprise is really a form of dialogue: with other scholars; with earlier writers and thinkers; with students, and, perhaps most of all, with the loved ones who make the sacrifices that allow you to pursue these other conversations.

Thus we return to the competing realms that I outlined in my opening remarks. How does one bring together the two parts of my subtitle—the life of the mind and minding (that is, caring for) one's "real" life? By acknowledging that both involve reciprocity and demand a fuller sense of connection. You come to balance or blend the two lives by learning to incorporate whatever gifts—welcome or unwelcome—come your way.

For not all things that choose you are what you would rationally select. In the last ten years I have been led to reflect daily on the nature of minds because of the mind of my son, who is now eleven. Cameron has been given an unwelcome gift: the neurological disorder called autism. He has enormous difficulty communicating his thoughts and feelings, and often seems to exist in a private world of peculiar tics and obsessions. My wife and I have been forced to learn how to accept this gift, and to try to learn gratitude for it. As I noted earlier, there is always the choice of refusing a gift, and that is what makes gratitude dangerous; that possibility is especially pertinent here. I'll admit that I often feel that my son's disorder is less a gift than a curse. But this past summer, when Cameron went to camp for the first time, and we did not see him every day, I could not

seem to concentrate. I wondered why. Was it that I can no longer work without interruptions? Or rather, does the gift of his presence give shape to my intellectual life? Does he make my labor meaningful because he requires that I learn to cultivate a grateful frame of mind? Perhaps through him I have learned that we do not control everything; that sometimes one must await arrival rather than schedule production.

Just as accepting one's obligations in intellectual life prepares you to accept other responsibilities, so becoming grateful for such things as disabilities or hardships fosters a receptivity to intellectual obligations. Thus, when I say that I could not do any scholarship without the collaboration of my wife Leslie I don't mean to offer the perfunctory acknowledgment one sees at the front of a book. I mean rather that the environment of support and what might seem to be interference engenders a self more willing to accept and reciprocate all gifts. The connected self nourished in the family is inevitably passed on through one's intellectual work, so that my work becomes our work. The inalienable possessions we make—my wife, my son, and I—embody the creative currents, the presents, that pass through the household. What they give, I try to pass on.

Cultivating the connected self requires that one accept and perhaps even become grateful for the "gift" of a disability, which in some ways is perhaps just a different kind of ability. Beseated by sensory distortions, by crippling anxiety, by unimaginable frustration at his inability to communicate effectively, my son nonetheless maintains relationships with his classmates, family and teachers, enjoys gymnastics classes, and sings with

glee. Indeed, the way that he courageously, even heroically, struggles to make his way in the world despite his severe limitations makes the difficulties of "typical" people seem laughably insignificant. But let me pass on one experience that helped me learn about acceptance. For years we took him to the swimming pool, where he splashed around under our tense and vigilant supervision. After a few years, and with great trepidation, we finally began to let our home therapists take him to the pool. Early last summer the three of us returned. Cameron immediately ran to the deep end and merrily jumped in. My wife and I plunged, panic-stricken, into the water. But he emerged laughing, and, in a hybrid of dog-paddle and breast stroke that he had invented, swam confidently to the side. It seemed that when we let go just a little—when we accepted his right to learn his own way, when we allowed him to discover his skill rather than trying to will it into existence—it arrived on its own. From the combination of terror, joy and astonishment in such moments, I learned that the acceptance of unwelcome gifts sometimes frees you to receive more welcome ones.

The same is true of the life of the mind. The gift of his disability offers to me—and perhaps to all of us—another charge. Through him, I have been inspired to think of my work—my gift—as answering the compelling obligation to speak for another who can't speak so well. You perform the labor of gratitude, give back the gift, because not to do it would be immoral; it would be refusing to honor what has been given to you. My close experience with another mind that has had less given to it makes this responsibility more urgent.

We've seen how the life of the mind enacts the obligations to give, receive and reciprocate. But there's a fourth as well: the requirement that we give to something greater than ourselves, however we define it. The dedication to the life of the mind constitutes an attempt to reach beyond human limitations; to understand what is difficult; to make sense of—and failing that, to accept and even be grateful for—what seems unfair; to fix what is broken; to speak for those who cannot. Let me end, then, with a question and a charge. Everybody here today is gifted in some way: by birth, talent, skills. What will you do with these gifts? The gift perishes if it is not passed on. Will you allow your gifts to perish? Or will you enrich them through the erotic labor of gratitude? Only such labor, I conclude, nourishes a commerce that affirms our complete humanity, and perhaps permits us to catch a fleeting glimpse of what transcends the human.

I repeat: Thanks.

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