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### My Last Lecture: What Happens When You Teach Longer Than Alexander the Great Lived?

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# My Last Lecture

Tom Auffenberg

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## What Happens When You Teach Longer Than Alexander the Great Lived?

I want to thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to do this today, but I also want to confess that if you take this assignment seriously—which I did—it is a most daunting task. Trying to present your “Last Lecture” while you’re out there munching on your lunches, it strikes me as most difficult not to present something that is either too pompous or too vacuous. One is almost tempted to plagiarize the closing lines from one of my favorite movies, Monty Python’s *The Meaning of Life* and tell you Eric Idle’s conclusion that “It’s not very much really, simply try to:

\*be nice to people

\*avoid eating fat

\*read a good book every now and then

\*get some walking in

\*try to live together in peace and harmony with people of all creeds and nations

.... and sit down. But I’ll try to do a bit more.

Over twenty years ago now, the Student Entertainment Lecture Foundation asked me to present my “Last Lecture” back at a time when my hair was considerably longer, my goatee had not yet emerged, I was a few inches skinnier, I was the youngest member of the history department, and I still had both of my real hips. As I sat down a few weeks ago to prepare these remarks, it struck me how utterly unprepared I was to deliver anything so imposing as a “Last Lecture” when I was a mere youth in my thirties. But now, if I can make it another 7 1/2 days, I will have completed thirty-four years as a college professor, all of them at Ouachita Baptist

University; and perhaps I have earned the right to make a few general observations to my colleagues. Regarding these thirty-four years, I won't plagiarize Everett Slavens and pronounce them "marvelous," but I will say without hesitation that they have been challenging, intellectually stimulating, and life-changing. Certainly, far more than merely "satisfactory." All things considered, I find myself among that lucky part of humanity that truly loves my job—most of the time.

And now, a word about my title. First of all, let me assure you that I am by no means trying to compare myself to Alexander the Great. After all, I really don't share much in common with that most famous of all Macedonians. Admittedly, I don't particularly like the current regime in control of Persia/Iran, but I can assure you I have no intention of invading it. And, compared to Alexander

\*I have killed far fewer people

\*I have spent far less time on horseback

\*I have pillaged fewer cities

\*I have been married far fewer times

\*I come from a family where my parents actually liked each other

\*I didn't have a mother who liked to handle snakes—indeed she was scared of them

\*I suffer under no delusion that I might be a god

\*I had good teachers, but none of them were famous philosophers

\*it remains extremely unlikely that Oliver Stone will ever want to make a movie about my rather ordinary life

No, the title basically is meant to convey the concept that it has truly been a privilege to be in the classroom for a long time. Indeed, I was almost tempted to title this lecture” “From Filmstrip Projector to Power Point.” As I was preparing these remarks it dawned on me that I have taught longer than not only Alexander the Great lived, but also such famous figures as Joan of Arc, John Keats, Percy Shelley, Emily and Anne Bronte, and both Kings Richard II and Richard III. And, alas, despite being allotted more years than these individuals, I have yet to besiege a castle, write a truly memorable poem, or arrange for the deaths of any of my younger relatives in the Tower of London.

Indeed, it is far more daunting when I realize that I have now lived as many years as were allotted to both Oliver Cromwell and William the Conqueror, the latter of whom expired at aged 59 after being violently thrown against the pommel of his saddle while pillaging a French village, which fatally ruptured some of his internal organs. Remembering this, rest assured I have no intention of pillaging a French village sometime this year. And I have certainly been nicer to Ireland than was Cromwell.

And, God has been generous enough to allot me more years of life than such individuals as:

Henry VIII

William Shakespeare

Alfred the Great

Charles Dickens

Mary, Queen of Scots

William Pitt the Younger

Emperor Constantine the Great

John F. Kennedy

Czar Peter the Great

James K. Polk

Czar Ivan the Terrible

St. Francis of Assisi

John Calvin

St. Thomas Aquinas

Sir Thomas More	Adolph Hitler
Machiavelli	Davy Crockett
Lorenzo de Medici	Richard the Lion Hearted
Vladimir Lenin	King John
John Lennon	both Ferdinand AND Isabella
Vincent van Gogh	Christopher Columbus
Botticelli	Ludwig van Beethoven
Raphael	Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

I could go on and on and take up the rest of my time—but you get the point. Throughout history, people did not enjoy the life span we have come to expect for most of us in the twenty-first century. Having been privileged to spend thirty-four years at Ouachita, I thought would provide a few “awards” regarding some of the highlights of my pedagogical experience, highlighting some of the high and low points we have all encountered.

- 1) Favorite mixed metaphor: “I will practice a merciful severity”—Emperor Ferdinand III
- 2) Favorite self-induced mixed metaphor: “He thinks he’s such a big cheese in a small pond.”
- 3) Favorite clueless geography question: “Dr. Auffenberg, is Canada north or south of here?”
- 4) Favorite campus demonstration: “The Serbs demonstrating against the Bosnian Bill of Rights”
- 5) Most Embarrassing classroom moment: can’t say, but did involve torture devices
- 6) Proudest pedagogical spelling accomplishment: teaching David Sharp to spell Parliament
- 7) Most dangerous use of audio-visual equipment: Scaring David Sharp with an exploding light bulb from a filmstrip projector
- 8) Favorite student misspelled word: Moussie Tongue for Mao Tse-tung

9) Favorite new vocabulary word learned in a colleague's class: puti

10) Most unexpected course I found myself teaching: Art Humanities

11) Most prolonged nerve-wrecking event leading to my being on anti-anxiety medication:

Construction of Hickingbotham Hall

12) Favorite academic reform while at OBU: Tie—moving to 12 hour teaching loads & sabbaticals

13) Most annoying classroom habits attempted by students:

Tie: spit cups and text messaging (not caps—they're OK)

14) Biggest change on campus?

Tie: physical make-up of campus/caliber of faculty

15) Colleagues I miss the most?

Tie: Fran Coulter and Lavell Cole

16) Most unexpected place I got to visit thanks to OBU:

Great Wall of China

17) Most intimidating course Johnny Wink ever got me to enroll in:

Advanced Spanish grammar (pronunciation)

18) Favorite quotation: "No good deed goes unpunished."

19) Biggest benefit Ouachita has provided to me?

Alas, I find this last one impossible to answer, as there are so many, but let me isolate four.

Probably highest on the list would be the many life-long friends that Ouachita has provided me—

and here I wouldn't dare beginning another list for fear of leaving someone out—but you know

who you are.

Second, thanks to research grants, development grants, European summer study tours,

and sabbaticals, Ouachita has enabled me to see so many things I might well never have experienced had I not taken this job. As a result of being a Ouachita professor, I have been able to see Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights and Goya's Saturn Devouring His Children in the Prado. I have seen the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square in China. I have walked the troubled streets of Derry and Belfast and heard Ian Paisley thunder about the pope as Anti-Christ during a worship service. I've seen Hamlet performed in a replica of Shakespeare's Globe. I've had the opportunity to be taken to a secret location to hear a member of the IRA explain his party's position. I've had the privilege of seeing students overwhelmed by the beauty of Notre Dame cathedral, the canals of Venice, a blessing by the pope, and the delight of Italian gelato. And I've spent seemingly endless hours in the British Library reading highly partisan Irish newspapers and manuscripts. I daresay there are few universities that would have provided me with the same rich variety of experiences.

Third, I would terribly amiss if I didn't mention the hundreds of students it has been my privilege to have in the classroom. The students, after all, are the reason we are here. And, yes, through the years there have been a handful of maddening ones I've encountered, but I'm happy to report it's only been a handful. I realize that for the most part we don't know what happens to the young men and women once they leave our classroom, but I have a special advantage. I recently turned to the OBU catalog and discovered it had been my privilege to teach such a diverse group of people over the years as:

Wesley Kluck

Trey Berry

Rebecca Jones

Mike Reynolds

Kathy Berry

Mary Beth Long

Lisa Hill

Tim Knight

Brian McKinney

David Sharp

Todd Knight

Johnny Wink

Bill Phelps

Jeff Root

Ian Cosh

Jay Curlin

Margaret Reed

Yvonne Cloud

And I'm sure there are others. If the caliber of these individuals is any indication, then what a privilege indeed it has been to be a Ouachita professor. And what is perhaps the greatest gift Ouachita students have given me? A fountain of youth. Even though my body continues to slowly but surely fall apart, I still feel young when I am in the classroom. It remains tremendously engaging to be intellectually involved with young people and sometimes even learn from them. One of them this semester, after all, is involved in an ongoing and marginally successful process to teach me how to use a cell phone properly.

Fourth, teaching at a small liberal arts university has provided me with yet another benefit. I'm not here, of course, speaking about our salaries, but I am referring to the incredibly wide variety of courses I have found myself teaching as a result of my position as a history professor and participant in our former GNED and current CORE program. I arrived on the OBU campus a very narrowly trained British historian with a specialty in the seventeenth century. I even had a course at Vanderbilt that focused on the first five months of 1659. But since arriving at Ouachita, I have found myself teaching—or trying to teach—and I will admit with varying degrees of success twenty-two different courses in the History, CORE, and Honors programs.

My major advisor at Vanderbilt, a wonderfully learned man, once remarked that he felt uncomfortable dealing with anything before 1640 and after 1660. If anything else, teaching at



Ouachita has most definitely forced me to expand my comfort zone beyond five months in 1659; and I'm eternally grateful it has.

Finally, when I began thinking about preparing these remarks I asked myself if there were any over-arching intellectual themes that have come to preoccupy me after teaching such a wide variety of courses over so many decades. I ultimately isolated two, both of which have obvious connections to my interest in Northern Ireland. First, I find myself persistently concerned about the issue of nationalism in the contemporary world. In the mid-1970's, when *Contemporary World* was still the very politically incorrect *Man and Society*, Newsweek provided us with a filmstrip that focused on the four main kinds of nationalism that characterized the contemporary world—traditional, striving, protective, and imperialistic. Over three decades later that categorization remains eerily relevant.

During my lifetime the number of independent states in the world has nearly doubled until it stands today at nearly 200. And there are still numerous peoples out there—Palestinians, Kurds, Chechens, Tamils, and others—who still dream of achieving their own state. Undoubtedly one of the key issues of the twenty-first century will be the difficult balancing act between satisfying nationalistic aspirations and promoting global cooperation on issues such as the environment, poverty, refugees, AIDS, and nuclear proliferation. No realistic individual would envision—or even wish—an all-powerful United Nations or some form of global government. Nationalism has proved itself far, far stronger than internationalist impulses. And that's not necessarily a bad thing.

But nationalism is a bad thing when exploited by unscrupulous leaders to promote ethnocentrism, xenophobia, or the sort of “my country right or wrong” mentality that destabilizes the world and promotes conflict. It is my fear that we find ourselves with all too many such

leaders out there, and this becomes even more frightening when coupled with the real possibility of continued nuclear proliferation.

Related to this theme, and as a proud American, I grieve over the position my country now finds itself in globally. Traditional American values such as democracy, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of dissent, and numerous others, remain things to be truly proud of. But over the past few years we squandered the good will we enjoyed after 9/11 and now find ourselves far less admired than we were at the beginning of the century. And, let's face it, what was once boasted as "Mission Accomplished" is now much more appropriately described as "Mission Impossible." In the eyes of too many throughout the world we are perceived as an international bully too quick to use our overwhelming military might. It is my hope that in coming years we will not have to live with such a perception by demonstrating a better understanding of other peoples and cultures as we try to navigate our ship of state through an increasingly complex world.

Second, the other theme that continues to preoccupy me is that of religion. It is a privilege to teach at a university where students, faculty, and staff take religion seriously. It was not all that long ago that Marxists and other secularists were confidently predicting that religion would cease to be a significant force in the world. Any examination of the contemporary world clearly demonstrates the profound error of such predictions.

My own faith has proved of great comfort to me at various difficult times in my life, and I'm sure all of you could provide similar testimony. Faith is indeed a powerful force that provides not only comfort, but also is capable of bringing out the best in our humanitarian instincts toward our fellow men and women. Yet, as history all too often demonstrates, religion can be perverted to

evil ends as well—and this is what continues to grieve me. Every night on the news we hear of Sunnis killing Shiites or vice versa. We see intransigent Jewish settlers on the West Bank defiantly resisting any compromise with their Palestinian brethren. And it was not all that long ago that the ferociously intolerant seminary-inspired Taliban so brutally deprived the people of Afghanistan of their human rights, and it is a most fearful prospect that the Taliban seems on the resurgence as we speak.

In a world obsessed by the violent rhetoric and deeds associated with Islamic fundamentalist extremists, we must avoid the danger of forgetting of what some of those acting in the name of Christianity have proven themselves capable of doing, whether it was having the Inquisition authorize the burning of alleged heretics at the stake, the Council of Trent burning John Hus at the stake for questioning papal teaching, Calvin's burning of Servetus at the stake for questioning the Trinity, Luther's urging German princes to burn down synagogues, crusaders slaughtering thousands of Muslims and Jews as they took Jerusalem, or city fathers in Zwingli's Zurich drowning pacifist Anabaptists for refusing to accept infant baptism. The examples are, sadly, seemingly endless. Even our own country, which prides itself on a proud tradition of religious toleration, we long nurtured a virulent strain of anti-Catholicism that surfaced as late as the 1960 election of John F. Kennedy.

When coupled with nationalism, religious extremism becomes especially repugnant and dangerous. That's what I have seen time and time again as I studied Irish history; but the same can be said as we look what has happened in places like Lebanon, India and Pakistan, Bosnia, Kosovo, the Sudan, and all too many others places in the contemporary world. We ignore the powerful importance of religion at our own peril. I recently finished a new book by Stephen

Prothero entitled *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't* in which he makes a powerful plea for reintroducing the study of the Bible and world religions into our public schools. It's an idea well worth pondering.

I am very proud of our students, but I am sure all of you could provide stories verifying that they often come to us with a sincere faith, but one not necessarily accompanied by profound knowledge of their own religion, much less that of others. Inevitably, on the Contemporary World pre-test, for example, we have numerous students who continue to insist that Judaism is one of the three main branches of Christianity. That's why I'm glad we have two CORE courses taught in Christian Studies to provide our students with a more mature introduction into their faith, as well as our attempt in Contemporary World to provide them with at least a cursory introduction into other modern belief systems. I wish we could do more. And perhaps there is nothing more important that Ouachita Baptist University could do for the Christian faith than to graduate young men and women who emerge with a strong faith, but also an informed faith. Nothing would better validate Socrates' maxim that "Knowledge produces virtue; ignorance produces vice."

One of my favorite Biblical passages concerns Christ's injunction of "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone." As I look at our contemporary world, I sadly see all too many stones being hurled. Some are verbal stones, promoting discrimination, bigotry, fear, ethnocentrism, xenophobia, and a siege mentality of us against them. Some are deadly stones in the form of bombs and bullets and even genocide. Some are stones hurled from frighteningly soulless and dangerous regimes such as that which controls North Korea. But some come from mosques, some come from synagogues, and some come from pulpits. I'm not particularly optimistic about it, but let me hope that as the twenty-first century progresses; we have fewer

stones and more knowledge. Nearly 2500 years later, it still seems true to me that “Knowledge produces virtue; ignorance produces vice.”