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My Last Lecture: Death and the Teaching Profession

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NOTE: Directed by Mrs. Shirley Dumais, Assistant Professor and Circulation/Reference Librarian, My Last Lecture is the final faculty lecture given each year in the Gutenberg Conspiracy Series, a faculty-staff reading symposium. The title “My Last Lecture” playfully refers to the notion that a faculty member would address his or her peers with parting words. Selected by my peers for 2011, I delivered the Last Lecture in the cavernous Evans Banquet Room. To set the mood for my written *memento mori*, across the tables, I propped human skulls atop black cloth draped on dark stacks of antiquated Encyclopedia Britannica. Dimming the room to 40 white candles, I lightened the mood by adding fancy, feathered hats to three of the skulls, the Last Lecture falling in the same week as The Royal Wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton with hatted viewing parties being all the rage at the time.

“Death and the Teaching Profession”

My Last Lecture by Amy Sonheim,

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“My Last Lecture” falls at the end of the academic year, the end of the spring semester, five days after Scholars’ Day, two months after the visit from The Higher Learning Commission, at the end of our seniors’ four years with us, and at the beginning of all the grading involved with finals. The Final Assessments of the semester. The Last Judgment. So, naturally, “My Last Lecture” suggested to me the judgment of my work, our work here at Ouachita as teachers. The more I reflected on our profession of teaching the more I conceived of our teaching as a process of dying. And, I’m pretty sure that it is this dying process that is keeping me alive.

For me, the mystery of finding one’s life by losing it has almost become a spiritual cliché. So, right now at the beginning of the lecture, I will not be speaking about death spiritually, but biologically. These days, teaching takes the life out of us. April was the cruelest month, wasn’t it? As the semester has crescendoed, our sleep has diminished. We’ve been up reading early and up

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grading late. Ask any music faculty or theater faculty or any athletic coach, and he or she can easily testify to more hours spent working in JPAC, Verser, Mabee, Sturgis, or at away games, meets, and tournaments on an average weekend than spent at home. As I am an English professor, my death by teaching is much less dramatic. I die as the history professors do—one paper at a time. Each time I grade a paper, I’m certain I lose cells. As the skin of my hand slides across the page, I slough off squamous epithelial cells. Look how thin my hand is! Look how thin YOUR HAND is!

Yet, at present, it is not death itself that interests me. It is a phenomenon involving the loss of the cells. Here is the phenomenon: as you lose squamous epithelial cells paper by paper, as you comment in margins and measures--giving your students your vision for what is valuable, you have no control of what your students will do with what you give them.

Compare the predicament of our cells to the context of HeLa cells, those ever-growing cells used in all sorts of scientific research. Rebecca Skloot, the medical biographer of the young Black woman, Henrietta Lacks, from whom HeLa cells derived, has recorded this phenomenal story in her 2010 book, entitled *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (Broadway 2010). Henrietta Lacks is, as you may know, the woman diagnosed with cervical cancer in 1951 whose cells were harvested by Johns Hopkins from the tumor in her cervix for research--without her understanding it or even knowing about it. Those cells—known as HeLa cells from the first two letters of her first and last names--are still alive sixty years after Henrietta is long gone. Listen as Skloot introduces us to the phenomenal “immortal life” of the HeLa cells:

I’ve tried to imagine [writes Skloot] how she [Henrietta Lacks, that is] [would] feel knowing that her cells went up in the first space missions to see what would happen to human cells in zero

gravity; or that they helped with some of the most important advances in medicine: the polio vaccine, chemotherapy, cloning, gene mapping, in vitro fertilization. I’m pretty sure that she—like most of us—would be shocked to hear that there are trillions more of her cells growing in laboratories now than there ever were in her body.

There’s no way of knowing exactly how many of Henrietta’s cells are alive today. One scientist estimates that if you could pile all HeLa cells ever grown onto a scale, they’d weigh more than 50 million metric tons—an inconceivable number, given that an individual cell weighs almost nothing. Another scientist calculated that if you could lay all HeLa cells ever grown end-to-end, they’d wrap around the Earth at least three times, spanning more than 350 million feet. In her prime, Henrietta herself stood only a bit over five feet tall. (Skloot 2).

Rebecca Skloot has two main purposes in writing about HeLa cells: First, Skloot wants to recognize the woman and her family who contributed the HeLa cells AND second, Skloot wants to expose the exploitation of the Lacks family who cannot afford “health insurance” while their mother’s HeLa cells are “sold by the billions” (back book jacket). Right now, I, too, will exploit the use of HeLa cells for investigating a question: How does the process of Henrietta’s losing cells resemble a teacher’s process of dying?

For my experiment, I will also use symbols.

Watch this. [I turn and write HENRIETTA LACKS on the flip chart. Then I circle the HeLa for HeLa cells.] Here is the way in which the HeLa cells acquired their name.

HeLa cells have been used at Ouachita by our own Lori Hensley, Nathan Reyna, and Nathan’s students in biological research. Yet, what you might not realize is that we’ve been experimenting with another type of cell in the English Department for the last 38 years. Watch this: [I turn and write on the flip chart: JOHNNY WINK, circling JoWi.] In Johnny Wink’s classes, he’s been spreading JOWi cells, cells which I will also exploit now by doubling the last letter: JoWii.

Unlike Henrietta, Johnny has freely and knowingly given of his cells for research, but just like Henrietta, he, too, has had no control of where students have taken them and what students have done with them. JoWi cells have been sighted as far East as Beijing, in a former student directing Shakespearian plays with all Chinese casts. JoWi cells have cropped up regionally in Pumpkin Bend, Arkansas, where into the wee, wee hours of the morning, when all was dark around, a thin line of light shone out from underneath a closed-door as a student of Johnny’s studied Hindi.

Exploiting the name of the popular game device—the Wii—enables me to explain how Johnny’s cells first spread. The JoWii cells of Johnny regenerate year after year in Johnny’s students because Johnny works hard at teaching by playing harder.¹ This is a trait shared by many of you. For a royal example, sometime in the mid 1980s, Joe Jeffers, a chemist, wanted to work at building vocabulary, so for sport, he enlisted Tom Auffenberg (historian), Hal Bass (political scientist), and Johnny (grammarian) to join him in the Daily Word Game. Instead of memorizing new vocabulary by rote, Jeffers suggested the Daily Word Game, which many of us still play. For each semester,

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Johnny, as secretary, chooses a letter, than selects a word for each work day Monday-Friday, for us to learn. In 2006, Jay Curlin added the stunning feature to the Daily Word Game, of composing a lexical rhyme that works as a riddle for two words at a time, hinting at their meanings, but eliciting the wit of students and faculty to discern the definitions.

For example, when Johnny was on the letter “A” (and that’s a whole other gameⁱⁱ), he chose the verb “absquatulate” and the adjective “absurd.” You know the meaning of “absurd,” but see if you can guess the meaning of “absquatulate,” as Jay Curlin reads his lexical rhyme,

“Absquatulation”: [At this point, Dr. Jay Curlin rose to read his poem from the front of the room.]

Absquatulation

When you’re next in a rush, perhaps late for a date,

I’d simply advise you to *absquatulate*.

I know it sounds hard; the first time might be rough;

But you’ll master it soon if you practice enough.

In no time, both you, and whomever you’re dating,

Will dazzle the town with your absquatulating.

“Good heavens,” you’re thinking, “the man’s lost his mind,

As we feared he might do with these lexical rhymes.

The language we speak doesn’t have such a word;

He’s just making it up, and we think it’s *absurd*.”

But it’s there, like *absurd*, though you’re right to be wary,

As you’ll find when you next check a good dictionary. (Curlin)

Recently, a whole academic theory known as “gamefication” has developed. This theory describes how Johnny works, how he teaches. In “gamefication,” persons in positions of authority—policemen, bosses, and teachers—use games in which those who play by the rules win more than those who break the rules incur penalties. For example, in Canada, it used to be that those who broke the speed limit incurred fines; this system did little to deter speeding. Using the theory of gamefication, the highway patrol changed the policy so that those who obeyed the speed limit were able to win lotteries gleaned from the speed breakers’ fines. Since then, there has been a dramatic drop in the offense of speeding.

In our classrooms, over the last few years, an offense on the rise has been texting. I have tried all sorts of punitive measures. Spreading those cells of JoWii, Johnny, on the other hand, has made texting into a disciplined game. At the close of class time, Johnny asks his students to take out their cell phones and text a chosen quotation from the day’s lecture to a friend, a game that he and his students refer to as “slabbing.” At the beginning of last semester, one of Johnny’s freshman wanted Dr. Wink to meet the friend, a young woman, whom he had been texting. Cordially, Johnny said to the young woman, “Nice to meet you. I understand that you two have been slabbing,” at which point the girl turned crimson.

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To qualify my working analogy, I wish to note that as much as the profusion of JoWii cells compares to the proliferation of HeLa cells, the outcomes for teaching cells remain much more unpredictable.ⁱⁱⁱ

Last week, I had the joy of attending the Chemistry class of Dr. Sarah Hubbard, who taught me about enzyme activity^{iv}. Sarah’s illustration of the lock-and-key method of enzyme activity provides a helpful contrast to my point. In the lock and key method certain enzymes are designed to lock specifically with certain substrates, producing predictable outcomes. For example, the enzyme sucrase will *only* lock with the substrate sucrose, breaking it down predictably into glucose and fructose. By contrast, in the teaching profession, we can never guarantee *what* will break down, what will speed up the break down, or even *how* the breakdown occurs.

On April 14th, after twelve weeks of clockwork, my two o’clock English Studies class broke down. It physically absquatulated. Such a strong physical break down may have been catalyzed by temperature. Our classroom on the third-floor of Lile had reached a warm mugginess, heightened by our after-lunch stupor. To make our classroom bearable, for the prior two gatherings, we had begun to leave off the lights. The exact enzyme, in this case, which speeded up my students’ break down, may have been the tedious detail I was exacting from them in rather large volume. My goal was ambitious. They were to master the *mechanics* of research writing. I was asking them to introduce quotations, quote accurately, paraphrase fairly, employ-- ellipses, brackets, capitals, abbreviations, indirect quotation protocol, quotation marks, page numbers, commas, and periods all in the right places at the right times. Simultaneously, I insisted that they were to maintain a conversational engagement in their research writing, as if it were a live discussion, not a cut-and-pasted report. To keep such an academic enterprise human, the week before, we had read the 19th-

century Russian novel *Fathers and Children*, and to *understand* the novel thoroughly, for April 14th, I had assigned the reading of a scholarly article about *Fathers and Children* by Gary Saul Morson, entitled “Two Kinds of Love,” an article which explained Turgenev’s novel differently from the way I had taught it. The week before, I had approached the novel in the usual way as an argument between the two main ideological camps—the titular “Fathers”—who were the older generation of liberals, believing in tradition, authority and art—and the titular “Children”—who were the younger generation of liberals, believing in progress, individualism, but not believing in art. Professor Morson, taking a new tack, instead of grouping the characters by age, classified them by how they felt about romantic love. Morson regrouped “fathers and children” into those who believed that romantic love should be exotic, wild, and passionate and those who believed that romantic love should be ordinary, familial, if not, downright dull, a love Morson called “prosaic.”

As my students and I discussed Morson’s article it became apparent which camp I was in—the dull one. As we discussed the passionate group including older Pavel Petrovich and younger Bazarov, a father and child respectively, we noticed that Pavel’s fling with a Princess petered out and Bazarov’s dramatic falling in love with the beautiful, intellectual Odintsova *kept* him spiraling downward into a premature death. In fact, we noticed with such brutal outcomes for the passionate lovers that not only was our critic Gary Morson preferring prosaic to passionate love, but also so was our author, Turgenev. Turgenev’s judgment seemed to be that an ordinary love left one with sustainable, ordinary bliss. But, I wanted to know which type of love my students preferred. So, at 2:45, when I finally asked my quiet, sweating pupils to compose a written response in which they quoted Turgenev, paraphrased Morson, and discussed their own thoughts on which was better passionate or prosaic love, I was unprepared for their physical reaction. Sally Ferguson sighed. (HHHhouhhh). And, then, to my bewilderment, all 14 of my students stood up and walked out.

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There was still about 30 minutes remaining of class. I waited. I peeked out the door. And, in about two minutes, here they all returned, filing back into their rows, sitting at their desks, and, I might add, writing feverishly on their responses.

“What was that all about?” I asked.

Savannah Shotts, a freshman, looked me dead in the eye, and said, “We want passion.”

Passion. My students wanted passion. They did not want to live ordinary lives.

Being Easter people, we know that Christ’s Passion was His *Work* on the Cross. If Work is Passion, Passion is Death, then, once again, Our Work would seem to be our Death. Quickly here, I wish to qualify that I want to lead us NOT into the temptation of sophist syllogistic thinking. Rather, I believe there are real theological connections between Christ’s Passion, His Death, our death, His Work, and our Work--our teaching.

To make the connection, we need the missing link: Worship. From ancient days, the Jews worshiped in the tabernacle in the desert, approaching worship as work, the religious word for it being “liturgy.” “Liturgy” signifies that worship is our work or our service to God. (Though many Protestant churches do not use the term liturgy, they comfortably use the term “service” as a synonym for actual worship, especially in reference to what happens on Sundays.) In Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Episcopalian and other liturgical traditions so significant is the idea of liturgy being the work of the people or their service to God, that the preacher’s part, the sermon, is short and the people’s part, the work or liturgy, is long as the people recite prayers, chant psalms, read scripture, voice responses, stand up, kneel down, and lie prostrate. Moreover, in the Catholic church, there is the history that with the rise of religious orders—those for monks and nuns—the

clergy gave the monks the legacy of not only worshiping liturgically but living liturgically, making their life of the church the work of their lives, pausing to say prayers at morning, noon, and night; gathering for daily vespers; assembling for daily communion. So much so did worship become a way of life for the monks in Glastonbury, England, that they carved into the stone lintel, entering their workplace the Latin phrase “*Laborare est Orare*,” translated “Work is Prayer.” For the monks in Glastonbury, good work became indistinguishable from good worship.^v

That brings us to some thorny questions about the teaching profession: if we cannot control the outcomes of our teaching, or worse, if we never *see* or never even *know* the outcomes of our teaching, how do we know that our work is good? Or, with my emphasis on work, do you think I am diminishing Grace? Am I advocating that Christ should have turned not to Mary, but to her sister in the kitchen, Martha to say, “Martha, you have chosen the better way?” At Ouachita, we have a tendency to segregate our spiritual work—our worship—from our academic work. You can often hear students who pray in Chapel draw a definitive line between the two, praying something to the strain of “Father God, help us to put all our thoughts about classes and homework and tests aside, Lord, and just worship You.” Though well meaning, such prayers belie the students’ distrust in the value of academic work. Yet, setting up a stand off between work and rest, or works and grace is an unproductive endeavor because work was never meant to compete with either rest or grace. Our understanding of our work as worship demands such a full answer that I wish to explain it in two parts—a preliminary part, then a final one.

Listen to how the writer of Hebrews, perhaps Paul, described the preliminary situation of Jews in the tabernacle worshiping and serving: I’m reading from Hebrews Chapter 9, beginning with verse 1:

Then indeed, even the first *covenant* had ordinances of divine service and the earthly sanctuary. For a tabernacle was prepared: the first *part*, in which was the lampstand, the table, and the showbread, which is called the sanctuary; and behind the second veil, the part of the tabernacle which is called the Holiest of All, which had the golden censer and the ark of the covenant . . . the golden pot that had the manna, Aaron’s rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant; and above . . . the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. . . . Now when these things had been thus prepared, the priests always went into the first part of the tabernacle, performing the services. But into the second part the high priest went alone once a year . . . (Hebrews 9:1-7)

The writer of Hebrews describes one place of worship with two sections—one in front of the veil, the sanctuary, and the other behind it, the Holy of Holies. On April 12th, I experienced the implications of this passage in Ouachita’s own tabernacle on Tuesdays: Chapel in JPAC.

As they say, timing is everything. And, on April 12th the time was the last Tuesday before Palm Sunday, which Ian mentioned in his prefatory welcome to worship. April 12th was also the last Chapel before the spring musical *Bye Bye Birdie*, meaning that it was the last *day* before dress rehearsal on the very next night. So, I was a little taken aback when I arrived at Chapel that there were no signs of any huge production such as *Bye Bye Birdie* on stage. The stage held the usual instruments for worship—the piano, musicians, Plexiglas podium, screen, the lights, the monitors, and the four upholstered chairs held Ian Cosh, Lori Hilburn, Dr. Rex Horne, and the morning’s guest preacher Brother Archie Mason of Jonesboro, Arkansas. In front of the veil or curtain, Brother Mason was preaching in a wonderfully Lenten way. In the Lenten tradition, he asked us to repent of secret sins.

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For the sake of furthering my point, I would even say Brother Mason “worked the crowd.” For, he stepped out from behind the podium, stepped down from the stage, and moved among the students, and I dare say the Holy Spirit was moving among us, too. It was easy to experience worship as work under Brother Mason’s leadership because he was energetic and passionate. But, little did we know, that “behind the . . . veil”, behind JPAC’s curtain that is, in the Holiest of All, the Holy of Holies, two other people were frantically working, and I would add also offering their exquisite service to God.

If you were lucky enough to attend this year’s production of *Bye, Bye Birdie*, directed by Mary Handiboe and John Secrest, then you will remember the scene being worked on behind the veil. It was entitled the “Shriner’s Ballet,” which is sort of a euphemism for the rather wild table dance performed both on and under the table by Rosie Alvarez, played by Cortnie DeVore. After doing can-cans with her back to the table, Rosie must dismount from the table top, while keeping her skirt and the red skirt circling the table intact. To this end, while Brother Mason was working in front of the curtain, “behind the veil,” Sister DeVore was working it all out on the table, while Brother Eric Phillips, the chair of the Ouachita Theater department, was strategically trying to work out how to get the table skirt to stay up. The electrician’s tape that Eric was using was so loud to tear that he was having to synchronize his work with Brother Archie’s on the other side. Eric had to wait for the rise of Brother Archie’s voice in order to rip the tape.

My conclusion is that on both sides of the curtain work as worship was taking place. Divine Worship. Both sides were giving their best service to God in the best way they knew how. And, both types of work take faith. In fact, the farther the details feel from being significant, from being spiritual, the more faith it takes to believe that the work is good. So what must we do to be doing

the work of God? “This is the work of God that you believe in Him whom He has sent” (John 6:29).

Your work in the teaching profession is immeasurably valuable not because of its outcomes, not even because you will necessarily change the lives of your students, but as I have tried to illustrate because it is *good* work. Adam’s curse from God to work by the sweat of his brow was not so much a punishment, as it was a form of penance. Penance is the work given to a confessed sinner to relearn, to re-experience, and to relate again to God by His grace. When Christ says, “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30), we understand that grace enables work. We even understand that our work can take the form of God’s grace. Work and grace are complementary, not competitive. In a fallen world, work won’t wait to become good until you get to heaven. It is good right now, right here. Every paper you grade, every article you write, every experiment you conduct, every recital you prepare, every lesson you teach, everything you do to the best of your ability and to the glory of God is your offering of thanksgiving. It is the thankfulness for such good work that creates full life.

Endnotes

ⁱ In drafting the lecture, I asked Dr. John Howard Wink, Ouachita’s Betty Burton Peck Professor of English, to read the manuscript. In reference to this section on how his own work becomes his play, Dr. Wink remembered a similar sentiment expressed in the last stanza of “Two Tramps in Mud-Time” by Robert Frost, who writes,

My object in life is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight
Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the future’s sakes. (66-72)

ⁱⁱ The “whole other game” I refer to here was illustrated by a giant cardboard A, about two feet by three feet, that stood beside me on the table during the lecture. In addition to teaching literature and creative writing, Dr. Johnny Wink also teaches Latin, for which he employs the large letter A. As a visible reminder to students to be ever vigilant about the neuter A as an ending, the A is toted to Latin by students who do particularly well in their parsings. Dr. Wink’s Roman A has nothing whatsoever to do with the A of Hester Prynne.

ⁱⁱⁱ The same month, April 2011, that I was taken with the idea of cell proliferation, and unpredictable life forms cropping up from decaying cells, poet Jane Hirshfield, published the following poem on the subject of regenerated life despite loss of desire, the poem which I had printed for My Last Lecture as mementoes for those attending:

FOR THE LICHENS

Back then, what did I know?
The names of subway lines, buses.
How long it took to walk twenty blocks.

Uptown and downtown.
Not north, not south, not you.

When I saw you, later, seaweed reefed in the air,
You were gray-green, incomprehensible, old.
What you clung to, hung from: old.
Trees looking half dead, stones.

Marriage of fungi and algae,
Chemists of air,
Changers of nitrogen-unusable into nitrogen-usable.

Like those nameless ones
Who kept painting, shaping, engraving
Unseen, unread, unremembered.
Not caring if they were no good, if they were past it.

Rock wools, water fans, earth scale, mouse ears, dust,
ash-of-the-woods.
Transformers unvalued, uncouneted.
Cell by cell, word by word, making a world they could live in.

^{iv}Dr. Sara Hubbard had invited me to peer review her teaching.

^v In an e-mail to me after the lecture, Dr. J. Daniel Hays, Dean of the Pruet School of Christian Studies and Professor of Biblical Studies here at Ouachita, added further understanding to the relationship expressed in the Old Testament culture between worship and work. On May 2nd, 2011, he writes, “An interesting side note which fits in with your point about work quite nicely. . . In Hebrew there is no one word that specifically means “worship.” Several words are used (bow down, sacrifice, etc.). One of the primary words used frequently for the concept of worship is the word for work (ebed). The verb can mean to work, to work for, or to serve. It is used regularly for working, but is also used for “serving” (i.e. “worshipping”) God.

In Exodus the dual meaning runs throughout the book in a fascinating wordplay. For instance, the writer lets us know something is up in regard to this word in 1:14, for it (ebed) appears four times in that verse: “They made their lives bitter with hard *labor* in brick and mortar and with all kinds of hard *work* in the fields; in all their hard *labor* the Egyptians *used* (i.e. *worked*) them ruthlessly.”

Then this is the word used in the demand to let the people go. “Let my people go, so that they may *worship* (work for me, serve me) me in the desert” (7:16, 8:1, 20; 9:1, etc.). The noun (servants, workers) is used of Pharaoh’s “officials” in the story as well (10:7).

Then this word is also used when Pharaoh orders, “Go, *worship* (or *serve*) the LORD” (10:8, etc.). The play, of course, is that they Israelites are changing from “working” or “serving” Pharaoh to “working” or “serving” (i.e. worshipping) Yahweh, the God of Israel.”

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