

“A FEW WORDS”

For the First Annual *Alpha-Chi-Epsilon* Gala

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Good evening.

To Miss Sarah Vielhhouse and the leadership committee of *Alpha Chi Epsilon*, my colleagues, our students, and (most of all) my wife, Emilie—fellow learners all: Greetings!

First, I would like to thank Sarah Vielhhouse and the other leaders of *Alpha Chi Epsilon* for affording me the opportunity to reflect on this great privilege of teaching.

I also note in passing that written in Greek uncials (capital letters), *alpha-chi-epsilon* spells the English word “axe” (ACE),<sup>[1]</sup> which you may or may not find a particularly helpful metaphor for the task of education, such as the relationship between your teaching and your students’ necks, a thought upon which we shall not dwell. On the other hand, properly transliterated into English, the same three Greek letters spell the word “ache” (a-ch-e), which may also be a more or less appropriate metaphor for your learning and future teaching, and a sensation with which most of us will become increasingly familiar as the semester wears on.

It might be useful to explore some of the implications of this, such as saying, “We’re going to *ache* tonight”, or “It’s the Gala of *Ache*”; faculty could say, “I’m an *ache* advisor” (faculty saying this might be well-advised to maintain a personal supply of Ben-gay®, cold-packs, and Ibuprofen® in their offices). And that might be enough exploration of this particular line of thought.

Thirdly, I have titled this talk “A Few Words”, in accord with the printed invitation. The emphasis is on “few”, which should make everyone happy. When I was your age, delightful gatherings were often interrupted by the introduction of some old goat, who would proceed to harangue us about one thing or another; now I am the old goat. Grey hair apparently offers at least the appearance of wisdom.

FROM DARKNESS INTO GLOOM:

## A TRUE STORY

### I WAS *NOT* A TEACHER

When I began teaching, I had been in post-secondary school full-time for fourteen years, had earned an undergraduate and two graduate degrees, and was about to receive a third graduate degree, but had never had a course in education.

Before I began teaching, when my wife and I were first married, we had a weekly Bible study in our apartment. Between twelve and thirty-two people would gather to talk about the Bible and pray together. Our pattern was invariable: we would read a passage out loud, I would ask a question, and for the next ninety minutes or so, the discussion would ebb and flow, sometimes drifting into side issues, but always circling back to the text that we had read. This, it seemed to me, was what the phrase “Bible study” meant, in contrast with Bible studies that were really sermons in disguise, with rows of listeners dutifully taking notes on everything that the leader had prepared. Those were happy evenings, and we are still in touch with some of those people, largely because of the relationships forged through those extended, semi-casual, but always textual conversations. This pattern I abandoned when I became an official “teacher”. In order to give a full picture, however, I must admit that a number of people visited the study for a week or two (often after hearing me preach), but—when they realized that I was not going to lecture—did not return.

After I had been hired, but before I began teaching, my academic dean asked me to describe my philosophy of teaching. I naively replied that I was Socratic, probably because my favourite undergraduate courses (apart from music theory) were seminars on philosophy and the “Metaphysical” poets, and an independent study on Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Years later I realized that I had enjoyed these classes because they all entailed reading and discussing texts; the philosophy seminar was my first experience of this pedagogy, and was explicitly identified as Socratic (as we were reading Plato).

The dean’s immediate response was, “So you agree with Plato that we only need to be reminded of what we have forgotten; we do not actually learn anything new!” This was so intimidating that I realized that my view of teaching must be unacceptable, and so I tried to do what “real” professors did, to fit the patterns and expectations of academe. I published texts for Hebrew students, read papers at conferences, looked mildly successful on paper, and felt both frustrated and guilty. I feared to reveal my true convictions about the nature of teaching and learning, indeed, my beliefs about the nature of reality and truth that underlay those convictions—everyone around me modeled a very specific type of “teacher”, and I felt pressured to fit their pattern.[\[2\]](#)

I knew that I did not know what it meant to be a teacher, and so every summer I would read one or two books on teaching. The first few were primarily on technique—“tricks of the trade”, as it were: how to ask better questions, how to write exams and quizzes, how to lecture, how to grade, &c.—but I soon found

myself gravitating to books on the meaning and philosophy of education, and the person and nature of the teacher as a person.

I do not remember much if anything from the first kind of books, nor have I kept many of them. The latter, however, have helped shape my thinking about the nature and meaning of this “immortal profession”, as Gilbert Highet calls it.

After two years, since I did not know what I was doing, the seminary where I was teaching made me academic dean, and I instantly became responsible to oversee and evaluate the faculty’s teaching—the faculty of which I had just been a part, all of whom were far more experienced teachers than I, most of whom had been my own teachers.

I needed help, and did not know where or how to get it. I asked our liaison at MSA (the Middle States Association for Schools and Colleges, our regional accrediting agency) what a dean was and did, and received a smiling non-response that in her opinion answered my question. (The word “dean”, as you may know, comes from Latin *decanus*, “ten”, because the title of “dean” was originally given to a master who was over a faculty of ten other masters.)

Eventually, because I was teaching Biblical Hebrew, I began to ask the question “What is teaching?” in terms of “What is learning?”

[Warning: This paragraph contains a very brief lesson in Hebrew grammar, which you may feel free to skip.] English uses “helping verbs” to modulate the meaning of a verb (“he threw the ball”, “the ball was thrown”, “she made him throw the ball”). Hebrew, however, changes the vowels or form of the verb itself to indicate the nature of the event, so that one form may describe a simple action (“come”), and another the action of causing that action (“bring” ← “cause to come”). The Hebrew verb that is rendered “learn” in one form is translated “cause to learn” or “teach” when it occurs in another form.[\[3\]](#)

After giving students this explanation a few times, I began to question its validity (to myself), asking if “teach” really does mean “cause to learn”? I suspected that it was not, because students failed courses taught by “good teachers”. If teaching meant causing others to learn, then surely a “good” teacher’s students would succeed, and learn better than students of a poor or “ordinary” teacher. Then one day I typed these words on my computer: “What does it mean to learn?” And although I did not then suspect it, that question began my pilgrimage.

Please allow me to tell two brief stories.

In a college course we were told to read St. Paul’s Epistle to Titus and come to the next class prepared to discuss the theme of the book. I read Titus five or six times and took notes on the topics addressed. When class started, the teacher said (with a big grin on his face) “All right, class, all together now, what is the theme of Titus?” I thought “How can we say it in unison—there are thirty of us, and there’s no way that we’re all going to use the same words”. I opened my mouth and said, “Rela—” (“Relationships between believers”), and the entire class (apart from me) shouted—in unison—“Good works!” The teacher

grinned and said “That’s right. Very good, class.” [I don’t remember anything beyond that point.] I later found out that he had published a book outlining and analyzing (“introducing”, it was called) every biblical book, that the rest of the class knew about his book, and that they had merely looked up his own answer to his question. I remember nothing else of that course; I avoided that teacher for the rest of my time in college.

Early in my teaching career, I was asked to teach a required course for a colleague who was going on sabbatical. He gave me his file for the course, which was contained in a four-inch three-ring binder of lectures, typed out word-for-word, with occasional highlighted phrases and corrections. I first taught his course by studying and reading his notes, but felt increasingly confined by his example (which I felt bound to follow—he was the experienced teacher, and since I was teaching “his” course). At several points I wondered why he didn’t publish—or at least hand out—his materials so that the students could read them and then use time in class to discuss them. I tried to read his notes to the class. I worried that I would drop or mis-emphasize a word, or that a student would ask a question that the notes didn’t address. When I was asked to teach that course again, I decided that I would follow his list of topics (with which I agreed), but that I would do as much reading as I could before each class, and then ask questions to prompt students to think through the issue(s) for themselves.

For example, a major issue for many students was the length of the days of creation described in Genesis [Gn] 1. Most arrive “knowing” that the “real” or “literal” meaning of the Hebrew word *yôm* is “24-hour period”. My colleague’s notes set out the evidence for the function<sup>[4]</sup> of *yôm*, discussed the implications of each for the meaning of Gn 1 and how different views of the function of *yôm* related to the findings of science regarding the age of the universe, and ended by summarizing the possible views. I therefore drew up a list of various passages in which the word *yôm* occurs and asked them to determine how it functions in each passage. We then spent nearly two hours (classes meet weekly for three hours) discussing its function throughout the Bible, and what that implies for its function in Gn 1.<sup>[5]</sup>

I thus began to learn what I already suspected: that good teaching need not entail sitting behind a desk reading notes for students to copy (although I deeply respect my colleague’s scholarship and sincerity); perhaps I merely learned that I could not be a faithful teacher by attempting to be like him. Although I lecture on some topics, lectures are mainly means to stimulate or provoke thought, rather than a means to impart information.

I had begun to wonder, in other words, if the act of teaching—which I had always identified as standing in front of a room and talking based on voluminous notes or outlines, sometimes illustrated with slides or overheads (this was *long ago*), so that students could transcribe as much of what I said as they could, so that they could “learn” it, so that I could test them in order to assign them a mathematically precise indication of the degree to which they had attained the goals of the course (so that, in other words, I could grade their “learning”)—I began to wonder if this act of teaching could accurately be described as “causing [someone] to learn”, and realized that teaching may not cause anyone to learn; I, in fact, could not cause anyone to learn anything. Not even my “gift” (as some of my colleagues called it) for designing and writing syllabi could guarantee that anyone would learn anything in those beautifully designed courses.<sup>[6]</sup>

I knew that this conclusion was right, but did not yet know why.

## FORGING ANOTHER PATH

Even as I was going through this process, I was experiencing the second great influence on my development as a teacher: homeschooling our two younger daughters, a process that began soon after I started teaching.[\[7\]](#)

My wife and I found ourselves at times rather hard-pressed to explain to family and friends why we were going to homeschool our daughters, why we were going to deprive them of the “wonderful social opportunities” that school would bring, and why we thought that we could teach them ourselves. This forced us to learn to explain our decision, which entailed at least six factors, which I will merely list. (I would be happy to elaborate in person, or some other forum). We had come to believe ...

1. that every person is unique, created in the image of God, so that her education should also therefore be individual;
2. that we know our own children better than even the best-intentioned, most diligent teacher can know one of a classroom of twenty- or thirty-five, and so can interact with, encourage, and teach them in a manner that best suits each of them, and can also help them figure out what interests them and encourage them in those interests;
3. that they should be free to color trees and birds and flowers as they liked, without worrying about getting it “right” or “approved” (this is just an example of a much larger issue);
4. that we wanted to be part of the best hours of their lives, and not get them worn-out and tired after a day “away”—we did not want to have to “pick up the pieces” caused by whatever they had faced, experiences about which we could know little or nothing (even when we want to recount our “whole day”, we pick and choose moments according to our audience, according to whether those moments were positive or negative, according to how tired we are, or how much we think our audience really wants to hear, &c.);
5. that we wanted to experience the “joy of each moment”—the first time that they read something on their own, the first time that they grasped a concept in math, their first discoveries of this or that, just as we had been “there” for their first steps, first teeth (and second teeth), and everything else since the beginning of their lives—rather than merely hear about them from their teacher, or via a star or grade on a piece of paper;
6. that our daughters’ socialization should not be random—at least not while they were young, but rather occur on *our* terms; that we should know not merely our children’s

- acquaintances and friends (and certainly not meet them only at the end of the day, when they too were tired from a day at school), but their parents and siblings as well;
7. that age-mixed education is far superior to chronological stratification, which is an artificial situation that compounds the problems of any given age by putting together all the children who are facing the same fourth-grade (e.g.) challenges and frustrations, and who all *have the same* (fourth-grade) *resources* for dealing with those frustrations; they need peers who are both older (and have therefore made it through those fourth-grade challenges) and younger (so that fourth-graders could work through their own situations in explaining things to them—“teaching teaches the teacher”, as the saying goes); we also thought that if “chronological segregation” is rare after one finishes school, it should not be part of school;
  8. that one to two hours (or more) per day on a school bus was not a good use of their time; and
  9. that education and learning should be inherently biblical and Christian, by which we meant that we wanted to choose at least some of the books that they read, especially when they were young, so that they would help them form a way of understanding the world that would be fundamentally biblical.

Our homeschooling eventually became a “home school”, with a group of twelve to fifteen homeschooling junior and senior high school students coming to our house every Friday to study Greek, Hebrew, literature, philosophy, Shakespeare, poetry, &c.[\[8\]](#) I taught all of these classes in as “conversational” a manner as possible. (This was a bit more challenging when studying Hebrew and Greek.)[\[9\]](#)

Another aspect of our homeschooling was that my daughters and I began to take fencing lessons, along with another homeschool dad and his two daughters. For the first time in many years, I was studying something about which I knew nothing (apart from which end of the weapon to hold). Its terminology, rules, etiquette, standards, &c. were all new to me. I was learning something as a beginner, unlike those times when I had briefly resumed my long-interrupted piano lessons or studied another language or some other subject that was essentially a variant on what I already knew. I found myself in class analyzing how each aspect of footwork and blade work was being taught, sometimes returning home to type up a narrative description of what we had learned that night, and even thinking about how I would teach it. I gradually began to realize that most of my critique of our teachers’ methods[\[10\]](#) reflected the distance between a teacher who no longer had to think about point control or footwork and a student who had never heard of either, and had to think about every aspect of both (at the same time!). This encouraged me to reflect on what I took for granted in my own teaching—things that I had forgotten that I had learned, so that I no longer remembered the confusion (frustration, elation, &c.) of meeting them for the first time. And this in turn made me think even more seriously about what it meant to learn and to teach.

As we continued to homeschool (always taking it “one year at a time” until they both finished twelfth grade), we spent many hours talking to people about what we were doing and why. I would talk

about the uniqueness of the individual, the personalization of learning, the value of self-exploration, and explain that the primary effect of what people called “socialization” was teaching children to conform to peer pressure. My wife (Lee) would later ask me, kindly and sweetly (truly!), how I could do what I was doing in seminary, based on what I was saying and writing about homeschooling and education.

Lee’s well-intentioned question only fueled my inner crisis, to the point that I felt guilty about what I did in class, no matter what I did. For example, one semester I devised a system of extra credit that virtually guaranteed anyone who would put in minimal extra work during the semester would get an “A” (it amounted to giving lots of credit for nearly anything that a student proposed); the next semester I caved in to my perception of what it meant to “uphold standards” and “academic rigour”, and gave no extra credit at all, to the outspoken dismay of several students who had been counting on being able to use extra work to bolster their grades. I felt guilty, they were angry, no one was happy.

## CATALYST, CRISIS, CATHARSIS

### *Catalyst*

I found myself lecturing less and less, and asking questions cleverly designed (I thought) to elicit conversation and even debate. If a student answered a question with a definitive statement, I would then ask, “Why?” or “What is that based on?” or “How can we know that?” or “How does that fit with ...?” This seemed to perplex many students; it greatly frustrated those who expected to “get their money’s worth” by writing down information “straight from the horse’s mouth”. I knew that I wanted students to talk more, but was not sure how to keep everyone happy. I also knew that I wanted to step “off to the side”, rather than be the “sage on the stage”, but did not know how to “accomplish” the “goals of the course” while doing that.

Eventually, I discovered that there were whole colleges devoted to the kind of teaching that I had come to believe in, and our daughter Lydia decided to attend one of them (St. John’s College in Annapolis, Maryland).[\[11\]](#) This gave me the courage to begin letting my true colours show, at first in the safe environment of our homeschool classes in Shakespeare, literature, poetry, philosophy, Greek, and Hebrew, and then, slowly and cautiously, in classes in seminary. One of my first decisions was to re-design the classrooms, so that rather than sit at tables in rows, we all sat in a “U”; the open side was toward the blackboard (which became a “democratic” blackboard—open to all), and provided some “eye relief” by giving people a place to look that did not require them always to look at each other (an important factor for some ethnic groups).

## *Crisis*

I was known as a \_\_\_\_\_ Hebrew teacher (with the blank filled by various positive noises and adjectives), and others praised our program in Biblical Hebrew as “equal to any, if not the best, in the country”, [\[12\]](#) and I believed those who said such things: I thought of myself as a Hebrew teacher. And the more that my Hebrew courses were praised, the more entrenched became this identity, so that I would sometimes wonder, “If I’m a Hebrew teacher, why do I like to read Shakespeare, or philosophy, or history? Is this appropriate? Why don’t I just read more [about] Hebrew?”

But when I lost my job, I could no longer teach Hebrew. What did it then mean to think of myself in those terms? How could I be a Hebrew teacher if I was not and could not teach Hebrew. What was I? Losing my job gave me, you see, the rare opportunity to spend time with myself, trying to understand myself, and thus to redefine what it was that I did and wanted and tried to do.

Josef Pieper (especially 1989) introduced me to Aquinas’s idea that when true learning occurs, learner and subject become one—that we learn only what we love—and so came to believe that most teaching (at least, as it is understood in this country) yields little or no learning, because (or perhaps because) it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to love on command, and on someone else’s schedule, especially a schedule designed for and by the “average”.

The question then becomes how a school and its “teachers” or “professors” (terms that I now eschew in favour of “tutor”, as my students know) create or foster a climate that encourages this sort of love. What can an institution do, and what can its faculty do with students individually and collectively, to foster this understanding of and attitude toward their studies? This question I leave for you to ponder.

## *Catharsis*

I also began to understand that I was not a teacher of Biblical Hebrew, but merely a man who likes to poke around in all sorts of places, seeing what glitters, what shines, and what is muddy, and to show those things to other people who are themselves poking around, because I need their help in order to understand what I have found. What sparkles to me may be fool’s gold, what I see as mud may be just the right soil for this plant or that to grow and thrive.

This was the most liberating realization—that I am not defined by what I do (professionally or otherwise). It took me what will have been well over half my life (even if I live to be a very old man) to recognize this, and I am still trying to realize it, in the etymological sense of “making it real” in my life.



My responsibility as a faculty member was no longer to be able to answer every question,[\[13\]](#) silence every disputant, solve every exegetical or interpretive or theological problem, but rather to ask questions that would kindle, clarify, and refine thought, *not*, however, attempt to control or direct it.

I continued teaching literature and biblical languages (Greek, Hebrew) to homeschooled high school students.[\[14\]](#) When a new student would answer my opening question and then look to me for evaluation, the rest of the class—students who had been with me through my beginning evolution—would say (with evident glee), “He doesn’t want an answer! He asked it so we could *discuss* it!” And we would see even those students who came to get “the truth” gradually grow into textual conversationalists.[\[15\]](#)

And I also embarked upon what turned into a rather lengthy project. I had applied to a number of schools for positions in Old Testament and biblical studies, and had some interviews. A common question at these was, “Do you have any questions for us?”, to which my response was desultory at best. I realized that I needed to think about what was genuinely important to me, especially in light of my changing convictions, but also because knowing what I valued would help me discover if the schools to which I was applying for a job valued the same things. So I began to write a description of the values and conclusions which I began to reach, values based on reading, reflection, and conversations.[\[16\]](#) This soon turned into a design for a graduate school of theology—the “New School of Theology” (NST), a prospectus for a new and unique program of biblical and theological studies[\[17\]](#)—that has some people (at least) excited about the prospect of further study.

I soon had opportunity to teach Hebrew again, part-time, to a very small class. But now I had honed my questions to, “What does it mean to ‘learn?’”, followed by “What does that imply about the meaning and purpose and nature of teaching?” or, more simply, “What does it mean to learn, and therefore, to teach?” Thanks to reading and discussing Aristotle with my homeschool students, I had come to realize that in order to draft a theory of teaching, I needed first to understand what it means to learn, because teaching is a means to that end, not an end in itself, and therefore cannot be defined in terms of itself.

I began to say that teaching is ecologically linked to learning,[\[18\]](#) rather than determined by content or expertise; the (faculty) tutor’s responsibility is to foster an atmosphere—a context—that encourages thoughtful[\[19\]](#) conversation focused on a text. The tutor, in other words, must be able to ask questions that stimulate thoughtful reflection on the text. The best “opening questions” would be followed by three to five minutes of silence, in which students would ponder the question in light of the text, and then begin to offer tentative answers, more often in the form of further questions that also arose out of the text.

I also began to design course syllabi that gave students as much flexibility in expectation, “performance”, and grading as the system would afford.

And so in these classes we do several things designed to reflect this philosophy. Here is a partial list:

1. We sit in a circle in order to foster conversation (it's difficult to converse with the back of someone's head, or over one's shoulder, or twisted around in a chair);
2. We all call each other "Mr" and "Miss" plus last name in order to level the playing field (calling them by first name, while they are required to call me "Dr/Mr/Rev/Professor Putnam", lowers their status);[\[20\]](#)
3. We change seats every class—no sitting in the same seat, or next to the same person(s), two classes in a row in order to force a continual variety of perspective (this idea I borrowed from Jensen 2004);
4. We have no quizzes, tests, or exams, which greatly reduces stress and anxiety (the palpable difference in tone and attitude on days when there is a quiz or test is familiar to all faculty);
5. I assign the first paper topic by giving students a choice of several upon which to write, after which they choose their own topics (although I am happy to recommend several ideas if asked);
6. There are no privileged questions, no privileged answers, and no privileged point of view; we want to learn to examine the truth of a claim, not evaluate it by its source;
7. There are no lectures (I am a fellow learner);
8. My responsibility is to ask questions, not to direct the conversation to some goal or outcome;
9. The board is democratic—open freely to all (underclassmen often find this difficult to believe, and even more difficult to apply); and
10. We talk about what we are doing, and why we are doing it, as well as about the "subject" of the course.

For example, in the required course on the poetic and "wisdom" books of the Bible (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations) I do not lecture on the provenance (authorship, origin, date) of each book, or its meaning, but set aside one class to discuss it. When we come to Ecclesiastes, for example, I might begin by asking "What does *hevel* [traditionally "vanity"] mean?" We discuss how to determine what the author meant by it, its rôle in the book, move on to discovering the other main message of the book, and ask how these messages are related. At some point I might outline the basic argument of Pascal's *Pensées* (of which few have even heard) and ask how his theme relates to that of Ec, or put Macbeth's "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" speech on an overhead and ask them what it means and how it relates to Ecclesiastes. We generally run out of time.

This same course begins by discussing how to identify a text as poetry or prose, and why the difference matters. We begin by discussing simple poems in English as a class. This leads us to consider the nature of poetry, following which we compare Judges 4 and 5 (which are prosaic and poetic accounts of the same event) in order to ascertain some of the differences between biblical poetry and prose,[\[21\]](#) and to raise the question of poetic epistemology (which version—Judges 4 or 5—is a more accurate record of the events, whether or not this is even a valid question [it is not]).

Perhaps the simplest way of summarizing all of this is to say that I have come to see the classroom is a *sacred* space—a space set aside for leisurely<sup>[22]</sup> reflection and thoughtful conversation, where there are no privileged questions, answers, or learners. It should be a *safe* place, where any of us can offer any thought, insight, or idea in confidence that neither it nor we will be attacked, rejected, condemned, or ridiculed, but rather that our fellow learners will listen to what we say, consider it, and offer a meaningful, substantive, and helpful response. At the same time, it will be a *dangerous* place, since everything that we think is open to question (no privileged answers), investigation, scrutiny, and critique. But if all of this happens without defensiveness or arrogance, in an atmosphere of trust and respect based on in the conviction that we are working together toward understanding what confronts us in the text or in life, then we will find it a most happy place as well.

I would be happy to talk to any of you about any of these as well.

All along this journey I continue to learn from the best “teachers I have never met”<sup>[23]</sup>—James Schall (from whom comes that happy phrase), Parker Palmer, Christopher Phillips, Anne French Dalke, TheodoreSizer, John Holt, many resources from ISI (including their outstanding “Student’s Guides”), Neil Postman, Paolo Freiere,<sup>[24]</sup> Michael Strong, bell hooks, John T. Gatto, the Sudbury Valley School(s), and many others, and so my understand of learning and teaching, of power structures, fear, and coercion, of love and desire continue to change, and so does my teaching and (I hope) my students’ learning.

## CONCLUSION: A DREAM

Today, what motivates me is a dream, which I share with you in closing.

I dream of a school system in which visitors cannot distinguish faculty from students, because all are equally engaged in learning from whatever lies before them, whether it be a tree, a specimen under a microscope, a piece of music, the host and rank of heaven, or ideas described by galaxies of letters in constellations of words on a page.

I dream of places of learning where men and women recognize the unity of creation and the ubiquity of truth, so that their goal is to know *of* what is *that* it is; where everything that exists is respected as a means of divine revelation, whether it be the dumb created order, the outpourings of the human heart, the Word of God written in Scripture, or the Word of God incarnate in Jesus Christ.

I dream of schools that are genuine places of leisure (above), where students are free to pursue their interests, and where “courses” are joint ventures between tutors and students, opportunities to help them further understand some aspect of what is true and right and good and just; they are deliberately collaborative in conception, design, execution, and evaluation, open to all, for the good of all and for the well-being of each.

I dream of an academy—a grove!—in which every man or woman understands and seeks to realize his or her responsibility to and for him or herself, as well as their responsibility to and for each other, so that we who are not yet what we already are (Pieper) may continue to become what we were created to be by learning to grow in prudence and justice and fortitude and temperance, because we live in the faith, hope, and love that are the gift of God, so that our learning—whether it be in biology, literature, physics, history, mathematics, philosophy, music, theology and biblical studies, or (perhaps above all) “merely” learning to *open our eyes*, that we may see and know the truth of all things—so that we may be increasingly able to pursue that which is good and right and just, in a community in which righteousness and mercy themselves are infectious.

Once again, I thank you for this opportunity and the privilege of sharing these thoughts with you, and would be delighted to discuss any of them further with you as a group, or individually. May the Lord continue to have mercy upon us all.

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(revised & expanded edition)

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[1] I assume that this is also the reason for the design of the t-shirt (“alpha-X-epsilon”); using lower case letters would accomplish two purposes: (1) it would prevent being asked why you are wearing the word “AXE”; and (2) it would provoke conversations, since the *alpha* and *epsilon* would show that it is not the word “axe”; it would look like this: ace).

[2] In fairness to my colleagues, I am sure that this pressure did not come from them—we rarely discussed pedagogy. I did, however, *feel* pressed.

[3] The root *lmd*, from which the word “Talmud” comes, which itself may be translated as either “teaching” or “learning”, depending on its context.

[4] In discussing lexical semantics, the word “function” is more helpful than “meaning”; students of language need to be careful not to confuse a word’s gloss(es) with its function(s).

[5] This account of events a dozen or so years ago is probably not chronologically accurate; I have not really thought about them until writing this paper. It is as accurate as I can portray them. My assessment is based on the students’ personal responses, course evaluations, and my own perception.

[6] One of the problems with writing about this is that I would now qualify nearly every word by putting it in “scare quotes”; I no longer believe that courses should be “designed”, which means that they cannot be “beautifully” or “well-” “designed”.

[7] One of the challenges of history writing is that written language is linear, coherent, and uni-dimensional—it can focus on or describe only one thing at a time—whereas life is multi-dimensional, branching, and (apparently) random. It would probably be more accurate to say that all of these thoughts and experiences were impinging on each other all of the time, so that there was no “process” in the sense in which we normally think of it, but rather a rather erratic “progress”.

[8] After reading this paper and discussing it with my wife, we realized together that our most important “class” began spontaneously as a conversation with our younger daughter and some of her girlfriends. One day I showed my wife a small book on modesty (Gresh 2005), [8] sent to me by the publisher. When I showed it to my wife, our daughter (13) grabbed it out of my hand, said, “I want to read this!”, sat down on the kitchen floor, and read it straight through. She then emailed and called several of her friends to tell them about it, and loaned it to them, which started an ongoing conversation about modesty, beauty, and attractiveness, and what they meant in light of how God had made them, and what he might expect of them. These girls, my wife, and I talked about this on and off for more than a year. None of us thought of this as a “class” or “course” or “subject” to be studied. They (and we) were intensely interested; the conversation was natural for all of us.



[9]This does not mean that languages cannot be studied conversationally, merely that the tutor must set certain rules, including (1) volunteers translate and answer questions; (2) anyone can offer a suggestion, when, e.g., a student reading a text gets “stuck” or forgets a gloss; (3) “answers” are actually suggestions; and (4) the class arbitrates “answers”, not the tutor. This last is the most difficult concept for students to grasp, at least in my experience, since students are always convinced that the tutor knows the “right answer” or the “right way” to render or explain the text.

[10]This is not a complaint or criticism; our teachers were outstanding.

[11]St. John’s College, along with Thomas Aquinas College, Thomas More College of Liberal Arts (New Hampshire), Shimer College, Gutenberg College, and others, through their websites, have all influenced my thinking in ways and to an extent that I no longer recognize, but for which I am most thankful.

[12]I say this only for the sake of illustration.

[13]I was originally hired to teach Hebrew and Greek (“Instructor in Biblical Languages”); before each class I would read every grammar that I could find—both reference and pedagogical—and come to class like a cannon, primed and ready to fire, awaiting only the match of a question that would let me demonstrate my erudition. Years later, some of those early students would tell me that taking a course with me was like trying to drink from a fire hose. (At the time, I would have taken that as a compliment; I now blush with shame that I thought that that was “good” teaching.)

[14]Lee and I had what amounted to a “Friday school” in our house, although we rarely thought of it in those terms; its “success” is suggested by our former students—nearly all out of college, and some married—desire for us to convene them for “reunions”.

[15]Not that our conversations were models of Socratic dialogue (or “method”, as Michael Strong calls it); we followed rabbit trails so large that we called them “SUV tracks”. But we were having a lot of fun together, reading great books (I’d be happy to share our syllabi, which consist of a list of books and a provisional schedule) and learning to understand and appreciate them by talking about them.

[16]Many of these conversations were with our daughter, who deserves a “Golden Ear” award for listening to her father’s constant rambling on this topic, but whose experience at St. John’s College has helped me enormously by showing me how ideas that I knew from the college website and publications had been applied in her classes.

[17]I am happy to share this with anyone who realizes its yet-unfinished state (and encourage them to pass it on to others).

[18]I happily admit my indebtedness to Neil Postman (1993, ???) for this use of “ecological”.

[19]The term “thoughtful” is a touchstone of St. John’s College’s requirements for tutors (faculty), and of student conversation and writing.

[20] This applies to undergraduate students. In this situation, where students must use an honorific, I prefer “Mr P”, used by all of my homeschool students. My daughter found this requirement of classes at St. John’s College the single most effective factor in encouraging open conversation, and in de-privileging the tutor’s voice. This practice also reflects the conviction of Paulo Freire and bell hooks (i.a.) that learning be democratic, or, to use Freire’s terms, that we eschew the “banking model” for the “questioning model”.

[21] I presented this pedagogy in a paper titled “Poetic Pedagogy” (c.v.).

[22] The Greek word translated “leisure” is *scholia*, whence we get “school”. A school was originally a place to which one went in order to spend time away from the normal demands of life, so that one (and one’s companions) could discuss what it meant to be fully “human”, and how one might come to live “a good life”, not unlike Augustine’s experience with his friends (*Confessions*, Book ??), or Cicero’s idea of a *convivium*—eating together in order to think and talk together. This concept also underlies much of the “residential college” movement.

[23] See “Bibliography”.

[24] I was introduced to Freire and to Postman’s work on education by my colleagues Chris Palladino, Sam Matlack, and John Oliff, with whom I have shared many happy conversations about learning and teaching.