

Balmuth Teaching Award 2013  
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The theme of my remarks this evening can only be thanks. Some of them are the obvious ones to extend, no less sincere on my part for being obligatory.

I must, of course, thank Mark Siegel, Class of 1973, who established this award and set out the terms of its being conferred, terms that include sponsoring this celebration of teaching and student-faculty engagement every year. I was told I could invite other people to it as well, and the opportunity sent me to my grade books and triggered the recollections of wonderful moments with students on campus and off, in London and in cities where alumni have gathered to talk about books or productions of plays they've invited me to introduce.

Prior thanks, then, are due to Jerome Balmuth, the Harry Emerson Fosdick Professor of philosophy and religion, because it is in Jerry's honor that this award is named, a superb teacher, who inspired Mark to want to honor him by establishing this tradition of celebrating teaching. This is the first of three appearances Jerry will make in these brief remarks.

Then, I guess I should thank the group who determines who will receive the award. I do not know who you are, so I will impersonate you all in the single figure of Dean Douglas A. Hicks, as we know him from e-mails that originate from his office. A sly fellow is our dean. The e-mail message from him arrived at 11:04 a.m. on Sunday, March 3. "Hi, Margaret [it read, all casualness, with no middle initial in the inbox address]. Would you have a chance to meet tomorrow at noon . . . ? I would value your perspective on your time as associate dean and on a couple of issues moving forward. It would be great if you happen to have this time open on your calendar. Thanks, Doug."

Copying it over into this talk, I realized that the best touch in it, really, is the "moving forward" part. There are former associate deans in this room. One was my colleague in the office. I would ask them now, Adam, Jeff, if somebody suggested to you that he or she would value your perspective on your time as an associate dean, would you have believed it? Would you not have checked your calendar to be sure it was not April 1? It was the "moving forward" part that made me reschedule my office hour for the next day, make sure my shirt was reasonably well ironed, and show up in McGregory at noon to hear Dean Hicks explain that, as much as he would like to hear my perspective on the experience of being an associate dean *some other time*, he had summoned me to tell me about this award. Then he said something that turned out to be true to an extent I will not forget. He said, "Get ready to answer a lot of e-mails once the announcement goes out."

The truth of that prediction is the warrant of the value of this award to Colgate. I got dozens and dozens of e-mails and handwritten cards and notes from colleagues on and off the faculty, teaching faculty, emeriti faculty. I was inundated with congratulations from people I deeply admire and respect. It was hard to open them, knowing that they were coming from people whose claim to the award was as good or better than mine. At first, I replied to them by saying just that, though not very elegantly. I wrote, "I can think of about a hundred people who deserve this as much or more

than I do.” David McCabe’s reply to that version of my acknowledgment was the best. He wrote, “I can’t think of more than seventy-five.” Then came the message from Michael Murphy that I repeated to many of you because he put it exactly right: “Congrats on your great recognition,” it said. I am sure that you are excited and very humbled by it.” Yes. I am surely both those things.

In those first days, what haunted me wasn’t just the uneasy feeling that I wasn’t particularly worthy of this award relative to the many excellent colleagues I have. There was also the formulation that this award is for “inspirational teaching.” I have always been uneasy about trying to be inspirational. In my earliest days of teaching here, the adjective students used on my teaching evaluation forms was enthusiastic. I know enough about that word to be wary of it, too, and I made my peace with it by assuming that it had something to do with my hair. I remember, not precisely chronologically but very vividly, the day when I decided to destroy all my notes about the material I teach and start fresh each time. That was when I went from being a teacher who was trying to stay alive in the classroom (trying not make a fool of myself) to being one who would work to stay alive in the classroom (being genuine in my responses to what I teach and valuing in my students that same interest in what is strange and provocatively perplexing).

From that point in my employ in this university, there have been many, many excellent experiences. I may or may not be an inspirational teacher, but I am definitely a teacher who has been inspired by the privilege of engaging with young people in the environment of this kind of school. So our students are the last category of people I want to thank. I cannot tell you of all the great moments I owe to them. I will try to convey the essence of a few exemplary ones.

The first has to be the demand, I can only call it that, that I preside over a production of a student-initiated performance of Shakespeare’s play *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. If you don’t know this play, you will be helped to appreciate the significance of its being the focus of the demand in 1978–79 by knowing that it is a play about four men who decide to forswear the company of women, study, exercise, and not eat much for three years. In 1978/79, Colgate was only a half a decade from being the kind of institution that the men in the play want to set up.

This student production of the play involved students from a class I was teaching and others from classes I had taught and still others that I was told were “found in the weight room” when we were still short three men. Helping these students (Matt Carter, who is here, was one of them) to mount a nearly full-length version of this play took so much of my time that, to this day, my husband and I can never remember how long we have been married, because we do not count that year. Its triumphant success had little to do with me; and, as much as my view of the play has evolved from what it was when I worked with those students, I cannot watch a production of it without thinking of them. Even good productions pale beside those memories, and Kenneth Branagh’s silly movie never had a chance.

Another exemplary category has to be the study groups I have taken to London in 1981, 1987, 1997, 2002, 2005, and 2010. In my experience of it, the London English Study Group works wonders. True, the students speak their mother tongue, but the miracle of the experience is that they speak abroad to other Colgate students they might ignore on campus. And the relationships that are formed between the students and me and between the students with one another should be the model of

what we strive for in Hamilton. Somehow, they never cut class, and if they mention inconveniences on evaluation forms it is often to relish the memory of them.

One year, during a production of *Richard II* at the Old Vic, I was fretting that, if my students leaned too far forward in the steeply raked second gallery seats to see what was happening on the left side of the stage, they would plunge to their deaths; and then I realized they were moving their heads like fans at a tennis match, dividing their attention between Kevin Spacey (doing a not, after all, very creditable job of representing King Richard) and Russell Crowe, who was sitting with his comely companion in the center of the dress circle. At that moment, my students became a group, a study group, the kind of group we should endeavor to create here in our well-appointed classrooms and labs.

My third exemplary category is the Core. I came to Colgate when the English department didn't teach much in it. But all that changed in the revision of the Core in the late 80s under last year's award winner Tony Aveni; and I became a member of the staff with Jerry Balmuth of what was then GNE101 and is now Core 151, a course that includes the Hebrew Scriptures and Plato. The term when I found myself teaching Plato's dialogue *Meno* in a class period right before teaching Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, I understood Feste's catechism of Malvolio for the first time, as my first-years in Core 151 struggled with Socrates' argument premised on the Pythagorean understanding of the soul's immortality: a whole class of little Malvolios.

I tried to put all of the students who had written honors papers under my direction on the invitation list to this dinner, and several of them have written me wonderful notes about what they are now doing. I won't prolong my remarks with details, except to say that, if I have any claim to fame (and the jury is still out), it will be because I have argued for the value of the First Folio reading of two passages in *The Taming of the Shrew*, an argument that was an outgrowth of work done by Colgate undergraduates on that play.

Finally, I want to return to that production of *Love's Labour's Lost* — not because I am nostalgic about it (though I am) but because it recurred 30 years later. When the class of 1979 came back in 2009, several of the students who had been involved in that production, led by Chris Hedges, who had played Berowne, gathered on Thursday night to read the play. They got me to give a talk, and then we adjourned to the dining room in Merrill House, collecting people to fill in for those who couldn't make it. We gathered around the dining room table and read the whole play aloud. Chris had assigned the role of the pedantic schoolmaster Holofernes to me, so Jerry had to settle for some other role. I can't remember what it was, Jerry, but you were great, though possibly not as great as Coleman Brown in the role of the constable Dull.

You all get the point, I hope. The inspirational moments of teaching, what this award encourages us to engage in, do not stop when students leave here. To be sure, once they are no longer in our classes, they won't necessarily listen to us any more. They may well think, and may well be right, that we don't always know what we are talking about. They are smart when they arrive and smarter when they leave, maybe as a result of some of the things we've managed to convey. Teaching signs us up for an ongoing engagement with the insights and realities our students bring home to us. Let us thank them for that, even as we wish they would tamp it down sometimes. Let us, most of all,

thank Mark Siegel for this occasion of thinking about these things together.