"Farewell Lecture"

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Years ago, in one of those essays on the back page of *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* I read a sentence that has stuck with me ever since. (Alas, the name of the author has not.) The sentence said something like this (and I'll use masculine pronouns, as I believe the author did): "When a teacher stops thinking of himself as a fraud, he becomes dangerous."

Because this is the first lecture I've ever written to be read aloud, I actually had the opportunity to think about what I was saying. And what I realized, to my horror, is I'm absolutely *certain* of the truth of what I'm about to say today. I don't feel like a fraud at all. So it really *is* time for me to retire.

What I want to say are a few words on the two things I've been teaching about for the last 40 years: language and stories. I say "teaching *about*" because, as someone once reminded me, what we *teach* are students; our *disciplines* are what we teach *about*.

And I want to end by telling you, once and for all, why what I've done—what we *all* do—is *cosmically important*.

But first, language.

I grew up in a household that made its living with language. My parents, Wayne and Jeanne Davis, published *The Seymour Herald*, an eight-page weekly newspaper in Seymour, Iowa, with its thousand or so souls. We lived on the town square, in an apartment above the shop, and my sister, Polly, and I were raised in the family business.

If Johannes Gutenberg had walked off the square, into our shop, he would have known his way around and could have started to work almost immediately. Our headlines and much of our ad copy were handset from individual pieces of type, much like Gutenberg used in *his* shop in fifteenth-century Mainz. On Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays, we took individual letters from their separate compartments in type cabinet drawers and arranged them to make words. On Wednesday afternoon, we rolled ink onto that type and printed the paper. On Thursdays and Fridays, we wiped the ink off those thousands of pieces of type and put them back in their drawers. (In a letterpress shop, dropping a drawer full of type was about the biggest sin you could commit.)

What Gutenberg would have been most amazed by—but could have easily figured out—was the Linotype machine, where we set the body copy for the paper. Every Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, our Linotype operator, Russell Phillips, would

strike letters on a keyboard, mechanically releasing thin brass molds—“mats”—to drop into place. When enough mats had dropped to fill a line, he would pull a lever that squirted molten lead against them. After the resulting “slug” had been molded, the brass mats would be mechanically returned to their correct slots in the machine. On Wednesday, the slugs would be inked and pressed against paper. And on Thursday and Friday, all the slugs would be wiped off, dropped through a hole into the basement, and there melted—in a cauldron—into lead “pigs,” to be carried upstairs and melted again by the Linotype the following Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. (It’s a miracle that my father, at 88, and I, at 63, weren’t poisoned long ago by all the lead fumes we’ve breathed.)

I’ve told you all this to explain how I grew up seeing language in *two* very different ways. First, I saw it as a window into a reality beyond—whether a pirate ship in a book I was reading, or a high school basketball game in a news story I was writing. And second, I saw language as a *material substance*, thousands of pieces of movable type and molded lead that would all be recycled into different words and sentences next week. In short, I grew up seeing language as both *transparent* and *opaque*.

American journalist Finley Peter Dunne once wrote that a good newspaper “comforts th' afflicted” and “afflicts th' comfortable.” I think that’s our job as teachers, too: to comfort our afflicted students and to afflict the comfortable ones. But those of us who teach about language also have a particular, equally paradoxical, responsibility: to make *opaque* language *transparent* and *transparent* language *opaque*.

Unlike some in my profession, I don’t see our students’ immersion in e-mail and text messaging as harmful to their writing ability. On the contrary, use of these new media has given today’s younger students *much* more experience in the use of writing to *communicate* than my classmates had. When *we* wanted to communicate to our friends, we telephoned. If you’ve seen the musical *Bye Bye Birdie*, you’ve seen that habit satirized in a song called “The Telephone Hour,” in which teenagers return home from school and immediately spend an hour telephoning each other. I was one of those.

But when today’s teenagers and young adults want to communicate with their friends, they *write*. They understand better than most of my generation the transparency of written language, its ability to convey, with great subtlety, the ever-changing agonies and joys of growing up.

Once, in the seventies or eighties, a friend and former colleague, the novelist, poet, and essayist Wendell Berry, told a group of writing teachers I was supervising that *his* ideal writing class would be made up of twelve students who were each in love with someone far away and who would let him read their mail. “I could teach them something,” Wendell said.

Today’s writing teachers are almost in that situation. Even if the only student mail we are privileged to read is our students’ course-related e-mail, we can teach them

something about the writing they're already doing, not just the writing we assign them to do.

Still, when I teach more complex uses of language—Shakespeare or Joyce, business writing or copyediting—a big part of my job *is* making opaque language transparent: helping my students see through the barriers they encounter in increasingly diverse language, and understand—really co-create—a meaning beyond. Many of my students—like many of Joyce's own contemporaries—would never get beyond the first words of Chapter 3 of *Ulysses*—"ineluctable modality of the visible"—without that kind of help.

But in those same courses, I also have the responsibility of making *transparent* language *opaque*: helping my students see language itself as "stuff," as letters and words that are always being molded, and melted down, and molded, and melted down, again and again. Electronic media don't, I think, promote that sense of opacity. There is nothing less opaque, less like "stuff," than electromagnetic charges in a computer chip and glowing pixels on a screen.

One chapter of *Ulysses* takes place in a newspaper office. While there, we hear how a New York newspaper got a scoop by printing, just a day after the event, a map showing locations and routes of key events in the famous Phoenix Park murders in Dublin. In the 1880s, there was no way to send a map, or any illustration, across the Atlantic, except by very slow ship. So a Dublin reporter and a New York editor talked by telephone while looking at the same page of the same past issue of the paper. The reporter told the editor how to draw the map by connecting selected letters and words on the page.

Ulysses often teaches us how to read *Ulysses*. Here it teaches us to look at its letters and words as *objects*, as reference points, which we must connect to form a *map* of the human experience.

I need to help my students learn, as I did in editing society items for *The Seymour Herald*, that there's more than one way to say, "Professor Harold Hill and Mr. Marcellus Washburn spent Sunday evening at the home of Widow Paroo, and enjoyed Miss Marian Paroo's piano selections and Master Winthrop's singing." In short, we need to help our students learn, as writers, that language is something they can *manipulate*. We need to help them learn, as readers, that language is something that can manipulate *them*, for good or ill, for pleasure, profit, or propaganda.

And we need to give them the experience—even if only once in a while—of language becoming opaque and transparent at the same time, of becoming magically, glowingly *translucent*.

Perhaps my favorite poem about language is one that has that kind of translucence for me: "A Ritual to Read to Each Other," by William Stafford. Some of you have heard me read it at writing program orientations. I'd like to read it again today, because it deals wonderfully with the transparency and opacity of language:

A Ritual to Read to Each Other

If you don't know the kind of person I am
and I don't know the kind of person you are
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world
and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.

For there is many a small betrayal in the mind,
a shrug that lets the fragile sequence break
sending with shouts the horrible errors of childhood
storming out to play through the broken dyke.

And as elephants parade holding each elephant's tail,
but if one wanders the circus won't find the park,
I call it cruel and maybe the root of all cruelty
to know what occurs but not recognize the fact.

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,
a remote important region in all who talk:
though we could fool each other, we should consider—
lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.

For it is important that awake people be awake,
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;
the signals we give—yes or no, or maybe—
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.

The other main thing I teach about is *stories*. As I've said, I grew up reading fiction as well as journalism. From the time my great-great-aunt Nell Baxter got me my first library card, I lived in a world of stories—of pirates and knights and space travelers. And I still do. I love to read and hear stories, and I love to write and tell them. One of my all-time favorite compliments came from Jean Pival, a colleague at a previous university, who called me a *raconteur*.

In my twenties I found myself in a doctoral seminar in literary criticism at the University of Michigan. The professor asked us each what we'd most like to explore in the course. When my turn came, I answered, "I'm interested in *why* people read literature."

It was as if I'd picked my nose and put the result on the table. (Incidentally, I had a more vivid analogy, which an actual sociolinguist—Professor Shepherd—assured me was perfectly OK to use with this audience. But then the rhetorician in me took over and decided that my more vivid analogy might well be the only thing you'd remember from this talk.) So again, it was as if I'd picked my nose and put the result on the table. The instructor looked at me with extreme distaste and said, "That's something we can't discuss in this course."

I'm still intrigued by that question: "Why do we tell, and listen to, and write, and read stories?" The more I think about that question, the more answers I can come up with. But I know for sure what the most fundamental answer is: we have evolved into what Joseph Gold calls "the story species."

It's, say, forty thousand years ago. A band of early humans return from a mammoth hunt. Some of the party have been killed. The survivors tell the story of the hunt. Their listeners learn something about successful and unsuccessful hunting. On the next hunt, fewer are killed, more survive, because of the story.

In this two hundredth year after Darwin's birth, it's worth noting that stories have given us an evolutionary advantage. And they continue to do so. When we read Shakespeare or Joyce—the two authors I most love to teach—we learn thousands of subliminal lessons about what it means to be human. We learn thousands of ways to keep "the parade of our mutual life" from getting "lost in the dark."

When Harold Bloom talks about Shakespeare's "invention of the human," I believe he means that Shakespeare was the first writer to tell stories that convey such an amazing range of lessons—both gross and subtle—about human nature and interaction. And I believe that stories—narratives—have a unique power to convey those lessons.

Please understand: I'm not claiming that the purpose of literature is to be explicitly didactic. Most explicitly didactic stories don't work very well or last very long. The best stories, the most enduring stories, teach by capturing our imagination and our curiosity. We picture what's happening, and we wonder what will happen next.

In his book *A Blessed Rage for Order*, Alexander Argyros writes (and I'm going to quote him at some length):

> Our evolution into human beings was, at least in part, the result of the selective pressures wrought on our brains by the powerful information processing and creating mental technology of narrative structures. As such, we are creatures whose experience is essentially narrative. Using some of the ideas offered by chaos theory, it is possible to view traditional narrative, and its most ambitious subset, grand narrative, as evolutionary adaptations able to tap the remarkable ability of chaotic systems to be simultaneously conservative and innovative in the difficult task of accumulating, storing, transmitting, and creating cultural information. Narrative is indeed mimetic. It imitates nature. However, in light of what we are currently learning about the behavior of dissipative systems, nature can no longer be conceptualized as a Laplacian clock, or Cartesian automaton, following strictly deterministic laws, but as a dynamical, evolving system whose defining characteristics are complexity, hierarchy, and emergence. Therefore, if narrative does hold a mirror up to nature, we must rethink the notions of nature and representation implicit in such a model. Narrative does not re-present an object, idea, signified, bit of information, or cognitive structure; on the

> contrary, narrative is isomorphic to the dynamics of nature—the cruelty and beauty of the deep dialectical interpenetration between conservation and creation (321-22).

But Professor Turner said it more succinctly. In one of his famous e-mailed essays on teaching and learning, he wrote that literature students learn to read texts for "suggestions about the dynamics of change." Precisely. From stories, listeners and readers learn how change happens in this universe. Stories map time as maps map space.

When I teach literature, I *obviously* teach about stories. But even when I teach editing and business writing, I stress that *all* communication is story, part of larger narratives. My favorite business writing classes at IUPUI have been those in which my students play roles, as writers, in a global business narrative, along with students in Belgium, Finland, or Germany. I say "narrative" because the messages my students send to Antwerp have an effect on the messages that come back to Indianapolis—and so on. It's because I want my students to see the big-picture contexts of language that I have found systems theory a valuable theoretical base for my work.

And that brings me, at last, to the *cosmic importance* of my work, *our* work. For me, the greatest mystery of the universe is that despite the overall trend of the universe toward randomness and increasing entropy, systems emerge and evolve into more and more complexity and intelligence, capable—sometimes—of producing great good. That cosmic process is the greatest story of all, and for me, deserving of gratitude and even worship.

Language and stories have been both factors *in* and products *of* evolution. But evolution isn't over. Some say that our species is entering a new phase in our evolution: a phase in which evolution is becoming *conscious*. And that's where *we* come in. By teaching about language and teaching about stories (and all of us do, regardless of discipline), we assist in that conscious evolution. If we believe in truth and beauty, in honesty and justice and love, the work we're doing is helping the cosmos evolve into one more true and beautiful and just and honest and loving.

Two last words: "Thank you." I left my previous university, in 1988, because—as Bette knows much too well—I was so unbelievably unhappy there. I was willing to go anywhere else, and I interviewed with some institutions I would be embarrassed to name even today. But then I found IUPUI, and it, along with Bette, saved my life. At first my journey to IUPUI was only an escape, but it very soon became a honeymoon. And just as my thirty-eight-year honeymoon with Bette isn't over, my twenty-one-year honeymoon with IUPUI isn't over.

Why?

Because of you, my colleagues and especially my students. Again, thank you.