The Culture of Curiosity

Peter Caws

This meeting has been organized by the University Teaching Center, so presumably I'm here to speak about teaching, to people who've come here to teach (among other things). Welcome, it's a nice university. My title here, like yours probably, is professor, not teacher. It's true that when people ask me what I do I tend to say "I teach philosophy," because it's easily understood, less pompous than "I'm a professor of philosophy," and less pretentious than "I'm a philosopher." Am I really a teacher, though? I think I understand what it means to be a professor - professing is claiming, literally avowing, and I can claim to have read and thought a lot, to have some things to say that I think it would be good for students to hear, and to be prepared to back up what I say. But I've never felt like much of a pedagogue, and I still don't know after 35 years in classrooms what's the right or the best way to go about what is called "teaching." I take it everyone has had the experience of going into class one day fired up and totally prepared, only to meet with a kind of dead indifference - and going in the next day frazzled, fatigued, entirely unprepared, upon which discussion catches fire and one student after another comes up and says hey, good class! So you are not to expect from me any hints or tricks of the trade - I don't even begin my classes with jokes, I didn't even begin this talk with a joke.

As to pedagogy, it's perhaps comforting to remember that the original pedagogue, the Greek *paidagogos*, was actually a kind of specialized baby-sitter whose job was to take children

to school, literally to lead them, and presumably also to protect, from wolves or philosophers. He (and it would normally have been a man) certainly wasn't a teacher, except perhaps in the sense that he showed them where the school was. For teaching is originally showing or pointing out - the word is connected to the *deixis* from which we get the index of the index finger, the one that points. That seems like quite a good model, but it raises a couple of interesting questions, namely: what have I myself seen, that I'm in a position to point out? and is anyone looking?

Perhaps what I can most usefully do this morning is to concentrate on these questions - who's looking, what are they looking at, or for, and why? and when they look, will they see what I saw, and does that matter? I know there is a tendency to assume that there's a structure underlying all this, on which we can count and fall back: my degree is in a discipline, there are standard divisions of the field to which courses correspond, I'm supposed to be acquainted with the major problems, texts, arguments etc. and when my course is over the students are supposed to be acquainted, in their fashion, with all that too. So that pretty much determines what goes on in the classroom: we "cover" material - now that I think of it, a most appropriate term, given the culture of popular music, in the sense that it's someone else's song - and find out whether the coverage has been successful by setting and grading exams.

Now this is all terribly worthy and students like it - they want to know what's going to be covered and whether it will be on the exam, they get nervous if the syllabus is vague. In fact I find by and large that many of them are incredibly blinkered with respect to the enterprise of college education - they really seem to want a pedagogue, they like clearly marked tracks and limited objectives. The whole educational culture ministers to this weakness (and it is a weakness): the very language of course and curriculum, both meaning specifications for running,

suggests a kind of regimentation of activity, an eye on the goal, rules of the race. "Curriculum" is all right in "*curriculum vitae*," the course of a life already run, but I think it's fairly sinister when it's prescriptive: this is where you'll run, and at this speed. Curriculum committees - I won't name names but don't say I didn't warn you - are very good at rules, and, like too many students, they want to know exactly what you're going to do ahead of time.

But I very often don't know exactly what I'm going to do ahead of time. I recall a distinguished though rather Germanic friend and colleague at another university to whom I wrote once, when I was beginning a new course like one I knew he'd been teaching, to ask if he could send me any material. He sent a fat package containing what amounted to a detailed specification of everything students were to expect from the beginning to the end of his course. It was like military orders. It reminded me of Napoleon, who congratulated himself on being able to say what every child in every French *lycée* was doing at any hour of the day - or, better, of the Duke of York in the song:

> The grand old Duke of York
> He had ten thousand men
> He marched them up to the top of the hill
> And he marched them down again.

I wrote back with thanks - and I really was glad to have the material, it was rich and comprehensive - but I said I couldn't possibly teach like that, that very often in my classes something came up unexpectedly that took us off on some tangent from which we might never return, not in that class session anyway. It seemed to me that the disappointed expectations on the part of students - not to mention the guilt on my own part - that would be engendered by

failing to conform to such a detailed course plan would far outweigh any advantage that might accrue from making it.

This doesn't mean that I admire professors who don't plan at all, who go into class unprepared and just shoot the breeze, about current events, their private lives, etc. This seems to me downright irresponsible. I'm talking, rather, of a strictly intellectual obligation that might be called, borrowing an expression of Plato's, "following the argument where it leads" - the point being that one doesn't necessarily know where it will lead, that with one group of students it may lead to one place, with another group to another. If, as is probably the case, there's a point they *ought* eventually to get to, it might be useful to tell them that independently at the beginning, since if the class doesn't go there as a group, which it may well not, they'll be able to find their way on their own, in the library perhaps.

Two things are likely to go wrong with any system that takes much stock in coverage and the curriculum. The first happens when it is the *professor* who is expected to follow the curriculum and do the covering; the second happens when that is *all* he or she sets out to do. The first is a failure of the student's responsibility, the second a failure of the professor's competence. Students are the more excusable, since very often it hasn't been pointed out to them that they *have* much of a responsibility outside the contents of courses. One of my favorite illustrations of this point has to do with a lecture I once gave somewhere in the Middle West, and a student who came up to ask a question afterwards. I've forgotten both the lecture and the question, although I know it seemed appropriate at the time to ask her if she'd read *Othello*, since if she had I could use it to make a point in answering the question. But I can still hear her answer: "No," she said, "we read *Macbeth*." The idea that she might have read *Othello*

on her own simply didn't occur to her; she'd had Shakespeare in some English literature course, he'd been covered, *Macbeth* did the trick, if she was supposed to read *Othello* someone would have told her to.

This point is germane to the controversy about the canon and about multicultural survey courses. It seems to be assumed that what students will read will be what they are told to read, that if something doesn't happen in the classroom it won't happen at all. I think this is a prescription for disaster - one which moreover has largely come to pass already. Assigned reading, classroom experience, would in a halfway decent university culture be no more than a fraction of the student's intellectual activity (as it is, too often, they are a fraction of student *activity* but the whole of the intellectual part of that activity, the rest of it being devoted to Student Activities). Of course one way to get students to read works written from points of view other than those of Dead White Males is to include some non-dead or non-white or non-male authors in the reading list, and that seems like a good idea, though if this leads the students to neglect the DWM's they will be culturally deprived, however lamentable that fact may be. But to assume that they can't have access to those points of view *unless* they're on the reading list is to commit the Othello-Macbeth fallacy. Some of the notorious protests about the canon and the multicultural curriculum have a really bizarre rhetorical structure: we think we ought to be reading such-and-such texts, say the protesters in effect, so make us. But if you know what you ought to be reading, why don't you just do it?

I know, of course, that the situation is politically more complex than this. On the one hand it's sometimes a question of *not* being made to read something *else*, something associated perhaps with oppression and deprivation; on the other it's a question of the recognition that goes

with being included in the new canon. And someone probably ought to be telling students - especially those who *aren't* protesting - at least that other points of view exist and that they can have access to them. This brings me to the second thing that is likely to go wrong if the dominant preoccupation is with coverage and the curriculum. The first one was something that might go wrong with the student, this is one that may go wrong with the professor. If I lay out a detailed syllabus and worry about getting to, let alone covering, everything on it I'm liable to become a bit blinkered myself, not to allow the fruitful digressions from my lectures that might have been the most electrifying moments of the class, not to point out the things I *didn't* choose to cover though I might just as well have, not to give a sense of the interconnections between what we're doing in this class and the other parts of the intellectual landscape, not to give time to the issue that has just come up in the journals or the reviews that is changing the way the topic is thought about. And one of the more disturbing reasons why I may not do this, in some cases, may be that I don't know these other things and don't want to know.

Students, it is true, are sometimes made uncomfortable by too much openness. One student complained to me at the end of a course - and it was meant as a complaint, she was genuinely aggrieved - that I'd "opened all these doors and left them open." I told her she couldn't have paid me a greater compliment. Again, I should be careful here not to give the impression that one can be completely casual about conducting classes. *Of course* it's a good idea to plan for structure and sequence, to aim at the students' mastery of definite material, but what I want to stress is that that isn't what matters most. There are other ways for students to achieve that particular goal, as is clear from the fact that many of them miss non-trivial numbers of classes and manage to make up the work one way or another. What does matter most, then?

what can students get from us, and from our classes, that they can't get in any other way?

Note that there are two questions here. First, what students get from us apart from our classes: in some cases it has been clear to me that the most important exchange between me and a given student, the one that made the most difference, has occurred in my office, or in the hall after a class, or in a conversation during an unexpected encounter somewhere on or off campus, or in the comments I've made on a paper, and so on. That is being a teacher too, a pointer-out, and it's a significant part of the story.

You will no doubt be asked - I'm reminded of it by this last remark - to distribute evaluation forms to your students near the end of the semester, on which they will be invited to judge your knowledge of the subject they've just been introduced to. These seem to me to be harmless enough, though not of terribly much use and of doubtful statistical validity, so if I get them in time I dutifully have them administered according to form. (A parenthesis: my fondest memory of these forms comes from my very first semester of teaching, and hence from my very first experience of American undergraduates, with the exception of those few Yale upperclassmen - and in those days they were men - who were admitted to graduate courses in philosophy. This was at Michigan State; I was teaching - and yes, I think that is what it was, I had the rank of instructor and we used a class manual - something called Natural Science, and one of my students was a pomology major who wasn't doing too well. On the evaluation form he allowed, generously enough, that I knew something about the subject, but in the space for comments he said: "Has a hard time expressing himself, has a hard time getting over his broken English." This could have been clever and ironic but all the indications were that it was straight.) I don't, I have to admit, pay much attention to most of the scores. But there are a few

items on the form that I take very seriously, and worry over if the scores drop too low. These are the ones that ask about accessibility to students and willingness to listen to questions. It does seem to me that my professorial function - as opposed to my scholarly function - demands systematic and probably frequent conversational exchanges with students. (Of course they really must *be* students: *studium* is zeal, which suggests that being a real student involves at least a modicum of enthusiasm for something in some corner of the domain of learning.)

The question still is, do these exchanges have to take place in the classroom - or what does take place there? What does my presence in the classroom mean, given that pretty much anything I can say there, or some functional equivalent of it, could be found in a book? I'm an authority figure perhaps - but that reminds me of an anecdote. I once took part in an immense Ford Foundation boondoggle, spawned by the campus unrest of the sixties, called The Assembly on University Goals and Governance. One of the things that interested my group was what happened in classrooms outside the university - coaching for exams, Berlitz language teaching, and so on. Among other things we inquired about the instructors who teach airline pilots the characteristics of new planes - we supposed they would be grizzled old test pilots with lots of stripes and the authority of thousands of hours in the air. Not at all, said the airline people, pretty much anyone can do it, we only use instructors because they are cheaper than machines. Of course in such cases the students have a lively interest in getting it right, in having the plane stay up - there's zeal for you! It's too bad we can't convince students (or perhaps even believe ourselves) that what goes on in our classrooms is a matter of life or death; it usually isn't, not in that way at least - though it may have something to do with how our students live their lives, and how they meet their deaths.

Probably not authority, then. That may have its place, of course; we sometimes say that people are "authorities on" this or that specialty or figure or work, and knowing that one's professor is one of the authorities surely makes a difference to the way one feels about the classroom experience. It may not make it any better, one might have learned more from someone else, but it's good for conversation in later life. It certainly made an immense difference to me as a first-year undergraduate to know that old G.P., the professor (we only had one professor per department in those days), who gave the opening course on wave motion, had the Nobel Prize in physics. He actually didn't teach it very well, and the course only lasted six weeks, after which we didn't see G.P. again until we got to particle physics in the middle of the second year, but it was an initiation into the life of the university that few students can match. And the curriculum planners at the Imperial College of Science and Technology - though I don't think they had that designation, in fact now that I come to think of it there was probably only one curriculum planner, namely G.P. himself - knew very well what they were doing, he knew very well what he was doing, in leading with the heavy artillery.

Nobel prizewinners tend to be a bit thin on the ground at George Washington, so this isn't a terribly useful model. But it's headed in the right direction, because it underlines the fact that who G. P. Thomson was (which only he was) was more important than what G. P. Thomson said (which anyone could have said). And obviously what I'm getting at is that this is true of you too. In your case - though I don't know, there may be ringers among us - it probably isn't going to be the pedigree that does it (as far as that goes, G.P.'s father had won the Nobel prize too, for discovering the electron, so celebrity was rather overdetermined in that case). But if you aren't known to the rest of humankind as *having done* work of importance to the *world*, you can at least

become known to your students as *doing* work that is of importance to *you*.

A manifest sense of the importance of your own work to yourself - and I don't mean the work of teaching - is I suspect the greatest thing you can give your students in the classroom. Some caveats at once: I don't mean that teachers should be self-important, and I don't mean that what you teach should always be what you're working on, though if you're lucky you may sometimes be able to do that. I mean the importance of a *kind* of work - academic work, intellectual work; it's how you embody, or body forth, some degree of passionate involvement with that work, that will mark for better or worse the future attitudes of your students to their own work, if they are lucky enough to get it, but also more broadly to the academy - and to the intellect.

It's the more important for us to convey this lesson, the more the example of scorn of reasoned discourse, and of the intellect in general, is set by national leaders. I don't know who taught George Bush at Yale, but in his case the lesson doesn't seem to have taken, judging by his gut reaction to Paul Wellstone, the new academic in the Senate, whom he is said to have called a "chicken expletive professor" (though perhaps that applies only to Democrats). There's an old problem here, of the place of learning in social life, that goes back to Plato at the court of Syracuse, or Hobbes or Locke in English country houses, revered, but having a role uncomfortably close to that of the jester. I'm reminded of the old story about Edward Gibbon and the Duke of Gloucester, who, when Gibbon presented him with the second volume of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, said "Another damn thick square book! scribble, scribble, scribble, eh, Mr. Gibbon?" Bush may have been one of those Yalies for whom the professoriate was essentially part of the servant class. Johnson, Nixon, and Reagan, on the other

hand, had a suspicion of the intellect as it were from below, in the sense that they were wary of professors as pointy-heads or unprintable liberals or possibly people from Mars. It would be easy at this point to become nostalgic for the Washington of two centuries ago, when politics and philosophy were for a while true partners, or for that only slightly more recent time when the President of the United States and his cabinet were regularly represented at the early Commencement exercises of Columbian College, but I haven't even got to my title yet and must rejoin the argument.

Just what *is* a professor's work, and how can I go about exemplifying it to students who come mainly from the suburbs of the Northeast and have been reared on malls and television? How can I convince the future masters of the universe who are reading economics or political science or business that the life of the mind is worth the investment of a life, or their more pious and timid classmates that free and independent thought is not automatically subversive? My own answer to these questions will bring me to the title of this talk. I take myself to be, and represent myself as, a *practitioner of curiosity*.

Actually that's not strictly true, since I've never used the expression before today. But it's true in spirit, as they say, because it stands for an established truth, and it catches something I want to say today - and what better occasion for a new turn of phrase than a new occasion of turning, the first day-long orientation for faculty new to the University? (I've only just noticed that it's called "day-long" - I'm afraid you may be finding this hour long; I'll check with you about the day at the cocktail party tonight, since I have to admit that while you're being oriented I'll be over at the Library of Congress practicing curiosity. But perhaps reminding you of the Library of Congress can be part of my contribution to your orientation: it has a lot more books

than Gelman, and a higher ceiling, and you can get there for a dollar on the Metro or in less than an hour on foot. One of the directors of the University Teaching Center is the University Librarian, and she will know why I mention the ceiling: in a questionnaire the library here put out a year or so ago the last question was, If you could make just one change in the library, what would it be? and my candidate was the installation of a reading-room with a high ceiling. I think some kinds of curiosity may be freer under high ceilings, not borne down upon by lowering expanses of acoustic tile, but that is a claim in environmental psychology and motivational theory, not to mention institutional aesthetics, that I can't begin to justify here.)

Another way of putting the point about curiosity is to say I'm a skeptic, since from a certain point of view that means roughly the same thing: a skeptic (the root is cognate with "scope," as in microscope and telescope) is just someone who insists on looking, even in the mouths of gift horses, who won't believe it just because some authority says it, who uses the challenge of doubt creatively. But "curious" is a gentler term than "skeptical," and kinder to conservative sensibilities. It also has an unexpected twist, in that *cura* means care or concern, and curiosity originally implied that too. It is true that of the 21 definitions of the term listed in the Oxford English Dictionary the 15 that carry this sense are all said to be obsolete, though it seems to me that there's one partial survival: "curious workmanship" doesn't only mean strange or odd (or erotic or pornographic) workmanship, it also preserves a hint of careful or painstaking workmanship. But I think it's worth reviving - and perhaps isn't that dead after all: it would be nice to think that the curiosity of the rubberneckers who hold up traffic when there's an accident in the other lane isn't merely ghoulish but signals a vestige of care for the fate of the fellow human beings involved, though that may be too much to hope.

The robust meaning of "curiosity" as "the desire or inclination to know or learn about anything ... a feeling of interest leading one to inquire about anything" puts better than I could just what I want my teaching to engender in my students. If we are to believe Aristotle's opening claim in the *Metaphysics* ("all men by nature desire to know") it is already true of them, and at some rubbernecking level that is no doubt the case, though often enough any deeper manifestation of this Aristotelian humanity seems to have been burned out at an early age, by careless parents (read "uncurious") or the entertainment industry. At all events it may have to be relearned, or learned in a new way, and that is where we come in. I want all my students to have the interest that leads to inquiry, to have a lively curiosity about themselves, their world, other people, other cultures, other ways of being in the world. I think it is important for them to have paradigmatic experiences of what it's like, for example, to be black if they are white (or vice versa), to be female if they are male (or vice versa), to be gay if they are straight (or vice versa), to do mathematics if they are literature majors (or vice versa), to be Islamic if they are Christian (or vice versa, and in other religious combinations including atheism); to be poor, to live under water, to play a musical instrument, to read Proust, to conduct an experiment, to work out a theorem, to confront an environmental crisis or an ethical dilemma, to prove themselves right, to be convinced that they're wrong. Not only that: I want them to *want* to know what it's like. I realize that it's not always possible to have the full paradigmatic experience: at the moment I'm in an excellent position to satisfy my curiosity, in so far as this is possible for a biologically disadvantaged person, about what it is like to be pregnant, but the biological disadvantage is a real handicap. Still I can get close enough to have a lot of sympathy for the condition, and if that were the practical outcome of the exercises I've been listing, they would

have achieved a great deal.

The ideal, then, as I see it, is an *insatiable* curiosity, not only at the level of inquisitiveness but also at the level of concern. I want my students to think that it matters how things are, anywhere, for anyone, that it's possible to find out, that it's possible to do something about it; and in the end to choose a focus for their curiosity (call it a "major") and to pursue it for the rest of their lives. How can this be encouraged? Teaching, I said earlier, is showing; and I asked, what can I point out? and is anyone looking? Pointing out, however, isn't the only way of getting people to look. I had planned for this morning, until my nerve failed, a little experiment, in which I would have started a few minutes ago fixating on some randomly chosen object, interrupting my talk occasionally to peer at it, looking puzzled. The point is that by now you would all be looking at it too, or at least wondering about me - is he all right? what's going on? And then I would have said, as I will in fact now say: the best way to get someone else to take an interest in something is to take an obvious interest in it yourself. For me, the answer to the question as to what matters most in the classroom lies here. What I can do that books can't is to convey a sense of my personal curiosity, in both the senses I've been emphasizing: to show that I really want to know, and really care about, my subject, other subjects, the outcome of arguments, the reliability of claims (whether my own or those of others - including students), the usefulness of knowledge, its morality, its scope, its limitations. Classrooms should be Petri dishes of curiosity, places where it is cultured, where students are infected with it and from which they carry it away to infect others.

Metaphors have lives of their own: that wasn't the sort of culture I had in mind when I chose my title, which was anthropological or perhaps agricultural rather than microbiological.

The culture of curiosity defines a community, and the university is one of the points of entry to that community, the main one perhaps in our world. It is a culture which includes the multicultural, the feminist, the radical, because curiosity has no *a priori* bounds and everything is of interest to it. I realize that I seem here to be working up to a peroration and that you will be expecting me at any moment to quote Terence and say that nothing human is alien to me, and that thought suggests that I should probably stop. But there's a curious thing about Terence ....

Curiosity extends, or should, to why we live with the clichés we do, and "I am a man, nothing human is alien to me" is an exemplary cliché, which, in spite of the fact that Montaigne wrote it up in his library, didn't originally mean anything like what we take it to mean. It has become the motto of a generous humanism, but was spoken, in Terence's "The Self-Tormentor," by an unpleasant busybody, Chremes, who put it forward as an excuse for snooping into other people's affairs. Actually quite a few human things are alien to me - mayonnaise, Donald Trump, surfing - but that doesn't prevent me from being curious about them: why people in Minorca ever put that stuff on their salads, how it is possible to be Donald Trump, what surfers think about all day while they're paddling around out there.

Of course "the culture of curiosity" is a nonce expression, today being the once in question, but it will have served my purpose if I've reminded you that the business of teaching is empty and perfunctory if it isn't animated by a drive on the teacher's part to share a genuine interest and concern in what is being taught, and to encourage students to keep poking, keep asking, keep challenging. This is what keeps the human enterprise alive and honest, and it is continually needed to protect civilization from the barbarians. Curiosity seemed like a good word for the occasion, given some of its familiar adjectives, not only insatiable and lively but

unquenchable and restless - but you will find other ways of making the same point, and the cat-lovers among you will certainly wish to do so.

And now I am curious to hear what you yourselves will have to say.