Zahm Lecture presented by Thomas Landy, PhD
A Guide to College in 8 Contradictions
University of Portland
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I can't tell you how grateful I am to be back at the University of Portland. It's a place that conjures up many happy memories from visits here over the course of almost 20 years. It's especially significant in my life because of the relationships I've developed here with colleagues who I admire greatly - Professor Karen Eifler, Professor Tom Greene, Professor Norah Martin, Fr. Charlie Gordon, among others. UP has been a blessing in my life, and I hope that this talk will be a chance to pay that back in part, however inadequately I can do so compared to what I've been given.

I also appreciate the opportunity to give the Zahm lecture, to reflect on, and perhaps contribute to, the aspirations for the intellectual life embodied in the University of Portland. I hope I can live up even a little bit to Fr. Zahm's legacy.

I'm going to often talk about higher education in terms that may seem to apply to all, or many universities, not only Catholic ones. The "contradictions" I mention are no less germane to Catholic universities than others. It would be a mistake, in Catholic higher education, to focus only on the particularities, and not just the commonalities shared

with other institutions, as if only the particularities, important as they may be, are the important things that define Catholic higher education. I'll circle back in the end, as much as I can in a short time, to reflect on how these contradictions are particularly manifest in a Catholic university like UP.

I know that the audience here includes faculty and the broader public, but if they'll forgive me, I'd like to direct my comments particularly to students. Talks on higher education are pretty dull, I think, if they don't have students at the center. While not denying the tremendous importance of research as a function of the university, what I'm most passionate about is the education of young people. Since I'm often called on to give talks about what the Catholic *university* should do, and this is the Zahm lecture, I'll circle around in the end to some of those questions.

The question before us right now, though, is about what it means to be, or to become, an educated person in the early 21st century. There are certainly themes that would carry over from Fr. Zahm's time, but others that are particular to the present-day context. They, and my own experience, set the stage for my choices.

I've framed this talk around eight contradictions. Ordinarily this is a terrible way to organize a talk. But I hope that as we go along, the choice will make sense and you don't find it to be too unwieldy. At least this way, if three of my points don't resonate, you'd have five to take away, and that would suit me fine.

Why contradictions? I don't mean it in the same sense as George Bernard Shaw, who once quipped maliciously that a Catholic university is a contradiction in terms. But I do mean to turn that claim upside down. "Eight contradictions" is meant to provoke, but not to deceive. I could provoke even more by saying that I agree with Oscar Wilde, that "Consistency is the last refuge of the unimaginative," or even misquote Ralph Waldo Emerson, as I've occasionally heard done, that "consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds."

I approach the contradictions not merely as provocation, because *contradictions are endemic to human life* - not something always to be eliminated. We live with values held in tension. We always have to navigate, whether we pay attention to it or not, between values that are held in tension. (Ethics, a topic I deal with often in my work as a center director, is fundamentally about navigating competing values. If there are no competing values at stake, then there's not much to think about ethically). We

have to be discerning people who live in and between tensions. As Emerson really said, it's a *foolish* consistency that is problematic.

Contradiction 1: Take responsibility for your own education. // But be willing to explore what your *professors* have to teach you.

What could seem more banal than that first sentence, "Take responsibility for your own education"?

In the 1990s, I worked at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government learning and teaching around areas of Leadership and Authority. I was fortunate to learn from a lot of brighter people than me who developed a method of teaching and learning that depended on paying attention to group dynamics - that is, on paying close attention to what is happening *within* groups *as* it is happening, on *naming* it and *learning* from it. It was a powerful way to learn, and one of the most powerful things we witnessed, over and over again, was how much resistance humans have to taking responsibility for their own learning. When you see it happen enough times, in enough ways, you start to see it as genuinely problematic, not a cliché. You learn to recognize that individuals and groups enable such resistance all the time. Human beings are fairly good at learning, yes, but from a social-psychological perspective,

it’s equally fascinating to look at how much time we spend *resisting* learning. Humans have some pretty refined mechanisms for it.

I can’t tell you how many times, over the years, I had to confront students in those courses at Harvard and then the College of the Holy Cross with evidence of the gap between their espoused claim that they took responsibility for their own education, and the reality as acted out in the classroom. I sometimes got indignant responses, or denial in the face of evidence, or just silence. Repeatedly, though, in real time in that group dynamic setting, students would usually come to grips with the evidence, and face something they didn’t want to confront about themselves.

Bright as you surely are, most of you probably don’t stand magically above all those other students when it comes to taking responsibility for your own education; you too (simply because you are human) presumably often fall short at that, in ways you don’t even notice, or refuse to account for. That can be true even while you are willing to spend who knows how much money and to devote four years to coming to college.

Now, taking responsible for your education can be a confusing suggestion in our individualist society. What I mean by it is not simply “I get to choose, no one but me

does, it's my choice." What I mean is about not being a full partner in the opportunity you've been give. I'm not chastising you for it, but merely pointing out part of the human condition that even talented people fall prey to.

Not taking responsibility for your education, happens when you distance yourself from your classes and assignments, treating them as something imposed upon you, something that you work to find shortcuts around, rather than that you try to take them up fully. Or when you try to learn just for the exam, or (and I'd say, this is the most pernicious one) expect your professors to package things neatly for you in ways that don't make you have to grapple with their complexity. Do your attitudes to professors say "package this for me in such a way that I don't have to think about it" or do they say "present it in such a way that I have to learn with you to think about it deeply, so that I have to keep engaging your mind, so that I can get the best out of you"?

"Try out what your professors have to teach you," the second half of my contradiction, is crucial. I often think of it metaphorically as "trying on" ideas, the way me might try on a clothes or a role in life. Keep trying to inhabit parts of your professors' intellectual world, and the worlds of the thinkers they expose you to.

The Holy Cross priests who founded UP have a vision to share. Faculty, individually and collectively have visions to share. You in the end do have to sort out what to do with all that, but the place to start is by trying it on and testing it as fully as possible. The University of Portland has a core curriculum; majors have requirements; professors often try to draw your attention to subjects and methods and arguments that don't at first glance interest you, but could change your minds and your lives.

Having been raised in a society that encourages you to think of yourselves as consumers, don't let yourselves approach higher education as consumers, tempting as that is. If you approach education as if you are paying for a product and buying professors' time; are entitled to pick out just the "products" (i.e. courses and ideas) that you like; are coming to a university mostly for its amenities; are thinking of a college "education" as a credential that you buy - then you are going to come out of here with way less than you could. If you've been told that what's most important is just getting *into* a good college, and *through* it, and collecting a degree, getting a credential – a product – then you've been deceived, and you've been told to settle for less than you should.

There are going to be times when you get courses you might not want. But treat even these as opportunities. In

the classroom and in office hours, treat your professors as partners in your learning. Trying to find intellectual partners and mentors among your professors is a way of taking responsibility that is very different from being a consumer who clicks from film to film on Netflix, or shops on Amazon and just selects what he likes.

We live in an age of information access, and can be tempted to think that taking responsibility for our own learning means simply being self-reliant. A good deal of learning certainly can happen when you are reading and studying by yourself, but learning is a fundamentally social process. Who we learn *with* can hold us back or advance us far. I mean that in terms of faculty, especially, but I also mean that in terms of the students you learn with, how much they challenge and enlighten you, how much you challenge and enlighten them.

More than a century ago, John Henry Newman summed up: "the general principles of any study you may learn by books at home: but the detail, the color, the tone, the air, the life which makes it live in us, you must catch these from those in whom it lives already."[1] Of course you can get some of it from books alone - or even, I dare say, from some of what's on the internet. But, as Newman recognized, "the fullness is in one place alone. It is in such

[1] JH Newman, Rise and Progress of Universities, 1854

assemblages of intellect that books themselves, the masterpieces of human intellect, themselves originated." So much about learning derives from human interaction and relationships, as a participant.

Contradiction 2: Run with the hedgehogs. *//* Run with the foxes

In a 1953 essay that is still influential today, the Latvian-born Oxford intellectual, Sir Isaiah Berlin, made a famous distinction between two types of thinkers and artists. He wrote:

"There is a line among the fragments of the Greek poet Archilochus [ar-kill-o-GUS] *which says: 'The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.' Scholars have differed about the correct interpretation of these dark words, which may mean no more than that the fox, for all his cunning, is defeated by the hedgehog's one defence. But, taken figuratively, the words can be made to yield a sense in which they mark one of the deepest differences which divide writers and thinkers, and, it may be, human beings in general. For there exists a great chasm between those, on one side [the hedgehogs], who relate everything to a single central vision, one system, less or more coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think and feel – a single, universal, organising principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say*

has significance – and, on the other side, those [the foxes] who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some de facto way, for some psychological or physiological cause, related to no moral or aesthetic principle. [Foxes] lead lives, perform acts and entertain ideas that are centrifugal [gesture] rather than centripetal [gesture]; their thought is scattered or diffused, moving on many levels, seizing upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences and objects for what they are in themselves, without, consciously or unconsciously, seeking to fit them into, or exclude them from, any one unchanging, all-embracing, sometimes self-contradictory and incomplete, at times fanatical, unitary inner vision."

Archilochus seems to be referring to the fact that when faced with danger, the fox has many tricks, but the hedgehog has only one, rolling up tightly into a ball, which serves each well.

Hedgehogs have big, core ideas that they use to interpret and explain the world. Foxes are more prone to second-guessing any single explanation, preferring to look at things from multiple perspectives. You must be able to discern already, that anyone like me who gives a talk with eight contradictions, not one big idea, surely belongs in the fox camp, though I wouldn't say that I relate to no

moral or aesthetic principle. But even I like to teach and read both ways, learning from foxes and hedgehogs.

For example: When I taught sociology of religion, I loved to teach using rational choice models. These models sought to explain how even the religious choices and the growth and decline of religious groups could be explained by reference to cost-benefit choices of individual believers. They elegantly contradicted my own beliefs, suggesting that the religious beliefs that people hold dear can be best explained by examining how they benefit the believers in perfectly rational ways, compared to the alternatives.

Rational choice theories made a big splash in my discipline. I liked to explain them with the fullest benefit of a doubt, to help students understand the perspective and inhabit it. And I think that they could explain a lot. I also did the same with Durkheim's ideas. He had very powerful explanations about religion as a *non*-rational phenomenon. He also has a powerful influence on my field.

Over the years I also worried, in the face of other evidence, that big ideas like these can run roughshod over the unassimilable details of everyday religious life. I used, in fact, to be a sociologist who was drawn to big, theoretical explanations – hedgehogs' ideas, like those of

my mentor, Peter Berger. But over time, I saw that the world was too complex to contain them, as Berger did too. Today, as a result, I spend a lot more time around the globe looking at Catholicism's complexity and particularity. Perhaps a new hedgehog will help me make sense of what I find, but I don't see that as my role right now.

For all that, I still love reading histories by thinkers like Immanuel Wallerstein or Jared Diamond, to name two examples, people who focus attention on one or a few big ideas as interpretive lenses to the whole world's history.

So what does it mean to educate yourself? Where do you stand among foxes and hedgehogs? Have you found no big ideas worth anchoring your wordview? Are you skeptical about the explanatory power of any single, big idea? Do you really want to focus on one big thing, and feel the need to drown out the seeming "noise" that surrounds you intellectual goal?

I'd want to encourage you to be conscious trying on both fox and hedgehog perspectives while you are here. Do that with the books you read, the media you seek out, and if you can discern it, with the professors do choose. Foxes *think differently* than hedgehogs, and you should explore thinking both ways.

If you're at core a hedgehog, who thinks the world all boils down to one simple thing, try encountering some thinkers who will complicate that. Hedgehogs who don't want to deceive themselves *need* to try that. And if you are naturally a fox, consider developing an academic project that allows you to delve deep into one perspective – maybe a thesis project - anything that allows you to delve into one way of thinking and to inhabit it fully for a time.

Contradiction 3: Build communities that help everyone be safe and supported. // Be ready to question whether "safe" environments help you learn.

I have in mind two conflicting truths here: People learn when they feel safe. People don't learn when they feel safe.

In 2018, this first half of my contradiction is a provocative claim. On the face of it, it sounds highly problematic to claim - at a Catholic university in an era when we've learned of so many instances where the Catholic Church has violated the basic safety expectations of a shocking number of people, or in a world where immigrants are sometimes made to feel unsafe and unwelcome anywhere they go, to take two examples - that safety could be anything but a pure virtue.

I've experienced the need for safe environments and have accompanied students and friends who were truly threatened. I have witnessed trauma, and its long-term effects, shut down human beings whose safety has been fundamentally violated.

I also know that we live in an era dominated by fear. People are more afraid of crime than ever, even when we know from crime data that most places are much, much safer now than they were in my childhood.

Parents afraid for their kids. As children, they are watched over more than ever, and parents who let kids roam unguarded are demonized. (My brother, sister, and I say that being able to roam as children was one of the best parts of our childhood. Today, I fear, my mother would be arrested).

As a college educator, I see how much more parents fear today for their children's job prospects, as if there were no room for mistakes and self-discovery. I hear so frequently that *today*, there is no wiggle room, and only study that leads directly to a job is worthwhile. Anything else is a dangerous or a waste.

Americans too often live in fear of the other, whether that other is an immigrant, or elites, or people whose

ideological views we hold suspect. We've proven susceptible to the worst sort of fear mongering.

I'm aware that a culture of increasing emphasis on safety hasn't made us feel more safe. It appears that young people suffer from increased levels of depression and anxiety despite the protection parents give.

Let me be clear that it couldn't be more important for institutions and communities of friends to create safe, supportive environments for each other. How *you* think of doing that is important.

At the same time, doing that same group dynamics work I alluded to earlier, I learned how much safety, as often as not, can get in the way of learning. That happens when we find safe niches with like-minded people; in contexts where we avoid bringing up ideas that challenge each other, because we want to be "supportive." In those cases, ideas remain untested and lost to others. We can feel inappropriately complacent with the ideas we hold, because no one does us the favor of challenging them, as at least ought to happen in an academic environment. In the settings I know of where the most learning takes place, people take risks at putting ideas out and having them critiqued and challenged. They prepare themselves to feel uncomfortable, a bit unsafe.

I remember several times in my leadership and authority class doing an exercise where each of my undergraduate Holy Cross students had to write a helpful, on-target critique of every other student in the class: something really designed to get students to pay attention in the group, and to help the recipients of that feedback hear what they have to hear if they want to learn. Each student, I told them, would be graded on the quality of the feedback they offered, and I would share the collected feedback with each student. I wanted them to learn how to advise and challenge each other honestly, and most were really challenged by my request. They wanted to be friends with each other. Yet all agreed that it was extraordinarily helpful to get that advice from others. (That's the moment when some even came to terms with the particularities of their learning avoidances, when they heard it from others, rather than just me). The point is, their desire for friendship, safety and support, conceived only in a limited way, kept them from learning what they may most have needed to learn.

Those of us who do teach, or lead, have to learn how to turn up or turn down the heat to encourage learning - to regulate and challenge students' sense of intellectual safety, to keep it in a productive range. But so too do

students need to learn a bit how to turn the heat up, or down, at times.

For some people who have been traumatized, finding and establishing a comfort zone is extremely important, and a genuine accomplishment. But unless you are in that circumstance, it's necessary and appropriate to ask how you manage to step out of your comfort zone so that you can learn. If you want to move forward in your life at your full capacity, and to improve the world, you'll have to learn how to navigate some kinds of danger. If you find a nice, safe cocoon, within circles of friends who you feel most at ease with, you won't learn about the experiences of others.

I want kindergarteners to feel safe, and even eighth graders; and I wish more than I can tell you that high school students could feel safe from violence in their classrooms. *College students* I want to feel challenged, and to learn how to respond to that. I want to see you build up each others' resilience.

Contradiction 4: Recognize your privilege. // Savor your privilege.

In the last several years, one of the discourses of higher education has entailed calling out privilege. In one sense,

it's healthy, and in another sense, not. It can call us to reflect honestly on where we stand, before we speak, or it can be a weapon intended to silence others.

I worry that "privilege" has become a dirty word. I might even compare it to the way "socialist" was, until a few years ago, one of the worst bombs that could be thrown at a politician. In the last few years, to my shock, an old Jewish politician from Vermont managed to restore it to American public life. I hesitate to talk about privilege at all, but hope that in doing so I can bring one aspect of that word back to life, to keep it from being only a dirty word.

As I say this, I know full well that power and advantage are not distributed evenly among the students here. I can readily locate myself in the hierarchies of race, gender, class, sexuality and more, for anyone who needs to know.

I thought about the contradiction of privilege recently on reading an interview with the playwright Lucy Thurber, who grew up poor in my part of the country:[2] ["]My experience at an elite liberal arts college,["] she wrote, "was shocking to me, in a wonderful way… to be in a place where people did not need to lock their doors. And not just because they weren't afraid of people stealing, but

[2]https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/27/nyregion/lucy-thurber-transfers-playwright-college-admissions-poverty.html?smprod=nytcore-ipad&smid=nytcore-ipad-share

because they weren't afraid of who might come into their room at night. Suddenly I found myself in this foreign land of unfathomable safety, and plentiful resources. I had no bearings or examples of how to operate within it. Suddenly my day was supposed to be about getting to class, deciding what to wear, and doing homework, as opposed to worrying about how to get warm, where to find food later, or how to avoid someone threatening me or my mother with violence."

The passage is jarring, because it reminds us of the forms of deprivation and unsafety that Thurber had previously endured, and the scars they left. And it reminds us of the kind of safe community that colleges and universities do need to create.

No matter what background you come from though, college is a privilege. It's a time set apart for a purpose - to foster learning. To have that is a great privilege, in the best sense, and something not to squander. I'm perhaps especially aware of that because in college I didn't have as much time carved out - I typically had to work as many as 20 hours a week during the school year - so perhaps I recognize the preciousness of that time more. But I also grabbed at college as a privilege, even if I wasn't at the elite school I'd really wanted to attend.

Later in the same piece I just read to you, Thurber writes that much as the privilege and the joy of college was real to her, “my language, my mode of being, was very foreign to the other students I met, who could not believe my utter fascination with the salad bar at lunch. Ultimately I made incredible friends and that institution changed my life, but it was a jagged beginning. I experienced panic attacks and PTSD. I felt ugly and isolated, because I did not know the culture of this place of luxury, or how to blend in within it. It wasn’t until fairly recently that I’ve accepted that this other life I’ve built was not borrowed or temporary.”

Thurber’s definition of privilege focuses a bit more on college amenities - “plentiful resources” and “luxury” on the posh campus where she attended - than on the privilege to learn, but the privilege I’m talking about is not the best field house, though it’s great that you have that. It’s not the dorms, or whatever else. It’s the gift of time and space and access to great minds and thoughtful people that’s the privilege I’m talking about.

I want to have you hold on to the fact that a college education is a privilege because I believe that every privilege comes with responsibility. I want more people from previously underrepresented groups to share in the privilege, and to want to share that privilege with others, to create the conditions that make it possible.

Thurber shares in the latter section I quoted some of the ways that she did not know what to do with privilege. It took time for her to inhabit the privilege well, and the process was difficult. But in one sense, I don't think that Thurber stands apart from most of us. She stands ahead in terms of being able to recognize privilege, but like all of us, she has to learn to think about what to *do* with privilege.

Perhaps you'll tell me, given experiences like Thurber's, that privilege is not a word that can be recovered in a world of such great inequality. So let me try another word, one that I mean in a deliberately theological sense: "gift." What you've been given by others who make it possible for you to be here - founders, teachers, family members, university benefactors - is a gift. The intellectual abilities that you have, the fortune of circumstances that allow you to be here, in a world that far too often conspires to squander talent and not to give *so* many people a chance - these are also gifts. Even if we've worked hard to be here, being here is a gift.

Particularly as I think of it in a theological sense, a gift is not something to be squandered. And a gift, if we recognize it as such, is never something to lord over others, *precisely because* it's a gift. It's not something

we're entitled to, that we can see, in the ordinary sense as something that's ours because we earned it. I recognize that you've worked hard to be here, and I don't diminish that. But I've also seen so many places in the world where people work hard, but are not given the same opportunities that we are. That's what I mean by privilege and gift. In that theological sense, recognizing that we've been given a gift leaves no room for entitlement. To think ourselves entitled is just to deceive ourselves. And to see it as a theological gift is to say that it is given with a purpose, to be used well, and shared with others.

Checking privilege does no good if it dis-ables anything but self-entitlement and misuse of the gifts we're given. See yourselves as people given many gifts, and think how you want to respond. The gifts here are particularly for intellectual space and growth, so use this time for that.

Contradiction 5: It's all about you. // It's not about you at all.

This contradiction is a correlate to the last contradiction about college as a privileged place, so I will make it brief, though it's worth stating.

College is a privileged time because in some sense it *is* all about you. I don't mean that as a marketing slogan. It is

about you in terms of its apartness from your future work life. Especially at a teaching institution, your professors are expected to look after your intellectual development, and many people help look after other needs of your development. There are counselors who help look after your mental well-being, if and when you need it. There are exercise facilities. Student affairs personnel look to develop your leadership capacities. They are here to help you reach your potential, to perhaps even become someone you didn't think possible or hadn't imagined.

But it's also not all about you: Education has to be for a larger outward purpose. It is a kind of herd immunity - like a flu shot. If you get your flu shot or other immunization, it should not only protect you, but it even protects those around you, because the fact that you don't get sick means you can't pass it on to the rest of the "herd" - the rest of us. We do get educated because it benefits us. But privilege brings obligations that require humility, boldness and generosity.

If you believe that your education really matters, Who does it matter for? Yourself, yes. And how for others? Think now about what an other-centered educational commitment and what it should look like. Figure out who and what is worth giving the gift you've been given to.

Contradiction 6: An education that doesn't deeply explore the power of at least one religious tradition, and religion's role in shaping in human history, does us a disservice. // Education that doesn't confront arguments against belief is no less a disservice.

Ironically, having committed months ago to too many contradictions in this talk, I'm not going to develop this one fully, though I've tried to set it out clearly and concisely in the summary above.

By virtue of its history and driving beliefs, UP hopes in particular that its students will explore at least one religion, Catholic Christianity, with some seriousness. In the face of ongoing revelations about the profound failures of so many Catholic leaders, 2018 seems like the *worst* time to explore Catholicism, Christianity, or religion at all. You may be at the point in life where you think that Christianity, or any faith, has little or nothing to offer. But maybe today is the *best* time, a chance to cut through cant and to get to the heart of the matter. Honest inquiry into faith, for educated people, means facing up to the arguments against it, the challenges to it. Religion <u>has</u> been an driving force in history, a source of meaning and life.

Compare my claim that this is a good time to study and get involved in the life of faith to the need many people

feel at this moment in history to get involved in politics: Government institutions may be failing us, we may be disgusted, but it's exactly the right time to get involved, not to walk away; to think about what the truest and best forms of living our lives together are, and to help bring them to being.

Use your time here to explore these religious traditions and their contradictions in their fullness, so that you can better ask "How to Live," whether from the perspective of eternity or from the perspective of human finitude.

Contradiction 7: Learn to think critically. // Embrace the experience of Wonder.

Some years ago, back home at the College of the Holy Cross, I led a group of younger faculty alongside our now-Provost, Margaret Freije, to develop a document that would help us think about what it meant for us to be a Catholic, Jesuit, all-undergraduate liberal arts college. We already had a quite remarkable, non-clichéd mission statement, but by the time we began the process, that statement was more than 15 years old, and we wanted to supplement it by inviting a next generation of faculty to think about these questions. The one thing that I heard first and foremost, from every person in the group, loud

and clear, was that we should emphasize that education is about helping students to think critically.

Indeed, whenever I talk to faculty about the purposes of higher education, teaching critical thinking skills is right at the fore. The funny thing that I learned from our faculty group, as we tried to spell out what critical thinking meant in a few paragraphs, was that we didn't actually all agree on what that means. Nonetheless, we all believe that critical thinking is a *sine qua non* in higher education, the one quality that higher education must impart. I would be shocked if your faculty did not agree: while here at UP, students need to learn to think critically, to systematically question taken-for-granted truths, and to move past accepting things on the basis of authority.

Let me give one example of how one person who is not from academe wrote about its value: In a short essay earlier this year, titled how "Philosophy Prepared Me for a Career in Finance and Government," Robert Rubin, a former bank CEO and Secretary of the Treasury of the United States, described what he valued about his humanities education, particularly what he experienced in a sophomore philosophy class: He cited a professor who changed his life, in a quietly unfolding way. This professor, "a genial little man with white hair and an exceptional talent for engaging students from the lecture

hall stage, using an overturned wastebasket as his lectern... would use Plato and other great philosophers to demonstrate that proving any proposition to be true in the final and ultimate sense was impossible. His approach to critical thinking planted a seed in me" Rubin wrote, "that grew during my years at Harvard and throughout my life. The approach appealed to what was probably my natural but latent tendency toward questioning and skepticism. I concluded that you can't prove anything in absolute terms, from which I extrapolated that all significant decisions are about probabilities. Internalizing the core tenet of Professor Demos's teaching — weighing risk and analyzing odds and trade-offs — was central to everything I did professionally in the decades ahead in finance and government."[3]

Rubin's example is hardly the most radical I can think of – some professors mean by critical thinking that students should be taught to question the whole structure of capitalist society that Rubin commanded and preserved a decade ago (see what I mean about my colleagues' difficulty agreeing about what critical thinking means) – but it speaks to *a* value of critical thinking. It also suggests that critical reasoning is not the same as a lazy skepticism. It's about systematically looking at what you *can* know,

[3] https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/30/opinion/robert-e-rubin-philosophy.html?smprod=nytcore-ipad&smid=nytcore-ipad-share

and *can't* know; what you implicitly assume; and thinking through the implications of that. Systematically questioning taken-for-granted truths, and moving past accepting things on authority alone is actually hard to do consistently in a complex world. We all have biases.

I've been trained most of all in my academic career to value critical thinking. I believe deeply in the value of questioning received ideas, authority and wisdom, especially where these are used as tools of power and advantage over others. And I'd say to undergrads without any hesitation that if you don't come out of here equipped to think critically in all sorts of ways, you've settled for far less than you should have.

Paul Ricoeur, a celebrated philosopher at the University of Chicago, coined a phrase for how academics should approach texts: through a "hermeneutics of suspicion." Hermeneutics is the philosophical term for the study of how it is we interpret texts; "hermeneutics of suspicion" is a fundamental belief that we should "read a text with caution, even skepticism, determined to test every claim and proposition against such humanly defined standards as the light of reason or the evidence of history."[4]

[4] David Jasper, *A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics,* Westminster John Knox, pp. 9-10.

I mention the “hermeneutics of suspicion” not simply to be the sort of pedant who takes a simple idea and dresses it up with jargon, but for another purpose. But before I address that, I wonder if we could stop for a moment and ask ourselves about the moment we do live in. We live in a skeptical time. Americans are skeptical and critical, not without reason, of churches, every branch of government, the police, experts, universities, the healthcare system – things, I daresay, that both fail us and often serve us quite well, at different moments and in different ways. I’m not here to argue about whether we should be skeptical, but to suggest that our skepticism signals a need for giving more thought to the second half of the contradiction I just suggested.

Could it be, as the educational philosopher Karen Eifler said to me when she invited me for this lecture, that “in a world of too much cool, we need wonder and magic”? (Full disclosure: a) She has heard me speak about wonder before, and wanted me to address that here, and b) I wasn’t just teasing her by leaving this subject to the end)

The poet Billy Collins, an alumnus of my own College of the Holy Cross, illustrates the dilemma better than I can, in a poem called ***Introduction to Poetry:***

I ask them to take a poem

and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

Students: have you, in some way, been taught to see that torturing a confession out of it, "finding out what it really means" is the only thing educated people do to poems? Or literature? Or art? Or mathematical or scientific problems?

In talks to faculty about this, I've often suggested that what we also need to do for our students today is to offer them something I'd christen, in light of Ricoeur, a "hermeneutics

of wonder," a way of getting you to approach a text or a problem that seeks to inhabit it and explore it with boundless curiosity – a curiosity that does not only mean "solving" it.

Faculty actually resonate with that. They recognize the losses that are entailed with only inhabiting a world of critique.

Critique is cool. It can make you feel powerful. But that power can also delude you, and blind you to all the other things there are to see. It can fool you into thinking that *solving* is all you need to do, that you should find the answer so that you can ignore the thing itself and move on.

I think that to be an educated, sentient being who pays attention to the world requires being able to able to *wonder* at the world, or a poem, or a complex biological structure.
Wonder is the beginning of inquiry, much like curiosity. It should grasp us *whole*.

The philosopher Jerome Miller makes the point that "The experience of wonder… is the beginning of all human inquiry… [b]ecause wonder makes the 'why' spring to our lips." // "It prevents us from living inside our own little

worlds" because it is outside directed. // "It makes everything we already know pale into insignificance. Wonder, of its very nature, is an eruption of the numinous in human life." ///

Wonder is about that which transcends us, and also transforms us and our way of thinking. It steps beyond what we take to be given about the world. It can be about facing something joyful and enlightening, but it is also brings us face to face with what we don't know, with fear.

When I consider some of the words that would accompany a hermeneutic of wonder -- Awe. Grace. Gift. Longing. Passion. Mystery. Revelation – they seem especially life-giving, and ultimately deeply spiritual. They seem like words to live by, words to learn by.

One of my fears today is that our present emphasis on the hermeneutics of suspicion, taken alone, paralyzes young people from hoping they can improve the world in meaningful ways. Don't let that happen.

Wonder, for obvious reasons, takes me back to one of the functions of the Zahm lecture, whose mandate is in part to think about the University's mission in terms of its Catholic commitments. I think that Wonder begins to do that, in a way that should be able to engage people from a wide

variety of faiths, or no faith commitment. I am fully aware that the capacity to wonder does not lead everyone in a straight line to doctrinal faith. Wonder should be valued at any university, but certainly ought to be, at a Catholic university, a foundational good, without which nothing of value is possible -- equal in value to critical thinking.

Without it, I also think Catholic identity is hollow.

Some of us will be led to traditional religious faith through it, others not, even if we explore Wonder with utmost seriousness. But I'm helped by recalling lines from Mary Oliver's poem, "The Summer Day." In it, she writes,

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.

It's a wonderful juxtaposition - she says that she doesn't know what prayer is, and doesn't claim there that she is doing so - even as she does something that to me is the *foundation* of prayer. She pays attention, deeply, and wonders at what she sees.

“Attention is the beginning of devotion,” Mary Oliver tells us elsewhere.

Conclusion

What is it that you are asked, as an educated person, to do with contradictions? Maybe from a personal, psychological perspective, you might need at times to *ignore* them. Some might say that you should *resolve* them. I’d ask you to *live with* them, even to *live in* them. Not in simple relativism, but in a full engagement with their power and demands.

What about the University of Portland, then, and its mission? I said I’d get to that at the end.

As a university, and particularly as a Catholic University, the University of Portland lives in all the contradictions I named. Think about **hedgehogs and foxes.** Is the university best off as a fox, an institution that knows many things, that to again quote Berlin “*pursue[s] many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some de facto way... related to no moral or aesthetic principle.”*? That is centripetal, not centrifugal? That’s the ideal of the modern research university, in many respects -- *not* to stand for anything but exploration, wherever it goes.

Or should UP "*relate everything to a single central vision, one system, less or more coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think and feel – a single, universal, organising principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance"* like Berlin's hedgehog? Wouldn't the Christian vision be that central vision? Shouldn't UP embrace it?

A university like the University of Portland has to offer you a hedgehog's vision, *and* a fox's. It also has to offer, as thoughtfully and eloquently as possible, a Christian vision. It needs to show you the complexity of a fox's worldview. It has to give you a chance to test the Christian worldview, and to see other views. It has to stand for one thing and let you test the opposite.

A university like UP has to provide you with safety and build community, but challenge you in appropriate ways that make you feel uncomfortable.

It has to help you acknowledge and make the best out of a privilege – a gift - and not teach you to use it as a source of power and self-aggrandizement over others.

It has to dedicate itself to *you* and to teach you *not* to live just for yourselves.

It has to foster both critique and wonder.

I don’t say all these things because I think that the president, provost and faculty will suddenly realize tonight that they have to start doing all these things, though it’s good to name the contradictions and to have our attention drawn to them.

I say all this to point out that the University of Portland is inevitably a contradiction in itself - the eighth of the contradictions I’ll point to tonight.

UP - its students, administration and faculty - has to live *with* and *in* that contradiction, to navigate it, which is not easy, but certainly makes life more interesting. Contradictions, as I said at the beginning, are part of the human condition. “Solving” the contradiction for the university is never the goal. Some contradictions are meant to be *lived*, not solved.