

Last Lecture

By Mick Cochrane, syndicated from thesunmagazine.org, May 3, 2018

Recently I was invited to give a special lecture at the university where I teach. I accepted the invitation though, contrary to what my sons might tell you, I don't really like to *lecture*. For one thing, I'm not good at it. Also the concept of a lecture suggests to me that the speaker intends to deliver from on high some absolute Truth, with a capital T, and that does not interest me.

But this lecture was different. It would be part of a series inspired by Randy Pausch's book *The Last Lecture*. Pausch was a computer-science professor at Carnegie Mellon University who, while facing a terminal diagnosis, spoke directly to his students and colleagues about the things that matter most.

Thankfully I am not sick (illness is not a requirement to participate in the series), but I did try to take my cue from Pausch, and from a line by Bob Dylan: "Let us not talk falsely now, the hour is getting late." Rather than deliver some brilliant thesis or clever syllogism, I simply told four stories from my heart—all of them, I hope, like the very best stories, supple and open-ended and perhaps even a bit mysterious.

These are the four stories.

I

I am standing in a bedroom of the house I grew up in. I am four, maybe five years old. My sister, Sue, a year and a half older, is standing next to me, and the two of us are staring out the window into the night sky. She is teaching me how to wish on a star. She softly says the words, a kind of incantation, and I repeat them, just as softly: "Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight . . ." Maybe for the first time I feel the strange power of rhythmic language, of poetry. Just to be hearing and speaking such words under such circumstances is magical. Sue explains that I'm supposed to wish for something: my heart's desire, no limits. So I do. I wish for a stuffed bear. That's what I want, but no ordinary teddy bear—a big one, as tall as I am. It is probably the most outrageous and impossible thing I can imagine.

Meanwhile, downstairs, my family is falling apart. My father is a successful trial lawyer, by all accounts a brilliant man, but when he is drinking—which soon will be pretty much all the time—he is angry, violent, and abusive. He throws dishes, kicks down doors, yells and hits and breaks things. In the years ahead my father will leave, return occasionally to terrorize us, but not support us. He will cause tremendous suffering and die alone in a downtown hotel room when I am in high school.

My mother right now is in the early stages of an incurable, degenerative neurological disease, which will leave her depressed and crippled: she will die at home with my sister and me caring for her while we are both in college. We will be poor—no car—no telephone, and, for one memorable stretch, no hot water.

Sometime after my wishing lesson—the next day, as I remember it, but that can't be true, can it?—my sister goes shopping with a neighbor's family. She returns holding in her arms—what else?—one very large stuffed bear. He wears a ribbon tied rakishly around his neck. He has bright eyes and a pink felt tongue. His fur is soft and shiny. And he is big — exactly the size of a five-year-old boy. He is named Twinkles, which is clever, don't you think? It must have been my sister's idea. I would have named him Beary, or maybe Mr. Bear.

Twinkles, it turns out, can talk—at least, he can when my sister is around. He has quite a lively and endearing personality. He's a good listener, too. He cocks his head and gestures expressively. Over time Twinkles develops an increasingly complex social life involving other stuffed animals, who also begin speaking and displaying distinctive personalities. Jim Henson hasn't invented the Muppets yet, but Sue's genius for creating furry characters is equal to his. She and I start to think of this collection of animals as inhabiting a place, an independent

nation. We call it Animal Town. I'll spare you the details, but it has an origin story, an anthem we sing together, a political structure. Twinkles is elected president year after year, term limits be damned. We have a clubhouse, sports teams—by some amazing coincidence, Twinkles plays baseball, which just happens to be my favorite sport, too—even, I kid you not, trading cards hand-drawn by Sue. Together we create a complex web of stories, a mythology almost as rich and varied as that of the ancient Greeks.

So there is my childhood. On the one hand, confusion and fear, neglect and violence perpetrated by damaged adults; on the other hand, a couple of kids with a vast reservoir of courage, imagination, and love.

II

I am a sophomore at the University of St. Thomas, a private liberal-arts school in St. Paul, Minnesota. I am a history and political-science major: for sure I am going to law school; maybe I am going to be president. But first I need to take one more English course, and I don't know which one to choose.

I am in Aquinas Hall, where the English-department faculty have their offices. I have heard about one English professor in particular, Dr. Joseph Connors. Several people have told me the same thing: *Take a class from Dr. Connors*. It's rumored that, on the last day of the semester, his students rise and give him a standing ovation—he's that good. I decide to ask his advice about which course would be best for me. It is wholly out of character for me to do this. I am a good student but pathologically shy. I sit in the back of classrooms and do not ask questions and generally cultivate invisibility. What possesses me to knock on this strange professor's door? I can't say.

I should also mention that, at this time, having graduated from a high school that enforced short haircuts, I have long hair. I also have a beard—unkempt, somewhat Amish, somewhat Russian. (I was aiming for Dostoyevsky but may have landed on Rasputin.) I am wearing boots and an Army-surplus overcoat. Probably I look like General Ulysses S. Grant after a long, bad night.

The great wonder is that, when I knock on his door looking like this, Dr. Connors doesn't call security. He smiles. He welcomes me into his office, where the shelves are lined with books. The room even smells like books. It smells like learning.

Dr. Connors is the most deeply literate man I will ever meet. He reads all of Shakespeare's plays each year. He also reads Boswell's *Life of Johnson*—unabridged!—annually. He knows a great many poems by heart: in the middle of a lecture he will stare off into the distance and recite a Shakespeare sonnet. (I used to think there was a teleprompter hidden somewhere.)

But I don't know any of this yet as Dr. Connors brings me into his office and makes me feel there just might be room for me in this place. He takes books down from his shelves and shows them to me. He talks about the Romantic writers he's teaching next semester—Blake, Keats, Byron—as if they were mutual friends of ours. I nod a lot. These books are treasures; I can tell by the way he handles them. They contain secrets I want to know. Dr. Connors spends a long time with me, somehow intuiting, as all great teachers do, that behind seemingly simple queries there often lie deeper, more difficult, possibly impossible-to-articulate questions. I leave his office well on my way to becoming an English major. I don't want to be president anymore; I want to be Dr. Connors.

He and my other professors and mentors, through their kindness and encouragement, changed my life. They gave me hope that a certain shaky, half-formed story I wanted to tell about myself just might—possibly, maybe, someday—come true. When I did my PhD studies at the University of Minnesota, Dr. Connors took me to lunch at the beginning of each academic year at the Curtis Hotel, just as his mentor had done for him.

After Dr. Connors retired, after his wife passed away, after I had become a professor myself, my wife and I would visit him. He lived into his nineties. Though increasingly frail in body, he was always generous in spirit, as sharp and curious as ever.

Every time I knocked on his door at Rosewood Estate, part of me remembered with pleasure and gratitude that first time I knocked on his door in Aquinas Hall. That day he treated me—a scruffy, shy, naive young man—like a serious person, a student of literature, someone worthy of the world of poetry and story. And somehow that is who I have become.

III

I am at the Gowanda Correctional Facility in western New York. It is two days before Christmas, and I have been invited here because of a program called Battle of the Books: The inmates form into teams and, after weeks of study, compete by answering trivia questions about four novels for young readers—because the prison librarian believes these books will not be too difficult or intimidating. Today a book I've written—about a grieving, baseball-loving girl named Molly who's mastered the difficult art of the knuckleball—is one of the selections.

I've had my background checked, gone through security, and been given instructions on how to behave in here: Don't reveal private information. Don't walk between two inmates. Don't stand too close to anyone. I am brought into a big open room like a gym, where the men stand in groups. A couple of hand-lettered signs announce BATTLE OF THE BOOKS and list the names of the teams that are competing. It feels a little like a high-school mixer, except everyone but the librarians is a man, and all the men are wearing green prison uniforms, and instead of chaperones there are guards. Other than that, it's exactly like a high-school mixer.

I am here to watch the competition, which is like the bastard offspring of *Jeopardy!* and street basketball: nerdy knowledge wrapped in high-fives and trash talk. These guys know more about my novel than I do. They know, for example, the favorite color of the main character's mother. (Teal.) Numbers, food, the full names of minor characters—they have memorized it all. They know the freaking batting order of Molly's baseball team. And they know the other books just as well. Rarely does a team miss a question, no matter how obscure. There is tremendous joy in the room.

The competition lasts around three hours. After a while I almost feel as if I know these guys. Before I arrived here, I had the usual preconceived notions about prisoners. Now I see that, except for the green uniforms, the inmates look like people I might run into at the grocery store or a ballgame. I start to wonder: If the guards and inmates switched uniforms, would I be able to tell? Then I wonder: If I were to put on a green uniform, would I stand out? Would someone say, *Hey, what's the novelist doing dressed like an inmate?* I don't think so.

I find myself rooting for one team in particular. They call themselves the Twelve Steppers, or something like that. I get the reference: they are in recovery, trying to change their lives one day at a time. These men have done bad things. They've committed crimes. They've hurt people. But here they are, about to spend Christmas in this place. How can I not root for them?

Afterward the head librarian brings one of the men over to tell me something. He is about my age. "Your book," he says, "is the first book I've ever read." He thanks me for writing it. I thank him for reading. He extends his hand, and even though it is against the rules—especially because it is against the rules—I take it and try to squeeze into it all the strength and hope I can.

IV

My sister, Sue, the Jim Henson of West St. Paul, Minnesota, grew up to major in political science and French in college and studied for two terms in France. A self-taught musician—piano, guitar, bass, banjo, harp; you name it, she can play it—she performed in various bands: bluegrass, rock, rhythm and blues, classical, polka, even a little punk-polka, an under-

appreciated genre. She graduated with honors from law school, worked with a firm that specialized in antitrust law, drank too much, got sober, started her own practice, then switched to legal aid and worked for the St. Paul American Indian Center before being named a Hennepin County Family Court judge. She got married and adopted three boys from Korea, one with special needs. Throughout her judicial career she was a radical force, always aiming to make the system less damaging and more merciful.

Ten years ago, when she was diagnosed with breast cancer and undergoing treatment, she moved for a time to traffic court, but she couldn't give up her inclination to improve the system. She founded a community-justice initiative and went into Minneapolis neighborhoods that scared even her bailiff. She sat down with people there, without a robe, across a table in a community center, and listened to their problems, then helped them figure out what they needed to do to get their driver's license back.

Five years ago Sue learned that her cancer had returned and metastasized to her bones and her brain. It is Stage IV, a terminal diagnosis. Since then, I have not heard her utter a word of self-pity. She also has not slowed down one bit. She's taken her sons on a number of trips. She's organized and spoken at a conference on the topic of "Love and the Law"—an unlikely concept to you and me, but not to Sue. She's continued to cook and quilt. She's maintained her meditation practice and still serves as a kind of personal Buddhist teacher to her sons, her friends, and one brother.

She's also created a website to share some of her writing. If you visit it—just Google "Sue Cochrane healing"—you'll see that she arranges her writing under several headings. There's a section on the law, where she explores more-humane models of resolving disputes. There's a section called Living My Life, which contains updates on her health. And there's a section labeled Power of Love. It contains poems, photos, and essays on compassion. To get to them, you click a link that says, "Click here for unconditional love." It really says that. "Click here for unconditional love." I strongly recommend you do this.

About a year ago Sue flew to the Barrow Neurological Institute in Phoenix, Arizona, for brain surgery. Because her husband needed to stay with their boys, I flew down to be with her. I got on a plane in Buffalo, New York, just about the time she was being prepped. I thought about what the surgeons were doing, with their scalpels and drills and high-tech vacuums, while I was crossing the Rockies. Not knowing what the result of the surgery would be, I arrived in Phoenix, got a cab to the hospital, found the surgery floor, and entered the recovery room as she was coming to.

She had a wicked gash across her scalp—nineteen staples long—and her face was swollen, one eye almost closed. She looked like she'd gone twelve rounds with Muhammad Ali in his prime. The surgery, we would soon learn, was a complete success, beyond expectations.

Sue was groggy but recognized me and took my hand. She said two things, again and again, two things I would encourage you to consider saying to yourself and your loved ones from time to time. They are words you can use in almost any circumstance. She said: "I am so happy to be alive." And: "I'm glad you're here."

+ + +

So there you are: four stories. There's no thesis in any of them, no theme, no hidden meaning. If you want to draw some lessons from them, you are free to do so. You may decide to trust in the sustaining power of the imagination. You may decide to knock on a stranger's door, or to open doors for others if you can. You may decide to shake someone's hand, even if it's against the rules. And I hope you will click on unconditional love. Always that: click on unconditional love.

Mick Cochrane teaches—but rarely lectures—at Canisius College in Buffalo, New York, and is the author of four novels. His spirit animal is a mule. The Sun is an independent, ad-free magazine that for more than forty years has used words and photographs to evoke the splendor and heartache of being human.