

## **Fortin Address**

**Timothy S. Quinn**

Good afternoon, everyone.

First of all, I wish to thank the Fortins for endowing this annual award. This is no small thing. It has become commonplace nowadays to lament the retreat of the Humanities from the heart of universities everywhere, if not their impending annihilation. But thanks to the principled generosity of the Fortin family, our University rewards those who fight to keep them alive.

I wish also to thank my students and colleagues who have deemed my efforts on behalf of the Humanities worthwhile. I'm here today only because I have been continually inspired by all of you. At the same time, I have to confess that, listening to your remarks, I scarcely recognize myself. Your words are deeply moving; my gratitude, on the other hand, is beyond words.

But now that you've given an account of me, I shall presume to give an account of myself. Because I am not one of those clever people who can do more than one thing well at a time, I have, since arriving at Xavier over 30 years ago, dedicated myself primarily to teaching. Fortunately, teaching is the principal responsibility of faculty here, as I quickly discovered. I recall wondering, as a freshly minted Ph.D., whether the rumors were true, that professors after receiving tenure slacked off. What I discovered was quite the opposite: exemplary professors who set a high bar for dedication to sharing the life of the mind with their students. Paul Colella, Arthur Dewey, Norman Finkelstein, the late Bob Murray and John Rettig, the estimable Roger Fortin--I recall thinking, "I better get to work!" To teach well, however, required that

I become a student of the books I was teaching—an activity that raised questions that led me to other books, and therefore other questions, and so on, and so on. I was able to sustain a study of the books I used in my classes because they are great books. They are great because they are inexhaustible. So, every semester, I would pick up Descartes' *Discourse on Method*, for example, with fresh enthusiasm, because I was able to examine the book again with fresh eyes, that is, through my students' eyes.

Now, if I count my time in graduate school, I've been teaching for nearly 40 years. In that time, I've learned one thing with absolute clarity: I have never managed to teach anyone anything. Plato, Descartes, Heidegger, Nietzsche: these are actually the teachers in my classroom. All I can do is to help my students find a way for themselves into these books, to learn from these teachers. If I've received kudos over the years for this effort, it is only because my students have found their own way: praise for a teacher is in truth just deferred praise for the true masters, the authors of the "great books" themselves, before whom I too seek my way, in the same manner as my students. This is why I'm fond of telling my students that there is no genuine difference between us. My only difference from my students is the fact that I've read the books before them, and I dress up for class. For we all come to the books with similar questions and similar limitations; we are in this respect equals. Teaching, for me, has therefore become an education in humility, as well as a source of friendships that have sustained me over the decades. I'm reminded of a remark by Leo Strauss, the teacher of one of my teachers, who was once asked by a young professor how he ought to approach his first class. Strauss explained:

Always assume there is one silent student in your class who is your superior, in head and heart...Do not have too high an opinion of your importance, but have the highest opinion of your duty, your responsibility.

Needless to say, I find that student every year, duly humbled by my responsibility.

Concerning my scholarship, all I can say is that I write in order to discover things for myself or to work out questions arising from the books I read with my students. For this reason, my scholarly career resembles more a meandering stream than a straightahead superhighway. After working on Kant's aesthetics in my doctoral dissertation, I realized quickly that to understand Kant required me, for various reasons, to come to terms with Aristotle. But to understand Aristotle I needed a guide; and the best guides turned out to be Maimonides, Averroes and al-Farabi. But to understand them, and especially Maimonides, I thought it was necessary to confront one of their best readers and greatest critics, Spinoza. Studying Spinoza matched my teaching duties nicely, given his Cartesian discipleship. The nesting of Spinoza and Descartes however turned me back once more, not only to Aristotle and Plato, who they reject, but to their immediate antecedents, Francis Bacon and Niccolò Machiavelli, and then ahead, to Nietzsche (the author who brought me to philosophy in high school) and to his 20<sup>th</sup> century disciple, Martin Heidegger. This story gives the main currents of my reading over the past two decades or so. But there were several other tributaries down which I paddled for a while: Torah, Jewish poetry, Thomas More, Montaigne, to name a few. A group of questions has emerged for me as a result of these various divagations and digressions: where the line falls—if at all—between poetry and philosophy; whether Athens and Jerusalem, reason and revelation can

subsist independently of each other; what are the causes and the essential features of modernity; who the Greeks were. Just now I stated these issues badly; a better way of putting the matter is: who is telling the truth?

In this effort, I have always relied on the kindness of friends. Earlier in my career, while serving as director of what was then named the HAB program (now CPHAB) I found the act of writing a rather fraught experience. All I could manage during that time were translations of Greek and Latin poetry. But thanks to the warm and wise counsel of my friend and colleague Karl Stuckenburg, I managed to find a way back to writing. Since then, other friends and colleagues have encouraged me in new directions of study: Michael Sweeney, in our joint effort to understand the history of Catholic political philosophy; Steve Frankel, who encouraged me to work on the issue of civil religion in Toqueville and Machiavelli; Richard Polt, who managed to squeeze a few essays out of me concerning the roots of the Anthropocene crisis; Gabe Gottlieb, who encouraged me to pursue my latest passion, the work of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Jewish thinker Salomon Maimon.

The life of a student of philosophy is in large measure a skeptical life, a life of universal, radical, and at times unsettling inquiry. At the same time, it is a life spent in search of fundamental truths about the deepest matters affecting our shared humanity. It is, as a result, a fraught life. But it is also a life of deep and abiding pleasures, cultivating deep and abiding friendships. As I have come to understand it, and as Xavier has allowed me to live it out, education is an erotic quest, a quest for completion, for fulfillment, and for the liberation such fulfillment brings. We thus

celebrate the liberal arts, because they liberate us to from the slavery of popular opinion, and the humanities, because they humanize us.

In the end, then, I am no professional educator, but an amateur, quite literally, a lover, who fell in love with the life of the mind decades ago, and who is infinitely grateful for the privilege to have been able to share it with my students and colleagues here at Xavier.

Thank you.