

“Aesthetics.” When I say the word, some of you might think about the philosophy of art and of sculpture. Or your mind might go to “taste,” or to the study of the beautiful and the sublime. But the ancient Greek root of aesthetics, “aesthesis,” actually meant something very different. It meant “sense perception,” or “perceptual experience.” In other words, it meant the kind of knowledge that comes from the five senses.

This ancient meaning of aesthetics helps clarify Aristotle’s enigmatic claim, in his Nicomachean Ethics, that the friend is another self (heteros autos). When I am friends with you, or you friends with me, we come to share a way of seeing, hearing, and feeling that Aristotle called sunaesthesis. I may not fully agree with your logic or your rhetoric, and you may not fully agree with mine, but when I see I have the capacity to see with your eyes, and when I hear I have the capacity to hear with your ears. Our disagreement is therefore supplemented by a sixth sense. The things we perceive around us – the pale sunlight outside, this room’s gentle curves, these vanishing words – are not then completely different for each of us. We inhabit a world that is in principle shareable, a world that potentially, if not always in actuality, can be held in common. The art of friendship becomes the art of creating this common where before it didn’t or couldn’t exist. It’s the art of incorporating, in an almost literally physical sense, a shareable aesthesis.

I was not a close friend of Jeffrey Ferguson. I therefore lack the qualifications – the shared eyes, the common ears – that friendship alone can provide. But thanks to some colleagues who do have those qualifications, most especially Rosalina de la Carrera and Hilary Moss, I’ve been able to spend time with some of what Jeff wrote about teaching. Today I’d like to share some thoughts about one text in particular, which is the tenure letter Jeff wrote on May 31, 2005.

Before quoting from this text, a word about what a “tenure letter” is. At Amherst College, candidates for tenure are invited to write a letter summarizing their research, their teaching, and their service to the college. This letter is then read by the senior members of the candidate’s department, around eight to twelve scholars from outside the college, the six members of the college’s executive committee, the Provost and Dean of the Faculty, and the President. I have said that the tenure letter is “read,” but as you can see it would be more accurate to say that it is “scrutinized,” for it is studied very carefully by about twenty to thirty senior scholars.

In fact, it’s hard to imagine any document that is more pressurized and more consequential in the life of a young scholar. Here, after all, is where one most fully gives an account of oneself and of the work to which one has

dedicated one's life. And yet, in one of the stranger customs of academic life, a document so pivotal and comprehensive as this never then sees the light of day. Because tenure letters ordinarily remain completely confidential, one sums up one's life's work only to then seal away that summation forever. I'm therefore grateful both to Jeff's wife, Agustina, and also to Provost and Dean of the Faculty Catherine Epstein for allowing me to speak about Jeff's tenure letter today, for the account he gives of himself there has much to teach us about what it means to teach.

In the first of its eleven pages, Jeff's letter describes what he will call his "intellectual life," which began in the Afro-American Studies Department at Harvard in the early 1980s. That department may not be as star-studded as it is today, Jeff writes, but it did offer something different: "personal attention." Jeff will then explain what this means.

"I trace my desire to teach in a small college to how effectively close attention brought me along. Without this, I doubt that I would have become a professor at all. Close attention made me feel that something truly valuable had been passed down to me. Some gifts, especially those most weighted with human significance, must be given in order to be received. To the best of my ability, I am still trying to give this gift today."

Jeff then goes on to explain his relationship with the Harvard Professor Nathan Huggins. Jeff describes Huggins as "a polymathic intellectual historian and one of the truly great conversationalists in a university full of professional talkers." Huggins lectured in his classes, Jeff says, but in his tutorials he taught Socratically. "To this day," Jeff adds, "I remember some of the questions that he asked because I am still trying to answer them. I base my own teaching on asking, and on getting my students to ask, good, tough questions." Nevertheless, Jeff says of Huggins, "we never became friends, at least not in the casual sense that most people employ the term."

Having left open the possibility that he and Huggins were friends in some deeper sense, Jeff then writes the following. "I never knew how much I meant to Huggins until he died. His wife asked only three people to speak at his memorial service[.]" One of them, it turns out, was Jeff. "I cannot say much for or against the choice of speakers, but I can say that on that day in Memorial Church, as a graduate student standing in front of the toughest audience I will ever face – and under the toughest circumstances – I learned a tremendous amount concerning the core meaning of intellectual obligation. I truly became Huggins's student that day. In retrospect, I can say that he taught me even more in death than he did in life."

What lesson was it that Huggins taught Jeff that day? And what was it about that lesson that moved Jeff to say that only on that day did he truly become Huggins's student? Could it have something to do with the belated realization that the "close attention" Huggins showed him during his life was much more profound than Jeff at first realized? That what one might call their uncommon friendship only fully came into its own once it was too late for them to share the same living present with one another? If so, what might this bittersweet asynchrony teach us about the core meaning of intellectual obligation?

And what might we learn from a tenure letter that begins in the way that Jeff's does? In the opening pages of Jeff's letter, this text in which he gives an account of himself and his life's work, we find a most curious portrait of the relation between student and teacher. We find a student who only truly becomes his teacher's student following the death of his teacher. And we find a teacher who somehow teaches even more in death than he did in life. The student and teacher once belonged to the same chronological and historical present. They sat with one another in the same room. They broke bread together. They shared an incessant conversation about the texts, theories, questions, problems, and authors they had in common. But in some decisive sense, they only truly came into their own as teacher and as student only after they no longer shared the same living present. Why?

We find a clue in Jeff's letter. Huggins, you'll recall Jeff writing, taught Socratically. "To this day," Jeff wrote, "I remember some of the questions that [Huggins] asked because I am still trying to answer them. I base my own teaching on asking, and on getting my students to ask, good, tough questions." Later in his letter, Jeff again speaks of the Socratic, only this time to explain how he adjusted his "rather uncompromising version of the Socratic style" to meet what he calls "the special demands of Amherst classrooms." Adjustment is not the same as abandonment, however, and at no point in his tenure letter will Jeff say that he gave up on the Socratic approach he learned from Huggins. Quite the opposite.

Consider, for example, the syllabus for Introduction to Black Studies, which Jeff crafted together with Hilary Moss and taught from 2004 to 2012. The course description includes the following claim. "As the course title indicates, this is an introduction. As such it should spark your sense of wonder[.] The sense of wonder is probably the most important prerequisite for doing meaningful research." One is reminded here of the line from Plato's Theatetus that Hannah Arendt loved to cite: "wonder is what the philosopher endures most; for there is no other beginning of philosophy than wonder."

But what exactly is the sense of wonder? And how might an introduction spark it? In Plato's writings, wonder is always specifically speechless in character. When I speak with Socrates, I begin to speak less and to think more, and I express my wonder by falling silent in an almost shocked or stunned manner. One of the finest examples of this dynamic appears in Plato's Symposium, which also happens to be one of the finest texts ever written on pedagogy. A symposium is a banquet and a drinking party, and, in the one Plato depicts, seven friends decide to compete to see who can give the best speech in praise of Love. Each of the friends takes a turn, drinking all the while, until finally only Socrates is left. The friends press him to speak. He at first demurs, and then agrees, but only on condition that he can speak the truth about Love, and not merely praise it.

Socrates begins his speech in customary fashion, with a dialogue. His victim is a tragic poet named Agathon, who is host of the banquet. Socrates quickly convinces Agathon that Love is a form of wanting, for in the experience of Love we lack the thing we desire. From this harmless premise, Socrates then draws truly startling conclusions. For if what Love loves is beauty, he continues, and if Love is a form of lack, then Love itself must therefore lack beauty. The same would seem to hold in the case of the Good: if Love is love of the Good, then Love itself, paradoxically, must lack the Good. Love itself isn't then at all the same as what it loves. In particular, Love itself is neither good nor beautiful.

Agathon is not at all pleased by this sobering conclusion. Agathon's very name means "good," and he was reputed to be quite a beautiful man. In addition, he'd just finished a speech praising love as the very exemplar of the good and the beautiful. But however unhappy Socrates has made him, he finds he has no way to refute Socrates either. He's left speechless. As you can see, and as Jeff implies in his letter, the sense of wonder isn't always charming or pleasant. Sometimes it's tough. Sometimes it stings.

Always full of surprises, Socrates then reveals to Agathon that his argument about Love is not in fact his own. Instead, Socrates says, he learned it from a philosopher named Diotima, a woman who is absent from Agathon's all-male drinking party. Socrates then says more about Diotima. He explains to the gathering how Diotima taught him to let go of the idea that there's always a mutual exclusivity between opposed qualities. Ugliness is not always completely incompatible with beauty, badness with goodness, ignorance with wisdom, or mortality with immortality. Instead, Socrates says, Diotima helped him perceive another way of thinking about the relationship between opposites. Opposites don't always need to clash. There is a way for them to coexist, even as they retain their character as opposites.

For example, Socrates tells his friends, the more full of Love one is, the more one finds oneself full of wanting; but the more one finds oneself full of wanting, and thus the more one finds oneself full of lacking or emptiness. Take that in a moment. The more full of Love, the more full of emptiness. But aren't fullness and emptiness opposites? And yet in Love, or such is Diotima's contention, opposites can coexist as opposites. The Greek word Diotima uses to describe this strange form of relationship is metaxu, which may be translated as "intermediary" or "in-between."

At this point, you may think I have strayed from my purpose, which was to try to better understand the bittersweet asynchrony Jeff describes at the beginning of his tenure letter. In fact, tracing the threads of the Socratic in Jeff's letter has brought us directly to the core of that bittersweet.

In The Symposium, Socrates never teaches in his own name. He empties himself out in order to fill himself with Diotima's teaching. He shares her teaching with his friends in her absence. The Symposium, meanwhile, is a text written by Plato about Socrates after Socrates's death. In it, Plato at no point speaks in his own name. If Socrates empties himself out in order to fill himself with Diotima's teaching, Plato empties himself out in order to fill himself with Socrates's teaching, which he then shares with his readers in Socrates's absence.

Consider again, in this light, what Jeff writes about the origins of his "desire to teach." "To this day," Jeff wrote, sixteen years after Huggins's untimely death, "I remember some of the questions that [Huggins] asked because I am still trying to answer them. I base my own teaching on asking, and on getting my students to ask, good, tough questions." One wonders whether Jeff's students knew that the questions he was getting them to ask were based on the unanswered questions Huggins had posed to Jeff two decades earlier. Did they know that when they were in the room with Jeff that Huggins was in some sense in the room with them? Or that Jeff was in some way still receiving the gift of Huggins's close attention even, especially, as Jeff gave that same gift to them, to students who had never met Huggins and indeed would never meet him?

Giving and receiving, we note, are opposites. And in Jeff's words about Huggins, we also note, these opposites coexist as opposites: "some gifts...must be given in order to be received." Could there be a more perfect expression of the sense in which the love of teaching is always also, and perhaps even primarily, a love of learning? And of the way in which one learns that love from another?

In the Symposium as in Jeff's letter, albeit in very different ways, teaching would then seem to involve a subtle but decisive art. It would seem to entail the art of turning oneself into a cup or a container, a vessel for a teaching that's not

one's own, in order then to be able to introduce that teaching to those who have never seen or heard anything like it, who might find it in some way astonishing. In each instance, I would seem to pass down the weight of a certain speechlessness by remaining speechless myself, by refraining to speak in my own name. And in each instance, the teacher would seem to be an intermediary between generations who don't share the same living present, yet whose asynchrony presents no barrier for the experience of sunaesthesia, that sharing of eyes and ears that is the very hallmark of friendship.

Perhaps then there is no melancholy in the fact that students sometimes realize only belatedly what it means to have learned. No shame in the recurrent realization that it sometimes takes us too long to thank the one from whom we have learned how to learn. And perhaps too there is no desperation in a teacher who tries to extend his attention to his students' thought even, or especially, in his own absence. Perhaps teaching itself just is the art of sending ahead so many messages in bottles for students to discover later in their lives, when they may finally find themselves in a position to begin reading them. This might explain why institutions like ours host homecomings, for it might only be in the act of return that one fully understands what it means to have received a gift in the first place. And it might even explain that acute sense of solitude one sometimes feels as students file out of the room after yet another class. That solitude, that sudden sense of emptiness, is after all so much more than just emptiness. It's also a chance to glimpse the fullness of time, and a reason to trust in what it might bring.