

Community College of Denver

LAST LECTURE

S E R I E S



Laurence Di Paolo



April 14, 2015

4 p.m. – 5:30 p.m.
Confluence 105
on the Auraria Campus

I was born in Denver, Colorado on June 17, 1947. I grew up in north Denver just down the street from Regis College, so academe has always been a steady presence in my life as well as a tendency to be a surly Jesuit. After attending St. Catherine of Sienna Grade School and North High School, I entered St. Thomas Seminary, but discovered it was not in my temperament to be a parish priest. Over the years the Jesuits have tried to recruit me, but I have not been able to take the vow of obedience.

My undergraduate years were spent at University of Colorado at Denver and Metropolitan State College, where I received my Bachelor of Arts Degree. I earned my Master's Degree in English at State University of New York at Binghamton. I chose SUNY Binghamton because it was not too far away from the Temple of the Highest Art, the Metropolitan Opera. Though literature is my wedded wife, opera is my expensive mistress. My epitaph should read: "He never met a prima donna he didn't like."

When I was growing up, unlike my fellow classmates, I never dreamed of being a fireman, a cowboy or a dinosaur. Whatever fate held in store for me, I knew it would have something to do with books. During high school and my undergraduate years I worked at Denver Public Library, first as a shelver, then as a library assistant. I started college teaching as an adjunct instructor at Metropolitan State College in 1974 and arrived at Community College of Denver in 1978. I have taught a range of courses: Introduction to Literature, American Literature, Masterpieces of Literature, Introduction to Philosophy, and the whole sequence of Survey of the Humanities from ancient times to the present. The course I taught most frequently was Freshman Composition, a salutary penance.

Teaching has been my vocation during my professional life. I am essentially a reader, a scholar, an educator. I have not led an adventurous life, though I have traveled abroad, which has given me a better understanding of what I teach. Some high points: Rome, many hours in the Vatican Library, Florence, Venice, performances at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan, Pompeii, Edinburgh (a true 18th century city, even today), the English Lake District, London's Westminster Abbey, Sir Walter Scott's home, Abbotsford. My true adventure has been reading the world's great classics and passing them on to my students.

My favorite writer is Henry James; my favorite composer, Richard Wagner. I am fortunate to have spent personal time and corresponded with two of the major writers of the second half of the 20th century: I have been a guest of Gore Vidal at his villa in Ravello, majestically overlooking the Mediterranean Sea and the Amalfi Coast, and I have received an entire liberal arts education from Carlos Fuentes during his three visits to the Auraria Campus.

Since the 1980's I have become increasingly discontented with the decline of higher education. Now, in the second decade of the 21st century, I find the Digital Dictatorship to be absolutely intolerable. After an active ministry in teaching for 41 years, I now retire into the monastery of my mind to lead a quiet life of study, reading, and meditation.

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featuring
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Introduction

Stacey Beckman, Esq.

Paralegal Program Chair

Last Lecture

Larry Di Paolo, B.A., M.A.

Philosophy, Literature, Humanities Faculty

Open for Questions

Reflection & Presentation

Everette J. Freeman

Community College of Denver President

Adjourn for dessert and conversation

PREFACE

Traditions begin with a simple marker, a ceremonial event that speaks to the moment and the future. It has been the traditional role of community colleges to welcome all who arrive at our doors as seekers not only of job credentials, but also wisdom and knowledge. From hod carriers to housewives, veterans to high school drop-outs, men and women – young and old – have entered community colleges to expand their horizon. They come year after year to set personal markers for themselves. They are part of a long tradition that is the essential heart of the community college experience; namely, personal and intellectual growth. Those who commit to the rigors and delights of a community college education leave forever changed.

The publication you hold is the first of many last lectures that will be delivered at Community College of Denver by a representative from the cohort of retiring faculty members in a given year. The idea, modeled after Carnegie Mellon University's 2007 "last lecture" delivered by Professor Randy Pausch as his farewell address, aims to provide a forum for a retiring faculty member to share final reflections. Unlike the Carnegie Mellon last lecture, CCD's gathering is not occasioned by the prospect of an impending death, as with Dr. Pausch's courageous battle with cancer. Rather, the last lecture is designed to celebrate all that is lively, invigorating, irreverent, enduring and illustrative of the quality and depth of faculty at our community college. More than anything else, it is intended as a wellspring for current and future CCD faculty, staff, students, alumni and friends to draw intellectual strength and encouragement.

A special thanks to Professor Stacey Beckman for graciously agreeing to set the tone for the inaugural last lecture at CCD by not only introducing our honoree, but placing his intellectual journey in the broader context of the life of a true scholar and educator. Her introductory remarks truly echo the unfettered adoration that all connected to CCD hold Larry Di Paolo.

In the last lecture that follows, Laurence Di Paolo lays down the markers for what he ardently believes are the ideas and things that ought to matter most in

American higher education. Drawing from a life of scholarship, Larry's final lecture is clearly intended to teach and reflect on what it means to be a human being, a thinking being. At the same time, Larry seeks also to remind us about first principles and duties. His remarks are both comforting and disquieting – as they should be – for at its essence that is the role of education itself.

Everette J. Freeman

President, Community College of Denver

April 20, 2015

INTRODUCTION

by Stacey Beckman, Esq.

CCD Paralegal Program Chair & Professor

Welcome all. Today you witness Community College of Denver's inaugural Last Lecture. I thank President Freeman for instituting what is sure to become a fine tradition here at the College.

Having been asked to introduce Larry Di Paolo for his last lecture at Community College of Denver, the enormity of the task upon me, and through many false starts, I find myself anchored at this beginning point: quite simply there is no one like him; I've never met another like Larry.

When I recently chastised Professor Di Paolo for his overweening consistency in arranging facts so that he might always see the very best in others, he freely admitted this tendency as a character flaw.

Of course generosity of spirit, self-possessed grace and consistent graciousness are never flaws, and I found myself on that occasion, as is so often the case when I'm with Larry, examining my own words and conclusions.

Larry inspires in us thoughtful self-reflection, and we are better for it. Quixotic and possessed with an intellect of stunning depth, and remarkable breadth, Larry describes himself as an "18th Century Catholic Monarchist", much out of time with the grinding gizmos wrought by a culture too frequently disenfranchised from its own heart-beat, and perhaps more tragically, its capacity for critical thought.

Ah! But were it only the case that all monarchs, all authority, all of those in leadership positions, possessed Larry's deep understanding of the Humanities, and the illumination this broad understanding offers.

Larry stands unwavering as a man of wit and perspicacity. Over nearly 20 years of friendship, his uncompromising irreverence and liberating insights, have delivered me repeatedly from forces evil, base and unjust. He has oft stood alone;

courageously demanding that we reject the prescriptive directives which slowly grind creative professionals into automatons. He reminds us that we are human, noteworthy for our notorious brains and our terrific capacity for intellectual transcendence. He begs of us: use your mind, develop your interior life, embrace critical thinking, reject the herd mentality.

For 41 years Professor Di Paolo has posited our humanity right before us; when systems, and processes and jargon and gizmos and nonsense would enslave us, pull us down, or worse: pull us backward.

He reminds us that as educators, as scholars, we are obligated to “stand in the Sophoclean light” so that we might better enable our charges to experience the full measure of their intelligence and their potential.

A wise former Dean once said to me, “In order to have a college, Stacey, you need but two things. First, and most essential, you must have students. Next, and nearly just as critical, you need teachers. All the rest must remain in service to that essential core, lest our mission become corrupt.” It sounds so simple.

For 17 years I’ve stood by Professor Di Paolo’s side and watched that very critical, central precept – students and teachers, and what goes on in the classroom – be pushed aside, further and further into the margins, while the institution of higher education becomes ever more obsessed with serving itself and justifying its own existence, as if it were a thing apart, sharing nothing symbiotic with those it purports to serve.

As an unapologetic intellectual, Larry stands at a rakish angle to this dominant trend; like a true humanist he insists that we are more than cogs, more than a statistician’s fodder, or a marketer’s bundle of crunched numbers. He chides us pointedly for our betrayal of the grand tradition of the University.

In a recent conversation with him I speculated that even the most humble library contains more knowledge than the aggregate of every single television program ever aired. In response, I got the characteristic Di Paoloian sigh, with splayed hands to the forehead and, “Oh, dear Stacey, so much information, so little knowledge.”

In a culture that loves to hear itself talk, but often has so very little to say, Professor Di Paolo stands as an anomaly, tirelessly, steadily advocating for quiet reflection and the interior life of the mind.

I am not sure what Community College of Denver is without his imprimatur; I am not sure who we will become absent his intellectual gravitas.

Larry demands that we recognize that the essence of what goes on in the class room can never be captured in cold, lifeless reports, no matter how numerous, and no matter how often we change the acronym driving them.

We seek Larry out for his wisdom, for his knowledge, his well-informed critical analysis, his wit and his kindness. And Larry reminds us of this: our humanity. I humbly introduce him now, as eager as you are to hear his final lecture.



*Photo courtesy of
CCD Alumni Aaron Graff*

THE HUMANITIES AND THE INTERIOR LIFE OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

By Laurence Di Paolo

Recently I was listening to Francis Poulenc's opera, *Dialogues of the Carmelites*, and a specific line caught my attention: "All thoughtful people must ask themselves, what is it we serve?" Looking back over 41 years of college teaching, I can say with certainty that I do not serve our current educational system intent on dumbing down the entire American population. I do serve with great pride and loyalty the grand tradition of Liberal Arts education as it has rung out over the centuries, going back to the establishment of the great European universities of the twelfth century, themselves rooted in the profound legacy of classical antiquity. Here is a continuum of history that we lose at our peril, but which every day fades more faintly into the past.

I have been privileged to earn my livelihood by doing what I loved, passing on the great works of the past to students in the present. I have enjoyed the classroom, and I shall miss it. Even more, I have treasured my one-on-one mentorship of many of my students, and have watched with great pleasure the progress of their lives beyond the classroom. I have been at Community College of Denver so long that, over the years, I have taught the children, and now, the grandchildren of some of my original students.

But I have also witnessed the terrible decline of American education—to me, a national tragedy. I have watched the betrayal of our students—our future. It has been difficult to watch. I think it is hard for most people to live in a society in decline while still pretending that it is at the top of its game. We have not reached our current low point overnight. It has been several decades in the making. Though I am speaking of the liberal arts in general, I am focusing on the humanities in particular—art, literature and music, all those irrelevant things in today's world. From elementary school through college, public education has marginalized the humanities, thus robbing our students of what was once central to all formal education—the growth and development of their interior lives, by which I mean their intellectual life and their spiritual life, in whatever form that takes. I am speaking, in the words of Cardinal Newman, of the formation of character.

John Henry, Cardinal Newman has been a major influence on my pedagogy almost from the start. An old friend of mine from Victorian England, he was the author of one of the most important books on higher education, *The Idea of a University*, a work quite unknown in modern academe. He was facing in his day what we are facing in ours: the takeover of education by industry. Of course, in his time, industry did not own England as corporate business now owns the United States. In a famous chapter, Newman delineates the difference between liberal knowledge and mechanical training. Mechanical, or “useful knowledge” has no real impact on the intellect. It depends on rules and procedures committed to memory. It exhausts itself on the production of tangible things. It is characterized by the passive mind. Liberal knowledge manifests the active mind. It rises to abstract thinking, Plato’s realm of the conceptual, unchecked by tangible ends. I quote: “to have mapped out the Universe is the boast, or at least the ambition, of Philosophy.” Well, here is a bold counter to our current fixation on measurable goals. No “teaching to the test” for Newman.

What is the purpose of higher education according to Newman? To cultivate the mind and to refine the soul. Cultivate. Refine. Mind. Soul. These terms belong to the interior life of students. They refer to the transformative powers from within rather than the employment of external skills from without. They refer to the acquisition of the liberal arts rather than the execution of useful tasks. They point the way to the infinite instead of terminating in the finite. In short, Newman is completely at odds with the job-training mentality of 21st century education. Instead of being “acted upon by the world” (the passive mind) liberal arts students “take a view of the world” (the active mind). Newman focuses on the personal rather than the merely expedient. And this personal touch extends from the students to the institutions of learning, as well (note: “learning”, not “training”). I quote: “A University is, according to the usual designation, an *Alma Mater*, knowing her children one by one, not a foundry, or a mint, or a treadmill.” For the sake of brevity in this lecture, I conflate “foundry”, “mint”, and “treadmill” to one useful word: “factory”.

I wish I could register this mutation of *Alma Mater* into grim factory under the heading of “progress,” but I cannot. (For those of you who have allowed your Latin to lapse, *Alma Mater* means “wise mother.”) I know that many students—in my experience, I would say most—are eager for knowledge. I see it in their

eyes. I hear it in their questions. But I also know that most students come to college woefully unprepared in the basics of reading and writing skills. The two go together. Add a third—thinking skills—and we have a trinity. Sometime in the late 1970's Gore Vidal, that notorious scourge of America's proud ignorance, made a comment on television that has haunted me ever since: "I have never in my life met a stupid seven-year-old. But I am hard pressed to find a bright seventeen-year-old. Now something must have happened in-between, and I suspect it was the public schools." Then, the clincher: "The failure of our public schools on every level is too complete to have been an accident." Several years later, I was able to discuss this statement personally with Vidal. Wistfully, he shook his head. "Having financed the campaigns of our nation's office holders, corporate business now owns the United States. The last thing our corporate masters want is an educated populace. What they want is a nation of impressionable consumers. The job of the public schools is to enforce conformity."

Yet, conformity is not at the core of the grand tradition of higher learning. That honored place belongs to independent thinking. Without it, the quest for knowledge could not occur. My old friend from the seventeenth century, Descartes, was convinced that skeptical curiosity is an innate human trait. We certainly see it manifested in children; when they first ask that most primal of questions, "Why?" which is born of natural skepticism, there is no shutting them up. I like to think we have all travelled that path. Not all of us nourish that skepticism, however, and not all of us want it. It is much easier to be told what to do—and what to think.

For some of us, that innate skepticism drives us to years of study, formal or otherwise. It is amazing how many of our ancestors were autodidacts. Indeed, the whole point of formal education, for teachers, is to help put their students on the path of their own intellectual journeys. The reward for seeking the life of the mind is independent thinking. For this reason we must distinguish between education (to lead out) and training (to hammer in). We must distinguish between knowledge (the active energy of the mind) and information (something that sits inert on a computer screen). Information can lead to knowledge, but it does not become knowledge until—I again echo Cardinal Newman—an active mind "invests it with an idea."

The best catalyst for an independent mind is reading. The fervent reading of great books helps us to sharpen our own minds off geniuses of historic significance. Reading, then, becomes a privileged dialogue. And we have a whole Himalayan Mountain Range of extraordinary books to explore. All we can do in our limited time is to chip away at it. This is why we must not waste any time on pop culture drivel.

One of the best kept secrets in the Shopping Mall of American Amnesia is that world culture belongs to us all. There is a foul rumor afloat that the great books serve to keep a power elite in place and the populace down. This is untrue. After decades of reading the great writers of the world, I have discovered that their writings are forever questioning the governing structures and the societal conventions of their own time and place. From Confucius in ancient China to Carlos Fuentes in modern Mexico, we are able to cross continents and centuries. We read them because they are beacons of liberty. They remind us that we are not simply cogs in a wheel. Because of the challenging nature of their content, they remind us that we are thinking beings. They remind us of our natural skepticism.

I know of no major writer or thinker who can be categorized as a team player. Socrates was not a team player (nor was he thanked for his fierce independence). Plato was not a team player by the very fact that he recorded his great mentor's legacy of constant questioning, thus hurtling the Socratic method down the millennia. Dante was not a team player and was exiled from his native city for the rest of his adult life as proof of it. Voltaire was not a team player as shown by his lifelong crusade to overthrow both state and church, a rather ambitious task, thus paving the way for the French Revolution and the modern world, for better or for worse, that emerged from it. The deeply spiritual Tolstoy was not a team player and was rewarded by being excommunicated by the Russian Orthodox Church. I could add many more notable writers to this gorgeous mix, but I am studious of time.

Though the thinkers I have named were not team players, they were not psychopaths either. They left behind, in the legacy of their work a moral or ethical vision that propels their readers to a deeper and higher perception of what it means to be civilized. According to George Steiner, that most profound of literary critics, they help us "to create in our minds a mosaic of the indispensable," touchstones

of wisdom, and when we must face, as we all do, the vicissitudes of life, they “help us to find our way home in the dark of the night.” Ralph Waldo Emerson, that most reverberant of American thinkers (the author of “Self-reliance” was not a team player) voiced an astonishing epiphany: “In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts.”

The greatest allies of the interior life of students are silence and solitude. It is imperative that, within the framework of our overly-busy days, we ruthlessly carve out time to withdraw “far from the madding crowd.” This is something that the reclusive Emily Dickinson knew firsthand:

“The Soul selects her own society—
Then—shuts the door—

I have been much concerned about the upbringing of our children of late. They seem to lead lives on a choke-chain: they have to be at school; they have to be at football practice; they have to be at dance class; they have to be at a scout meeting. Their parents seem frantic to fill their lives with perpetual group activities so that they are never alone. And yet they must be alone some time in order to discover who they are or who they are becoming and what they think away from the pressure of their friends. In short, they are not allowed to develop their interior lives, so that, by the time they reach college, they have been conditioned to be totally dependent on their electronic devices and social media. How many of our students on entering college are even capable of independent thinking?

No amount of electronic devices or computerized programs can replace the one-on-one personal mentorship of teacher and student. I think it morally reprehensible for educators to encourage in students a passive dependency on mechanized devices. We, as educators, should be their guides, not their accomplices. This is why I so hate the Digital Dictatorship, especially that purveyor of mechanistic dependency called Desire 2 Learn. The rationale of the Digital Dictatorship is that it will help the students to take more control of their own education. This is nothing but system sophistry. If we were truly intent on empowering students, we would be providing them with a first class liberal arts college education instead of a low-grade, watered-down, extended high school program.

There is a difference between higher education and lower education. I am cursed by memory. I can remember when CCD was very much a college. Yet, it seems, with each passing year, we march relentlessly toward lower ed. As an alternative, I suggest we put as much distance as we possibly can between ourselves and those miserable public high schools. Let us offer our students an intellectual feast through the study of the Humanities so that, for many of them, for the first time, or at last, they will be able to develop an interior life through independent thinking.

The Humanities will open doors for our students they never dreamed of. One of the great pleasures of teaching at an urban college is the mixture of cultures and ages. My special vocation in teaching has centered on the adult evening student (and adult students do not want to be dumbed down!), but here is an anecdote about one of my younger students. Several years ago, I taught an uncharacteristic class at CCD. It was an afternoon class full of newly minted high school graduates from white suburbia. One day I showed a video of Jessye Norman, one of the great voices of our time, a majestic lady who grew up in the segregated south before and during the Civil Rights Movement. She was singing a song by Gustave Mahler, "Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen", which, in essence, means "I have withdrawn from the world." The words are by the poet, Friedrich Ruckert, about the interior life. When the performance had ended, I asked for comments or questions. One of my students, a nice lad but by no means a scholar—he was just coasting by—raised his hand. With simple candor he said, "Well, she's the wrong size, and she's the wrong color, and she's singing the wrong kind of music—but she's absolutely beautiful." That, for me, was a golden, a memorable moment. He had shown the almost unfathomable ability to get beyond his own cultural conditioning, his own ingrained prejudices, and his own age group. The power of art had allowed him to move beyond himself, and he had been open to the power of art. It didn't stop there. He came by my office before the next class and said, "Look what I bought." He showed me a compact disc of Jessye Norman singing Richard Strauss's *Four Last Songs*. I asked, "Why this recording?" He said, "Because I liked this photograph more than the other covers," which, for a neophyte, is as good a reason as any other. "What do you think of the music?" "I love it," he said, "especially the third song. I can't pronounce it, but her voice goes up and up and up like an eagle in the sky. And look here." He showed me the album booklet. "She sings in German, but there's an English translation, so

I can understand everything she sings. I played it for my friends, and they hate it, but I say, 'it's your loss.'" All we need to do as educators is open the door. We never know who will accept the invitation.

Our journey is almost over.

Last semester, President Freeman paid an impromptu visit to my Humanities 122 class. As chance—or the Holy Ghost—would have it, we were discussing the first part of *The Divine Comedy* by Dante: *The "Inferno"*. Hell. *The Divine Comedy*, one of the most influential books in the history of the world, is a work about the interior life. As we study Dante's reactions to the souls he meets along the way, we examine our own interior life off the genius of Dante. It is a work about choices we make and the consequences thereof. In the *"Inferno"* the souls of the damned have one thing in common: They have all deliberately chosen to set aside the good of intellect. Though rooted in medieval Catholicism, Dante's great masterpiece, like all great books, is universal in substance.

The next day Dr. Freeman sent me a gracious email. I quote in part: "Every participant was leaning forward. Always a true and sure sign of engagement and learning." Thoughtfully, he had sent copies to our provost, my dean, and my chair. They, in turn, sent me kind encomiums. I responded, thanking them all for their generosity of spirit. What I did not say to them, I tell you now: I was simply doing what educators have been doing for centuries in a direct and uncomplicated way. I did not feel compelled to employ any innovative strategies; I had not come to class equipped with a whole battery of group activities to amuse bored children; I was not hammering surface information into my students' heads so I could later test them on it and measure how much of it they had retained before they disposed of it for the rest of their lives; above all, there was not a trace of computerized intrusion to stand between ourselves and Dante. We were a community of scholars gathered together in a classroom, which I take to be a sacramental space, each of us in our own deeply personal way partaking in the communion of knowledge.

Thank you.