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## From the Editor: My Last Lecture

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## From the Editor

# My Last Lecture

My first encounter with *eloquentia perfecta* was the tap tap tap of my newspaperman father upstairs typing with two fingers his editorials on his Underwood.

Every day he wrote all the editorials for the *Trenton Times*, plus others for the *Brooklyn Eagle*, *New York Herald Tribune* and *Philadelphia Record*. This overtime sent my brother Dave and me to St. Joe's Prep, Fordham College and summer camp, plus piano lessons. Because the Trenton American Legion baseball team was named after him, my father had an annual team dinner at which everyone at the table, including Dave and me, had to stand up and speak. Dad was a distinguished public speaker, and before big events I could hear him up in his third floor room memorizing his remarks in front of the mirror.

Every step of my life I learned to write and speak because an older person — parent, Jesuit, or lay teacher — took the initiative and challenged me to do something difficult and different.

In fifth grade, I wrote a composition from the point of view of a horse galloping across the prairie. My teacher, a Franciscan nun, told me, "You can write." At the Prep my scholastic English teacher, John F.X. Burton, S.J., in front of the class, told me to compete in a speech contest.

My father recommended memorizing David Lloyd George's "Shall We Not Sing the Eisteddfod?" a traditional concert in Wales during World War I. I lost, but learned something about George. Burton named me yearbook editor. At Fordham Fr. Joe Frese, S.J., whose daily Mass I served, told my parents at the dinner table, "Raymond should go to France." In Paris an American Jesuit philosopher, J. Quentin Lauer, later at Fordham, tore my writing apart, convinced me that "such" had no meaning and thus should never appear. From Europe I wrote reports for the *Fordham Ram*. I returned named editorial editor and columnist. In senior year the *Ram's* moderator, Edward A. Walsh, told me I should publish articles beyond the campus. Two years later, at 23, my first article appeared in *America*.

After my army service in Germany and teaching journalism at five Jesuit and three secular universities, my formula for *eloquentia perfecta* boiled down to three steps: read, risk, write and rewrite.

The Jesuit formula in those years was based on *imitation*. — read the best and write and speak like the best do. Asked by a young writer how to improve his novel, Faulkner replied, "Read *Anna Karenina*, *Anna Karenina*, and *Anna Karenina*." In "Monologue to the Maestro," (*Esquire*,

October 1935) Ernest Hemingway told a young writer to "read everything" — so you know whom you have to beat. His list included Tolstoy, Dostoevski, Flaubert, Mann, Henry James, Twain, and Joyce.

Good writing is true writing, he stressed, and the more experience the truer it will be. For Hemingway, the writer's life was like an iceberg — the nine tenth under water was the experience feeding the one tenth prose above the surface. That's where risk comes in. For years I traveled alone to places in trouble — Vietnam, Cuba, Peru, South Africa, and Iraq — to test myself, in search of that detail that moved my emotions and would thus move the reader, and come back with a story.

I built my writing classes around Virginia Woolf, for the relationship between memory and detail; George Orwell for "Why I Write" and political courage; E.B. White for memory, observation, and wit; James Baldwin for eloquence inspired by anger ; and Joan Didion because she writes to find out what she is thinking.

The best writers, especially war correspondents, are moralists. I think of Richard Harding Davis' picture of the German army marching into Brussels and burning Louvain in 1914: he had witnessed wars where both sides followed some rules, but, "At Louvain it was war upon the defenseless, war upon churches, colleges, shops of milliners and lacemakers; war brought to the bedside and fireside; against women harvesting in the fields, against children in wooden shoes at play in the streets." What would he say today about drones?

Your papers are due tomorrow in the first minute of class.

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After editing *Conversations* for ten happy years, enjoying the friendship of the seminar's members, forged in all day discussions, including dinner and the pub, and listening to faculty and students at all 28 Jesuit colleges and universities, I am passing the editorship to an admired colleague, Fr. Ed Schmidt, S.J. During these years as *Conversations* became more pleasing to the eye, credit goes to Pauline Heaney, a great artist and dear friend. When I left Saint Peter's College two years ago I missed teaching; so it is an extra joy that five authors in this issue are friends from my teaching years. ■

RASsj