October 17, 1990. Professor Smith lectures on Liebniz’s theory of monads. A certain student listens intently, not quite understanding how souls can possess a pre-existence as monads. Nor is he certain he comprehends everything the professor is saying. He struggles to grasp some of the abstruse concepts he read in the text for today and the professor’s explanation of them. Nonetheless, he is fascinated by this abstract and new way of thinking about existence. While he floundered his first year and a half at university, he has found his niche – the exhilarating world of philosophy and theology.

April 10, 2003. The same student who was “lured away” from law school as an undergrad by adept philosophy and theology professors attends a doctoral seminar on philosophical and theological theories of justice. He and his cohorts come to each session having read (or skimmed!) two to three hundred pages per week, eager to dissect the text and each other’s arguments. Our protagonist finds this setting invigorating, and today’s session is no exception. A vigorous debate has ensued as to whether or not Rawls’ theory of justice is tantamount the famous maxim “a rising tide raises all boats.”

September 24, 2004. Having pursued his desire to inspire students to think critically and reflect on life’s larger questions the way his mentors did, our protagonist has undertaken the transition from graduate student to neophyte undergraduate professor. He teaches at a Jesuit university in Philadelphia, PA, in many ways an ideal place for him to begin his journey as an educator. He commences today’s session of the course “War and Peace” by asking the students whether or not the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was morally licit. The students have been studying ethical theories pertaining to war and peacemaking, and specifically have read (or should have read) for today a piece by the esteemed and often-quoted Michael Walzer that considers whether or not this case constituted a “supreme emergency.” To his bewilderment, the professor encounters one of those excruciating moments of silence. He never dreamed students wouldn’t be willing to express their views about something as controversial and important as this event...

As I am sure you have surmised our protagonist in these vignettes is none other than the author of this confession of sorts. It never really occurred to me that students, or at least a portion of them, would rather discuss their heroes from the latest reality TV show than topics like Hiroshima, globalization or the Rwandan genocide. One student actually put his head on his desk during my friend’s guest lecture, during which he described how he personally lost 40 relatives in that abominable failure of international responsibility. It also never occurred to me that much more could be lurking behind the students’ reticence, such as their fear of appearing one way or the other among their peers or their fear of being wrong. Could it be my own failure to create the right milieu, perhaps with a little humor here and there instead of being heavy-handed when a discipline problem arises (yes, there are occasional discipline problems at SJU, most of them annoying but fairly innocuous. This was yet another shocking insight to me)? Throughout my first year at SJU I often reminded myself that I was not a stellar student as an undergrad and that it took me a long time to “find my way.” I told myself, perhaps subconsciously, that if I could just replicate what my professors did both inside and outside the classroom for me my students would engage the material and quest for answers to the questions that arose. However, I learned rather quickly that this is not always the case. Per the request of the venerable and most helpful Dr. Paul Aspan, director of the Teaching Institute at SJU, I would like to share with you some of the lessons I think I have learned during my “baptism by fire.” At the same time, let me issue a disclaimer. I am still processing much of my experience this past year. This exercise is helping me in that endeavor. In other words, take what I say with a grain of salt.
First, the scenario I described at the outset took place at a different time in a different place with different people. My experience as an undergraduate, therefore, should not necessarily be taken as normative – here and now. I finished my undergraduate education almost fifteen years ago! Perhaps what was pedagogically sound does not always work today. I would venture to guess that pop culture and “turbo capitalism” have generated a greater sense of impatience in young folks that hinders sitting with a dense, seemingly useless (i.e. one that does not immediately produce career benefits and/or financial gain) text. Admittedly, this is just a hypothesis that I have conjured up here in Krakow, Poland where I am now vacationing with my wife and 14 month old daughter (who incidentally brought new meaning to my life but gave me a “second shift” of work at home, making my first year even more hectic). Succinctly stated, for whatever reasons I have found that the Standard Socratic dialogical rumination over a text or concept that the vast majority of my professors utilized did not always bear fruit. Thus, I have resorted to more small group work and “gimmicks,” to open up a topic for discussion. For example, I once distributed “role play” cards with descriptions of people that represent different positions concerning humanitarian intervention. I then asked students to consider in small groups what each person would argue concerning the prospect of American military intervention in Darfur. I hasten to add that I also distributed a short piece from the NY Times on the genocide in Darfur, so as not to assume all of my students know what is taking place there. As one of my wise colleagues once said, “You need to bring the news to your students, they are not following it.” This is not to denigrate our students. I certainly did not know much about foreign affairs as an undergrad, as I was a true “Philly boy” who thought that Philadelphia was the center of the universe. In any case, my own rigid, call it anal if you like, proclivity for discussing arcane ideas and expecting precise textual answers upon demand once scoffed at such classroom activities. After all, this university stuff is serious business, right? I must admit, though, that I have found such approaches to be quite effective, and, dare I admit, enjoyable for me as well as the students.

Second, I raced to finish my graduate studies at a blistering pace. In fact, I finished this May with my dissertation defense, ahead of all of my cohorts in my program. This has obvious advantages, but it also coaxed me into buying into what I call the consumptionist approach to education (the more goods we consume the better off we are). Because I was intellectually sprinting as fast as I could to finish the doctorate and “get a life,” it was hard for me to decelerate and meet my students where they are sometimes. Despite my efforts to curtail the reading load in my course, I still, rather subconsciously, operated mainly with a more is better mentality. Indeed, our students need to be challenged. I do not think anyone will accuse me of failing in this regard. However, I realize now that sometimes less is more. Some of my best students helped me to see this by candidly telling me that they enjoyed the course but would have like to have more time to consider a given issue. Now, I also realize that this will be an ongoing struggle for me. When does rigor become pedagogical masochism? Finding the right balance between rigor and realistic education goals is an issue that I will have to learn to deal with over time.

Third, in my humble opinion, there is a wide range of capabilities and ambition among our students. At the risk of sounding crass, many of them might be better off not even attending college. Many will not be turned on by Liebniz’s “monadology” or just about anything else you choose to treat. However, there are some very gifted, intellectually curious and assiduous students that you will encounter at SJU. These students could succeed at just about any university in the country. Then there are those who are somewhere in the middle. Learning to teach and reach all of these students will continue to be a challenge for me.
enjoyed mentoring some students in and out of the classroom who are diligent and naturally have lots of questions. On a positive note, I believe I will meet more students who dare to think for themselves, as Kant would put it, in the future. However, my desire to be a good mentor should not and does not extend to the best and the brightest. After all, those who took the wandering soul that I was during my first two years as an undergrad were patient enough to allow me to stumble and to try in various ways to help me get up and find my way.

Fourth, as a faculty member one is privy to many aspects of university education that I as an idealistic, perhaps naïve, undergraduate and graduate student was not. SJU, like every institution, has its flaws. One quickly learns about budgetary constraints, institutional politics and quirks that detract from the ability to provide an ideal education. For example, I always assumed that small class size was a marker of excellence in education, especially in subjects like philosophy and theology. However, financial pressures make it impossible to limit class size in every case. Without a doubt, at other institutions class sizes are even larger. However, being the uptight, quixotic idealist that I am, I do not like to think about mundane practicalities like budgets. After this year, I have realized that heretofore I was far too ignorant of such real considerations. Again, living with the ideal and the realistic will be something I must learn to negotiate as I mature an educator.

I do not want to give the impression that all is woeful our institution. On the contrary, there is much to savor and appreciate in my opinion. SJU tries very hard to do the best it can with the resources it does have. As a grad student, I became a library geek. Well, SJU’s library does not quite send shivers down my spine the way the 12 story neo-Gothic so-called “cathedral of learning” and its limitless resources did at one of my stops as a graduate student. However, much to my delight I learned the PALCI system (check it out ASAP!) and interlibrary loan work very efficiently. Together they seem to be able to handle most of my research needs, right from the computer in my office. In addition, the institution seems committed to the growth of its faculty, providing funding for conferences and other research needs. Moreover, people at SJU generally appear ready and eager to help one another. The cut-throat atmosphere at many “tier one” institutions does not seem to exist here (ask me about it again around tenure time!). To my mind, the expectations for tenure are reasonable enough for a young faculty member to retain their sanity, focus on teaching, engage in serious scholarship, and achieve tenure. In short, getting to know the ins and outs of the institution was an important, sometimes mentally taxing, part of my first year at SJU. While I have gained a certain level of comfort that comes with familiarity, I am sure this will continue to be the case.

Finally I want to underscore as emphatically as possible that I am cognizant of being a student again myself. I am now a full-time student of teaching, particularly of teaching undergrads at Saint Joseph’s University in Philadelphia, PA in 2005 and beyond. I have made mistakes and had some successes. I now know that I have much to learn and that knowing one’s subject matter very well does not always translate into teaching it well to a particular group of students. Fortunately, resources like the Teaching Institute have aided me in my learning process. I cannot speak about other departments, but my colleagues in the Theology Department have been very generous of their time and patient with me. No doubt like every department mine has its own irritating idiosyncrasies. But a few have become great colleagues, whom I respect as mentors, teachers and scholars and whom I believe I can trust. They have been very gracious in answering my myriad questions this past year. I assume at a place like Saint Joseph’s, every department will have such invaluable persons. It is important as a new faculty member to avail one’s self of them. They know our students better than any
of our previous role models and mentors. Resources like the Teaching Institute have aided me.

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