

# Awaken the Stars

reflections on  
what we REALLY teach



Essays by 25 Distinguished Professors at the University of Portland edited by Shannon Mayer and Jacquie Van Hoomissen

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# CONTENTS



A NOTE FROM THE EDITORS / 9

INTRODUCTION BY FR. MARK POORMAN, CSC / 11

## PART I. AWAKEN

Prologue / 17

*Professor of Wonder* by Shannon Mayer / 19

*Touched by the Infinite* by Rev. Charles McCoy, CSC / 23

*From Human Anatomy to Humanness* by Jacquie Van Hoomissen / 27

*Not What You Thought* by Maximilian Schlosshauer / 31

*Faith, Hope, and Love: A Trinity of Uncertainty* by Steven G. Mayer / 35

*An Invitation to Star-Gazing* by Michael Andrews / 39

## PART II. CONNECT

Prologue / 45

*Spelunking with a Dim Flashlight* by Rev. Patrick Hannon, CSC / 47

*Sophrosyne* by Laurretta Frederking / 51

*Learning to SHUT UP* by Jeff Kerssen-Griep / 55

*Language at the Outer Edge of Longing* by Laura McLary / 59

*The Many Facets of Humanness* by Anissa Rogers / 65

*Everything Always Has a Past* by Christin Hancock / 69

### PART III. THRIVE

Prologue / 75

*The Flourishing of Every Soul* by Karen E. Eifler / 77

*The Ham Sandwich Theorem and Other Adventures in Persistence* by Valerie Peterson / 81

*The Brightening of Stars* by Alexandra Merley Hill / 85

*Opening the Door* by Matthew Warshawsky / 89

*It Doesn't Have To Match, It Just Has To Go* by Stephanie Salomone / 93

*Halfway between the Head and the Heart* by Nicole Leupp Hanig / 97

### PART IV. ENGAGE

Prologue /103

*The Urgency of Slowness* by Lars Larson / 105

*Engineering Creativity* by Heather Dillon / 109

*Wide Awake* by Rich Christen / 113

*Seeing Clearly: Lessons from Social Science and Simon the Chipmunk* by Andrew Guest / 117

*Why Does This Matter? [Exactly]* by Molly Hiro / 121

*It's a Material World* by Khalid Khan / 125

*The Art of Compassion: Educating Nurses for the World* by Lorretta Krautscheid / 129

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS / 133

ABOUT THE EDITORS / 135

## A note from the editors

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*Department of Physics*  
*University of Portland*

*Jacquie Van Hoomissen*  
*Department of Biology*  
*University of Portland*

We asked some of our fellow faculty members at the University of Portland, a Holy Cross institution in the Pacific Northwest, what it is they *really* teach. This essay collection, by twenty-five professors of various academic disciplines at the university, was written in response to this question.

We hope the book will be an invitation to look beyond what is in the course catalog, class syllabi, or reading list at any college or university and to encounter the richer and deeper and more meaningful story of what happens (or should happen) in the classrooms and professors' offices and libraries and field trips and internships and study-abroad programs in the United States and around the globe.

For the educator, perhaps this collection will prompt you to reflect on what it is that you really teach. Consideration of that question will encourage you to be attentive and awake in a fresh way as you engage students.

For students, parents, alumni, and others interested in a deeper look at the world of academia, we designed this book to surprise and inspire you. We trust, of course, that the essays will be thought provoking and enjoyable to read, and that some story or anecdote will settle in you in a lasting and meaningful way. But beyond that, we hope the essays will provide you with an inspiring picture of what higher education really should be all about.



# INTRODUCTION

*Father Mark Poorman, CSC  
President, University of Portland*

*"Wherever we work we assist others not only to recognize and develop their own gifts but also to discover the deepest longing in their lives. And, as in every work of our mission, we find that we ourselves stand to learn much from those whom we are called to teach."*

*—Congregation of Holy Cross Constitutions, Constitution II*

It is not an overstatement to say that higher education is undergoing a shift of massive proportions. More and more, we are called upon to explain ourselves, to offer the employment statistics of our graduates as justification of cost, to focus our resources in areas with direct links to lucrative careers, to make clear the monetary value of our courses and degrees and certificates we offer prospective students. And while "return on investment" is an uncomfortable phrase for many of us in education, it also offers us an important opportunity to turn inward, to take stock, and to make sure that who we are is reflected in what we *really* teach. Indeed, I would argue that the term includes much more than our seniors' job prospects and starting salaries. As the Holy Cross Constitutions quoted above suggest, it includes the outcome of our efforts to help our students "discover the deepest longing in their lives." It is a tall order, to be sure, and one that takes great courage and commitment to aspire to and achieve.

*Awaken the Stars* is an invitation into the world of the talent-

ed and accomplished faculty members at the University of Portland, who have made it their life's work to guide students on that road to self-discovery. They bring a different voice to the conversation about the value of higher education—speaking of wonder, empathy, growth, and discomfort. The content of their courses is not unimportant, but rather it is informed and enriched by these greater goods that push our students to be the persons they are called to be. These faculty members are truly *teachers* in the fullest sense of the word.

Teaching is one of the greatest sources of joy among my vocational commitments, and one I was unwilling to give up when I became president. That is why each spring I co-teach an upper-level Theology course called “The Character Project” with three colleagues. Every week, we challenge the juniors and seniors in the course to give voice to the deepest parts of themselves, to reconcile the people they believe themselves to be with the decisions

they make and actions they take each and every day. After several years of teaching the course, it has become apparent to me that the students who benefit most are those who struggle to create and articulate a moral frame on which they can hang their lives. The responsibility for us as teachers is to help our students understand that they must be active participants in the creation of their own character and to insist they do so even in the face of discomfort or adversity. As this collection of essays illustrates, this responsibility is not relegated to any single discipline but is present in everything from quantum mechanics to anatomy to liberal arts to my Monday evening theology course.

It is my strong belief that this approach to education—engaging and guiding our students’ minds and hearts—is becoming increasingly rare, and therefore increasingly valuable. It remains a hallmark of a University of Portland education and of the Congregation of Holy Cross, the religious order of priests and brothers that

**The responsibility for us as teachers is to help our students understand that they must be active participants in the creation of their own character and to insist they do so even in the face of discomfort or adversity.**

founded the University of Portland and several other colleges and universities across the country. In Holy Cross, we are called to be educators in the faith and, in the oft-repeated words of our founder, Blessed Basil Moreau, believe strongly that “the mind will not be cultivated at the expense of the heart.” At the University of Portland, our faculty members renew and live out that commitment every day, encouraging our students to go beyond their comfort zones, beyond the knowledge required to ace the test or pass the class, to see the *real* learning that lies beneath.

As the essays in this collection show, our students, on both the undergraduate and graduate levels, are taught to challenge their assumptions about the universe and to see how what they choose to pay attention to helps define the world around them. They encounter professors who genuinely believe that who students are as individuals is far more important than what external triumph or failure they are currently living through. These professors teach them to embrace discomfort as a sign of personal growth and to cultivate a creative engagement with their studies as an opportunity for self-discovery.

I am humbled and honored to work alongside such

talented faculty colleagues every day. Each essay in this book confirms for me the value of a Holy Cross education and inspires me to continue seeking opportunities to unsettle my students in the hope they will learn much more than the syllabi suggest. I hope that you, too, come away from this book with a greater appreciation of all that higher education can offer when we demand that it not only teach students how to transform the world but also how, with the grace of God, to transform themselves.



Part I

# Awaken

*"Wonder is the beginning of wisdom."—Greek Proverb*

# Prologue

*Jacquie Van Hoomissen*

Everyone has a story about that one moment when things changed and the world was different. Maybe this turning point altered the trajectory of a life or opened new eyes to the beauty of the universe, and the impact was meaningful enough to be remembered. The more we recall these moments, the more powerful they become in the life narrative we each write and expand upon with every new educational experience. The teachers in the following section all speak of moments when the minds of their students are awakened to wonder, to revelation, to perspectives that spark new insights into understanding the mystery of the world.

# Professor of Wonder

*Shannon Mayer*

Physics Professor Shannon Mayer specializes in optics, with particular interest in the fields of quantum optics, laser spectroscopy, physics education, and science policy. She has published her work in technical journals, teaching journals, conference proceedings, and book chapters.

Wonder as a verb is an action, an impulse: *to think or speculate curiously; to be filled with admiration, amazement, or awe; to marvel.* Like gravity, the question “I wonder?” is a force of nature. It is the force that has propelled scientists, theologians, and explorers alike on the unstoppable quest to discover the story of our world. It is inborn and intrinsic, an inherent part of the fabric of human nature—as watching any small child learn will prove. But, again like gravity, which diminishes as you get further from the source of the gravitational pull, the force of wonder tends to diminish the further one gets from childhood. Other forces (fear, indolence, busyness, the prescriptiveness of formal education, etc.) conspire against wonder to weaken its power.

Consider wonder the noun: *a feeling of surprise mingled with admiration, caused by something beautiful, unexpected, unfamiliar, or inexplicable.* Wonder sneaks up on us in ways we aren’t expecting. An encounter with unexpected beauty, a glimpse of the astonishing cleverness of nature, serves to deepen our friendship with wonder. Like its cousin, joy, wonder is a signpost that hints of a deeper, more profound mystery in the story of our world.

Me, I was drawn to physics by a love of mathematics. As I often tell my students, mathematics is the language of science and to do science you need to learn to speak the language. For those who do speak the language, mathematics can be a purveyor of

wonder; it possesses an artistic beauty akin to a beautiful painting or an intricate and melodic symphony. The fact that the universe is, at some level, describable by humans using beautiful mathematical equations is truly remarkable. Paul Dirac, a brilliant pioneer of quantum mechanics, believed that beauty was an essential feature of mathematical equations suited to the description of the physical world. Einstein once said that the most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible. How do we happen to live in a universe we can describe using the language of mathematics? Why do humans have the desire and, more remarkably, the capacity to understand the mathematics that describes the world? These are all questions that bring me back to wonder.

Artists often have a favorite painting or sculpture that has become an intimate companion on their journey of wonder. For a musician, it may be a particular symphony that inspires awe. For me, a physicist, the masterpiece I most admire is a particularly *beautiful* equation. Its formal name is The Wave Equation and in the language of mathematic it looks like this:

$$\nabla^2\psi = \frac{1}{v^2} \frac{\partial^2\psi}{\partial t^2}$$

A mathematician would call this a second-order, linear, partial-differential equation, but don't let the formidable title scare you away. Let me introduce you to a few of the beautiful features of this equation.

The wave equation is simultaneously elegant in its simplicity and profound in its versatility. It was first studied in the 1700s by Jean-Baptiste le Rond d'Alembert, who derived the equation to describe the vibration of a musical string. Since that humble beginning, the wave equation has been found to be equally at home in the cultured world of the concert music hall, among the bravado and swagger of big wave surfers in Hawaii, and out in the cold and empty space of space. Anywhere we encounter a wave, be it mechanical (a vibrating guitar string), acoustic (the campus bell tower chiming), or electromagnetic (sunshine streaming in your window this morning), the wave equation is there. The fact that so many seemingly different phenomena can be accurately described by the same mathematical equation is, to me, part of its beauty.

In addition to its versatility, the wave equation has great intuition, so to speak; it has the insight to predict that when two waves interact with one another, they superimpose, or add together. This is consistent with our experience with waves. When we drop two pebbles into smooth water simultaneously and watch the ripples travel outward, meet each other, dance together for a moment, and then continue unperturbed on their individual ways, they are fulfilling the requirements of the wave equation. In contrast, particles, when they interact, scatter off one another like billiard balls, permanently altering the path of the other by their interaction.

The predictive ability of the wave equation is another of its impressive facets. In the mid-1800s, the physicist James Clerk Maxwell was puttering around with the mathematical equations known at the time to describe electrical and magnetic phenomena: circuits, magnets, and the like. What he found, if he combined these equations in *just* the right way, is that they *predicted* that electric and magnetic fields *themselves*

could be described as waves. The wave equation applied to them too. The mathematics is the same, the application completely different. When Maxwell used his newly derived wave equation and computed the speed of these predicted traveling electric and magnetic waves, he discovered that they moved along at a speed eerily close to the accepted value of the speed of light. The remarkable beauty of his mathematics thus compelled him to propose that light itself was a form of traveling electric and magnetic fields. Maxwell's proposal, and the simple, beautiful mathematics behind it, turned the world of physics upside down. The notion that light itself was a traveling electromagnetic wave was revolutionary; it brought together the seemingly separate disciplines of electricity, magnetism, and optics, and foreshadowed some of the weird and wonderful aspects of the world of quantum mechanics.

*Wonder*, I think, captures the essence of *everything* that we are about in higher education and anywhere real teaching is taking place. My craft, as a physicist, is to

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pursue wonder. My charge, as a professor of physics, is to empower students to become wonderers and, in the process of wondering itself, to make discoveries about our remarkable and curious world. My colleagues in the other disciplines likewise profess wonder in endless forms. Scientist or philosopher, theologian or poet, we all seek to use the tools of our particular trade to probe the mysteries of the universe. Encountering the universe with wonder is our common enterprise. Indeed we are all professors of wonder, at a University of Wonder, and that is, well, wonderful.



# Touched by the Infinite

*Rev. Charles McCoy, CSC*

Mathematics Professor and Holy Cross priest Fr. Charles McCoy, CSC, studies a branch of mathematical logic that analyzes the relative complexity of constructions and theorems in other areas of mathematics, such as modern algebra and analysis. He has collaborated with mathematicians from a variety of countries, and his research teams have published their work in U.S. and Russian journals. A National Science Foundation grant specifically dedicated to international collaboration has supported these endeavors.

When people first learn that I am a Holy Cross priest and a college professor, they often ask, "Do you teach theology?" When I respond that I teach mathematics, some respond with a puzzled look that implicitly asks, "How do those two parts of your life go together?" (Or, more rarely, the bold will say the question out loud.) Throughout my own journey in academia and in religious life, I've meditated on this question for myself, and over the years I've realized that what intrigues me about mathematics is similar to what has called me to a life dedicated to my faith. Both entail the mystifying, fascinating, sometimes frustrating, always humbling contemplation of the Infinite.

The first college-level mathematics course that exposes students to the depth and mystery of the infinite is second-semester Calculus. The notion of "limit" (the idea of approximating function outputs to any given precision by approximating function inputs to a corresponding precision), encountered earlier in a student's mathematical journey, is certainly a difficult and subtle concept, and clarifying this concept in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was an enormous intellectual achievement for humanity. Nevertheless, the take-away of this idea, when applied to limits at infinity, is that if the limit exists then you can approximate that limit to any given precision by looking at a big enough finite input. (Of course, in application, the difficulty is ascertaining how big is "big

enough.”) This may leave novice mathematics students with the false (but philosophically easier to grasp) impression that “I can know infinity by extrapolating what I know about really big things.”

In second-semester Calculus, however, students explore a concept that disturbs this naïve comfort with the infinite. The spoiler is infinite series. A series is a sum of infinitely many terms that can still add up to a finite number; an easy example is how  $\frac{1}{3} = 0.3 + 0.03 + 0.003 + \dots$ . Now, at first it would seem that the insights into infinity gained by looking at series shouldn’t be any different from the insights from Calculus I, for indeed series are technically defined with the same Calculus I concept of limit. However, when students try to apply their long familiarity with finite sums—after all they likely have been adding numbers since pre-school!—to the infinite counterpart, they discover that, in some ways, the behavior of infinite series simply has no analogue among finite sums. For instance, start with any sum  $S$  containing a finite number of terms, i.e.,  $S = a_1 + a_2 + a_3 + \dots$ . Re-arrange the order of the terms to your heart’s content, and add them up in this new order; the Commutative Law of Addition guarantees that you will always get the same

sum  $S$ . But the same is not always true for infinite series. For if we start with the infinite series:  $1 - \frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{3} - \frac{1}{4} + \frac{1}{5} - \frac{1}{6} + \dots$ , *the exact same set of terms* can be rearranged to give a sum of whatever positive or negative number one pleases! This complete breakdown in the “obvious” Commutative Law of Addition shakes our naïve confidence in the analogy between the infinite and the “really big finite.”

There is a very important counterpart in religious awareness. People of faith, myself included, often intuitively or even explicitly think about God as an infinite analogue of ourselves. God is Father, so the divine must be a perfect version of my father; God is Love, so the divine must embody a kind of perfection, a limit, of human love. Under this paradigm, I understand God by extrapolating from what I know about the human person and human experience. But both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures and the great Christian theologians and mystics warn us of the limitations or pitfalls in this line of thinking. As is the case with infinite series, sometimes the analogies dramatically break down; sometimes the truth about God is best understood in how God is not like us, instead of how God is the “infinite limit” of us. This is a deep truth underneath the terse claims that “God’s ways are not our

ways," or that God is "holy," whose meaning, we often forget, is: "other, different, set apart."

And yet, neither in the study of mathematics nor in the life of faith is this "otherness" a cause to abandon hope for knowledge or understanding. On the contrary, in the twentieth century, a new appreciation of infinity and its special intricacies opened up entirely new fields of mathematics and, perhaps more importantly, set all of mathematics on a new foundation. Similarly, the mystery and transcendence of God do not preclude prayerful meditation and theological reasoning; instead they provide the necessary foundation for such faithful endeavors to be genuine paths to truth. Perhaps no Christian belief about God is as "other," as different from human composition, as doctrine of the Trinity: that God is both perfectly One and perfectly Three. Yet, over the course of two millennia, theologians have developed a rich and positive Trinitarian theology that has impacted not only Christians' intellectual understanding but also our spirituality and even our moral vision of community.

**When we encounter Otherness and Mystery, we do not turn away in utter confusion; instead, we are drawn in and are capable of understanding, albeit incompletely.**

Finally, then, in both mathematics and faith I see beauty and wonder. The Infinite has truly touched us. We may mistakenly begin by imagining the Infinite as something familiar, simply a better version of ourselves. Yet, when disabused of this notion, when we encounter Otherness and Mystery, we do not turn away in utter confusion; instead, we are drawn in and are capable of understanding, albeit incompletely. And in this capacity for genuine communion with the Infinite, we discover what is most mysterious in ourselves.

# From Human Anatomy to Humanness

*Jacquie Van Hoomissen*

Biology Professor Jacquie Van Hoomissen studies the beneficial effects of physical activity on brain function, mental health, and well-being. She has published her work in neuroscience and public health journals and the popular press, and she has received national and local grants to support her research as well as her science education and outreach efforts.

I am fascinated with life. Not the chronological marching of time that defines the beginning and end, but how we, as humans, exist and coexist within the totality of everything else, the intriguing, complex, and sometimes mystifying *stuff* that just *is*. You could say I am fascinated by our *humanness*, by our existence in comparison to all else. What does it mean to be uniquely human? I want to know how we define “humanness” and share that experience with students. Is it possible to complete the definition of what it means to be human by learning all there is to know about how we are put together? If we look deep enough beneath our skin will the answer be there, bounding around our cells and illuminating the inner darkness? I teach Human Anatomy because it is a place to develop our definition of humanness, a discipline in which we puzzle-piece our structures together to understand what it means to be *us*.

Humanness is both something to know structurally but also something that transcends structure. It is a mystery to discover deep within ourselves. Anatomy is a place to start, a place to figure out what we know about our own physical make-up. It helps form a map of how we are put together, but the map falls drastically short when we try to understand ourselves and what makes us uniquely human. For that we have to dig deeper and go beyond the standard anatomical classification system that simplifies and

normalizes every human body into the same alphanumeric code in an anatomical reference book. Within this text of tight typographical structures, of indentations and font changes, there *must* be a place for difference, for nuances of design, for uniqueness that is impossible to categorize. In essence, there must be room for *humanness*.

Through the exploration of a human cadaver, students write their own definition of humanness by engaging in what it means to be us—to ask questions, to ponder options, to explore our own existence. This experience is profoundly challenging. Students experience discomfort, frustration, accomplishment, baby steps forward, backwards steps, long and short lists of terms, gross things—like cadaver fingernails with nail polish. But they also discover the camaraderie gained through a shared, transformational adventure and a deepening sense of purpose. Anatomy lab provides the catalyst. The experience pushes students to see *themselves* differently and to understand that it is impossible to *really* know every structure

of the body, because our knowledge is incomplete. In other words, we are still unsure of what it fully means to be human.

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and what it means to  
be human.**

From my side of the chalkboard, I understand the struggle my students go through in class trying to wrap their minds around understanding themselves from a structural perspective. I was once that student, the one asking the questions they now ask of me about our bodies and what it means to be human. I was the panicked student trying to figure out how I could possibly learn every structure on the cadaver, making endless notecards for reference, drawing pathways of blood flow

in my free time, staying up late into the night in the cadaver laboratory, finding classmates who were willing to study with me so I could teach them because I knew by doing this I would learn the material even better. It was darn hard, and I'm sure at some point I shed more than one tear. I persevered long enough, however, until one day the terms were easier to say, the structures no longer seemed randomly organized, organ systems started

to come together, and finally the human body began to make sense to me. All the words, the vast array of complex terms derived from languages I didn't speak, added up to a human body, but the body I was looking at on the dissection table wasn't just a teaching tool, it wasn't an "it," he or she was a person...a beautiful, intricate, amazing person who was a mirror to my own design.

How remarkable to be human. How fascinating to see how we are stitched together and in what ways each structure supports another, summing to something greater than we can fully comprehend. How extraordinary to be human and possess the capacity to persevere in the pursuit of knowledge about our own existence. Such self-awareness is unique in the animal kingdom.

I can't directly lead my students to the same insights I had as a student, but I can give them opportunities to write their own definitions within our classroom community. Throughout their study of anatomy students add to their vision and conceptions of their bodies while simultaneously learning more about themselves and their place in the world. These learning opportunities come in fits and starts when their initial conceptions confront reality. As we progress through the semester,

students change. Their definition of humanness expands with each new insight. At first they start to recognize reality; cadavers look nothing like the perfect, multi-colored models and charts present in the anatomy lab. Then they start to identify inconsistencies; not all anatomical structures are identically created in different people. Finally, they question what we know; if we understand so much about the anatomy of the brain, why can't we detail where consciousness comes from? Their questions go deeper than wanting to know which blood vessel carries oxygenated blood to the toes. They start asking who came before our species, what structures are vital to life, what might be the next evolutionary adaptations, how do humans develop from a single cell to a newborn baby, how are we different from our animal relatives, why do some populations suffer from preventable diseases, why do specific anatomical structures take on such social and cultural relevance, why is their sister so ill, is cancer going to take their dad away from them? They ask questions spontaneously, in the quiet moments in lab, while we sit together in a community of learners at a small table covered in lower pelvic floor models or lumbar vertebrae or skull replicas of long-ago extinct hominid species.



I answer them the best I can, but always initially with a simple question, "What do you think?" Then I just listen as they pour out their inner thoughts about all things human. What students don't realize quite yet is that through the act of posing and pondering anatomical questions they write their own definition of *humanness*.

As a professor, I now teach the same class I once agonized over two decades ago. My students and I spend the semester figuring out how the body is puzzle-pieced together, structure to structure, but our experience goes beyond that. At some point in the semester our Human Anatomy class becomes a new one I call Humanness Studies. I hope my students recognize this transition. I trust they learn more than just names and structures. I want them to see how each of us is knitted together by an unfathomable number of structures we share with one another and with other species...and to understand how truly amazing that is. I want them to know that we're not just memorizing structures; we are really learning about being human. We are learning about ourselves, and this knowledge cannot be categorized, named, or pointed out on any anatomical chart or model. At the heart of it, I want them to see that *humanness* is unique

and with this distinctiveness comes our capacity to persevere and change the world around us. Yet it all starts with understanding how the hip bone is connected to the thigh bone.

# 25 Practical / Passionate / Perceptive Professors

## Share What They Are Really Trying to Teach Their Students



What do I *really* teach when I teach Philosophy? For one, I remind my students—and myself—that we live in a universe that was not made by human hands. Rather, we are made by *it*. Quite literally, we are made of stardust. Even more: through philosophy's conversations with mathematics, biology, physics, and chemistry, we are able to put the universe into our heads. Through imagination, the universe comes to think about itself. And when we think about ourselves thinking about ourselves, such conscious self-reflection typically means we have more questions than we have answers.



Students believe that the past can be quantified and organized and expressed, much like a mathematical equation, in a way that reveals absolute truth. Historians by contrast know that history is alive, dynamic, ever-changing. We look into the past with hopes of pinning down words, remembrances, pictures, feelings, experiences, and ever-shifting numbers, all of which sometimes present conflicting realities.



So what does what I really teach students have to do with German? Honestly, not a whole lot. German may be the subject that I teach, but “teaching German” is really the name of the road on which I travel in the uphill, often surprising, and occasionally truly stellar paths of the intellectual and personal growth of my students.



I teach Human Anatomy because it is a place to develop our definition of humanness, a discipline in which we puzzle-piece our structures together to understand what it means to be us. Humanness is both something to know structurally but also something that transcends structure. It is a mystery to discover deep within ourselves.



So, what do I really teach? What I really teach is as varied as my own education and experience, which has made me the musician I am today. I teach students to enjoy making sound, to love language, to use music as a lens through which they can view culture, history, science, philosophy, theology, and more. I teach students to love music enough to explore and dissect the profound way music connects and affects all of humanity and also to be awed and humbled by its mystery.



As much as possible, I help students understand the connections Social Work has to other disciplines and why those connections are crucial to our work. Sometimes it means showing students the underbelly of the work they will be doing, including asking students to explore old wounds and focusing on the tragedies of the human condition. But it also means exploring the opportunities, successes, and gratification students are sure to experience as they help transform individual lives, families, and communities.



Engaging compassion in nursing practice is vital and naturally raises provocative questions, inspiring transformational conversations to challenge the status quo. What does it look like to be in relationship with your patients? What assumptions and/or fears arise for Nursing students when we discuss compassionate caring? How do we develop in future nurses the capacity to look beyond the cells, tissues, and systems and ask deeper, more humanizing questions?

Education/Teaching



ISBN 978-0-87946-587-2



9 780879 465872

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\$14.95