

## Legacy Lecture: Elias Baumgarten

November 1, 2018

Colleagues, students, and friends. Thank you all for being here today.

I worked at this university for 46 years. Studs Terkel wrote a book called *Working*. Its first words were: “This book, being about work, is, by its very nature about violence—to the spirit as well as to the body... To survive the day is triumph enough for the walking wounded among the great many of us.”

I am lucky. The work I was required to do here was the opposite of violence to the spirit. I didn't only survive 46 years; I had the good fortune, unlike so many others even in this country and certainly in many others, to have a life's work that allowed me to express the things that I value most: the love of learning, thoughtful conversation, and the mentoring and friendship of students. Unlike too many in this country, I had good medical insurance. I didn't have to worry about job security or finances when I had kidney failure 27 years ago. I could dialyze in my office, teaching three classes while waiting for a kidney transplant, and I could teach, never cancelling a class, during the semester that I went through chemotherapy and radiation 7 years ago. The most important thing I want to express today is my gratitude. UM-



Dearborn helped me fulfill my dream to be a university teacher, and that dream, that choice, is one I have never regretted. Thank you, University of Michigan-Dearborn; thank you, colleagues; and most of all, thank you, students.

In this “last lecture,” I want to talk about three things: philosophy, teaching, and my experience with students on this great campus. Along the way—this is a talk with modest ambitions—I will offer a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Sort of.

**First, philosophy.** I originally chose philosophy because I believe that philosophical questions underlie every other area of study. Universities recognize this in naming their highest degree, doctor of *philosophy*. University catalogues pay homage to Socrates and the ideal of the “examined life.” Here on our campus the Business School requires students to complete a philosophy course in “critical thinking.”

But that recognition of philosophy’s importance exists alongside our culture’s deep skepticism about its value and, increasingly I’m afraid, about the value of critical thinking itself. Tocqueville called America “the least philosophical of countries.” And it’s not just *our* culture. Athens did not reward Socrates for being a gadfly; they put him to death. Spinoza said that a philosopher must be a “disturber of the peace,” and he was excommunicated from the Portuguese Jewish Community of Amsterdam, condemned for his “evil opinions.”

I think true philosophers must be marginal to *any* society because a majority of people embrace beliefs without the kind of rational evidence that philosophy demands. A shockingly large percentage of Americans accepted the slanderous idea that Barack Obama was an illegal alien born in Kenya. The failure to think critically can have dangerous consequences. Some parents refuse to have their kids vaccinated based on the groundless fear of autism. We had a case on the hospital ethics committee where a young otherwise healthy girl died from complications of the seasonal flu, a tragic outcome most likely prevented if she had been vaccinated. Whether it’s about Barack Obama, flu vaccines, or even whether children really died at Sandy Hook, conspiracy theories abound, and too many people accept them.

Critical thinking inoculates people against credulity, and American society has never needed critical thinking as much as today. The internet and hundreds of cable TV stations offer us the opportunity to learn from innumerable sources, but too many of those sources are “fake news” and, what’s worse, many people blindly accept what they read or hear. I believe that philosophy and critical thinking are necessary for a democracy to function well. And I don’t think American democracy is functioning well today.

Although philosophical reasoning is sometimes thought to be abstract to the point of irrelevance, my work on hospital ethics committees teaches me otherwise. I even once invoked Kant, the most abstract of all moral philosophers, and one of the greatest, to help clarify my views in one of my earliest cases on call. A woman needed a bone marrow transplant, and her sister was her last hope. When the medical team phoned her sister who lived in the South, she would rant and rave—“I hate my sister; I hate the whole

family.” But when they asked if she was refusing to be a donor, she’d snap, “I didn’t say that. That would be too terrible.”

The medical team wondered if they should just give up on her, and so they referred the case to Ethics. For some reason I was on call alone. The ethical issue was clear: could the sister give free and informed consent to donate her bone marrow even though it was something she did not *want* to do? For Kant a free choice is one motivated by morality, and not only is it *possible* to act freely when one chooses something one does not *want* to do; Kant gives the highest praise to one who acts against selfish desires and does the right thing simply because it’s right. I suggested that a practical test of her sister’s free choice is not what she wants to do but what she actually chooses to do, without coercion, regardless of her desires. If she gets on the plane, comes to the hospital, agrees to be tested, and follows through on each step, she can be acting as a free moral agent, even acting against her desires. The treatment team accepted this line of thinking--a bit too quickly for my comfort since I expected to be guiding an extended discussion. But in their mind, “the ethicist has spoken”—and, most important, the patient’s sister donated her bone marrow and saved her sister’s life.

Since that time philosophy and sustained moral deliberation have gained a more solid place in the medical profession. More and more physicians are also bioethicists and write bioethics articles. Philosophy has, in my opinion, showed itself to be immensely valuable in thinking through some of the most difficult life-and-death decisions that physicians face every day.

But philosophy has not lost its dangerous quality or its role as “disturber of the peace.” An ultra-conservative religious school would not allow the kind of philosophy course that we offer on this campus. For philosophers, reason and not faith is the final court of appeal, and all of us who have taught philosophy have made some students feel uncomfortable and intellectually less safe. That is our job. And questioning the beliefs that we have grown up with or become comfortable with is the job of anyone concerned about the truth. It is quite obvious to me that if I had been born in a different place or in a different age, my beliefs would be different. I might worship Vishnu or pray to the Canaanite god Moloch. Such reflections undercut any easy assurance that the beliefs of the culture one happens to be born into embody the one and only Truth with a capital “T.” Many of the best students I have taught welcome this journey into potential bewilderment. For some it leads to a strong reaffirmation of their original faith. For others it leads to spiritual change. For a few that I recall from decades ago, it led to initiating what they called “The Religious Project,” which involved taking each religion in turn, reading about it, visiting with and interrogating the best local spiritual teachers they could find—ministers, imams, rabbis, and others—and then deciding which religion taught the Truth. This project was led by David Richardson and Jim Bork—who are among the brightest students I have ever taught.

However, I think they were naïve in embracing their new faith, their faith in reason. Although reasoning can break down the confidence one has in the “One True Religion,” it is powerless to prove the truth of another. I think Kant was right to believe that although reason is a powerful tool in ethics, it reaches its limits when it attempts to answer ultimate metaphysical questions. As many of you know, Kant thought reason could demonstrate both that the universe has a beginning and that the universe is eternal, from which he concluded, correctly I believe, that reason alone simply cannot answer the question. According to Kant, many of the concepts necessary for human experience—time, space, and causation—are properties only of the human mind and not of ultimate Reality. We exist in a kind of Platonic cave but with no chance of escape. According to Kant, our rational powers are sufficient for discovering truths of ethics and science and mathematics. But when we try to grasp the “world as it is in itself” we can say nothing.

I agree with Kant. And with Socrates, that the truest wisdom recognizes its own ignorance about “the meaning of it all.” After teaching philosophy for 46 years, my strongest conviction is that the universe and my place in it is a mystery, a mystery that rational philosophy cannot fully address.

Those of us who teach philosophy and also live in the “real world” face that inevitable question “What’s *your* philosophy?” (I suspect that many who ask it later regret raising the subject.) I was asked this by a sheik in a village mosque near Hebron in Palestine after his extended effort to convert me to Islam. Twenty men, crowded into a room, were waiting for my answer as well. Of course I equivocated about this for as long as I could. I am not always good at what Buddhists call “right speech,” which includes mindfulness of right time and place, but I did know that this was not the occasion to mention David Hume’s view of miracles or Frederick Nietzsche’s assertion that “God is dead.” But since this is my “last lecture,” I am going to give an answer. Or, more humbly, I will quote Albert Einstein, whose words express, better than I can, both my philosophy and something about my religion. Einstein wrote in 1930:

“The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious... To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty which our dull faculties can comprehend only in the most primitive forms, this knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of true religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I belong to the ranks of the devoutly religious men.”

I am struck above all by the contingency of my existence. Why am I here in this particular time and place? To me Schopenhauer expresses this powerfully:

“To our amazement we suddenly exist, after having for countless millennia not existed; in a short while we will not exist, also for countless millennia. That cannot be right, says

the heart; and even upon the crudest intelligence there must, when it considers such an idea, dawn a presentiment of the ideality of time”—of the Kantian idea that time itself is a human category that does not belong to the nature of Ultimate Reality, the universe as it is in itself, independent of human knowers.

Having studied some Buddhist philosophy, I am not even sure that there is anything like an “I,” or something stable that we call a “self.” Of course it’s not just Buddhists who are unable to say exactly what the “self” is. Hume questioned the existence of the self as a stable substance and Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote in his *Notebooks*, influenced by Schopenhauer, “the thinking subject is surely mere illusion... The ‘I,’ the ‘I’ is what is deeply mysterious.”

So I am left with mystery and the flow of conscious experience, mine grounded in a particular culture and historical period and yet recognizing that the realm of meaning extends beyond these particular and limited boundaries. I see two of the great extra-human loves of my life, philosophy and travel, as attempts to reach beyond those boundaries and to try to touch, however gently and superficially, ways of thinking foreign to this time and place. In the Sixties we called this journey “consciousness expansion.” That was sometimes said flippantly, but I think it has a serious meaning. I endorse this passage from the *Bhagavad Gita*: “all who follow the spiritual path are blessed.” Hindus believe that there are many spiritual paths and that they that are different ways of reaching the peak of the mountain, different ways of attaining *moksha* or Enlightenment, different ways of escaping the cave of Plato and getting a glimpse of the sun. For now I am content to remain simply a traveler. I am not sure of the exact direction or whether it ever reaches an end other than death. But I *am* grateful for the beauty and richness of the path.

**Teaching.** At its best I think teaching is among the most noble of professions. There are certainly aspects of university teaching that feel anything but noble: the emphasis on grades, the administration’s unavoidable concern with efficiency, the sometimes narrowly quantitative ideas of assessment, and the economic pressures that force even some of the best students to forego their dream and to study a field only because it is likely to lead to a financially secure future. But none of these obstacles erases the magic of a classroom or of the one-to-one communication between professor and student in an office or cafe. Philip Roth describes this sacred experience in one of his novels imagining the first day of a literature class:

“...we will be meeting to discuss books for three hours a week...and from experience I know, as you do, that under such conditions a strong bond of affection can develop...”

“I love teaching literature. I am rarely ever so contented as when I am here with my pages

of notes, and my marked-up texts, and with people like yourselves. To my mind there is nothing quite like the classroom in all of life. Sometimes when we are in the midst of talking—when one of you, say, has pierced with a single phrase right to the heart of the book at hand—I want to cry out, ‘Dear friends, cherish this!’ Why? Because once you have left here people are rarely, if ever, going to talk to you or listen to you the way you talk and listen to one another and to me in this bright and barren little room. Nor is it likely that you will easily find opportunities elsewhere to speak without embarrassment about what has mattered most to [people] as attuned to life’s struggles as were Tolstoy, Mann, and Flaubert. ... I doubt that you know how affecting it is to hear you speak thoughtfully and in all earnestness about solitude, illness, longing, loss, suffering, delusion, hope, passion, love, terror, corruption, calamity, and death...moving because you are nineteen and twenty years old, from comfortable middle-class homes most of you, and without much debilitating experience in your dossiers yet—but also because, oddly and sadly, this may be the last occasion you will ever have to reflect in any sustained and serious way upon all the forces with which in time you will all contend, like it or not.

“...Does what I have just said render any more legitimate the claim I should like to make upon your time and patience and tuition? To put it as straight as I can—what a church is to the true believer, a classroom is to me. Some kneel at Sunday prayer, others don phylacteries each dawn...and I appear three times each week, my tie around my neck and my watch on my desk, to teach the great stories to you.”

I know that experience. I’ve loved it and I will miss it. It didn’t happen every class or even every week, but whenever it happened, it was thrilling. I would sometimes leave class regretting that I had to wait a few days before seeing the same students again. Once when it happened, I found myself bounding into the department office just to tell the secretaries how excited I was about the class discussion I had just left.

The passage from Philip Roth represents for me what is exhilarating about teaching. It is, above, all, about the Great Conversation. I speak now about the humanities; other fields have, I am sure, their own special moments, perhaps in a lab or in the woods. For the humanist the magic is found in the shared participation of teacher and student in the world of great ideas. But one thing I fear is that we may be losing some of the qualities that make the Great Conversation possible. The Great Conversation is *personal*. It cannot exist at its best on a computer screen or in a large lecture hall. To be clear, I have experienced it in both of those settings. I understand the economic necessity of having some large classes to balance off the expense of small seminars. And I strongly support bringing university education to people who cannot appear on campus every week at a designated time. But nothing can take the place of

real-time conversation--like my pre-medical students not only hearing what Roz Chalnick has to say but seeing that she is a 96-year-old woman. Nothing can take the place of Roz Chalnik, period. Nothing can match personal human contact for having ethnic or gender stereotypes shattered. Or for appreciating the perspective of students with a visible disability. Or enjoying humor or sharing food that can create bonds that go beyond the purely intellectual. Conversation is personal, and it can nurture what may be even more important than an open mind-- an *open heart*.

I fear that universities are making the mistake of not fully appreciating the importance of the Great Conversation. Even from a purely pragmatic perspective, most students will need the skill of speaking and listening in a group at least as much as the ability to write clearly and thoughtfully. We have rightfully been emphasizing the importance of good writing—we can probably never emphasize it enough—but I think, perhaps because of the expense of smaller classes, we have failed to acknowledge the importance of students experiencing and learning the art of good conversation.

### **Students**

I cannot help but get personal in this part of my “last lecture.”

I was born of Jewish immigrant parents who never finished high school. But they valued education. In Judaism study is as sacred as prayer. My parents weren't religious the way their parents were, but they retained a reverence for study, a reverence that spread to secular subjects. In my parents' home the television was almost never on in the daytime. My father made two exceptions. One was Saturday baseball, the “Game of the Week.” And the other was when my father would watch Shakespeare, helped along by a book version of the relevant play. Our home had lots of books, and my parents were always reading something. We had dinners together—no TV and of course no cell phones. Dinner was often a time for discussion and even argument about ideas. As kids my sister and I felt free to disagree with our parents. Disagreement on issues was not taken personally. We learned, as in the Sixties bumper sticker, to “question authority”; I've retained that practice all my life, not always to the pleasure of my department chairs. I've had to remind myself when teaching that not every student came from this kind of family and to emphasize that it's not rude to challenge my ideas or the ideas of an author or ideas of other students and that the best way of testing the soundness of a philosophical position is to consider the reasons that a thoughtful person might oppose it.

I went to a good, small liberal arts college. I confess that 46 years ago when I was on the job market, I had hoped to teach at that kind of school. My model was a school like Oberlin, preferably in a great city like Boston. So although I was glad to land a full-time job, I was not at first overjoyed with UM-Dearborn. I did identify with the many students who were the first in their families to go to college, but I

hoped to be teaching more students in love with ideas and fewer who saw college mainly as preparation for a career. And—this is the hardest to admit now—I was not thrilled when I learned that Dearborn had the largest Arab population in the country. I didn't know many Arabs—probably could not have named one Arab or one Muslim in my past—but I think the only idea I had about them is that they probably don't like Jews. In fact a few years into my time at Dearborn when a student urged me to come with him to “Uncle Sam's,” an Arab restaurant, I wondered if it would be safe. [Tone of voice: amazement and embarrassment] Actually the student was Jewish and assured me it was fine. I was faculty advisor to the philosophy club, and after that we often held our meetings and discussions at Uncle Sam's, and of course we were always welcomed with warm hospitality. And great food.

Forty-six years later I feel a deep affection for UM-Dearborn--and for Dearborn. Having taught twice as a visiting professor at a somewhat more socially elite university, I've come to appreciate even more what it means to teach on campus where many students are from working class families. I've seen how much *more* satisfying it is to *introduce students* to the world of books and ideas rather than merely to give students more of a world they already know. And although I myself love to see students excited about ideas for their own sake, I've come to appreciate, on a human level, the importance of helping students gain a career that will help them flourish, rather than being trapped in the kind of work that Studs Terkel described as violence to the spirit.

I love the diversity of the UM-Dearborn student body, every part of it. But probably what has been most transformative for me has been getting to know Arab students, both Muslim and non-Muslim, and Muslim students, both Arab and non-Arab. One student who changed my life is Nabil Khoury, now Dr. Khoury. In a course that I co-taught with Elton Higgs, Nabil approached me, as a Palestinian, to talk about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. I was never a strong Zionist, but I had many typically mainstream attitudes and had never studied the Palestinian position. Nabil changed that—very gently, too. Those discussions led me to go to Palestine and Israel during the first year of the intifada, the Palestinian uprising, and after I returned I literally could talk about nothing else. In the years after that, many of my interactions with Arab students revolved around political issues, and I set up an Arab-Jewish dialogue group, which was mainly Jews from Ann Arbor and Arabs from Dearborn. I think this experience demonstrated the transformative power of human interaction. I recall driving home from the group with one of the Jewish members after our first meeting. She had a Ph.D. in clinical psychology, was a psychotherapist, and considered herself a liberal Jew. She said, “you know, the Arab members of the group are so thoughtful and intelligent, and *why am I surprised?*” She knew why she was surprised and was embarrassed about it. Our group had honest discussions. We became friends and sometimes thought



the main point of our meeting was to enjoy *knefe*, that wonderful Palestinian dessert that Nader would bring. But inevitably new issues would come up and we had the trust to deal with them.

I feel that I can't possibly give a "last lecture" without saying something about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, especially since UM-Dearborn students have influenced my study of both the region and the conflict. The challenge, of course, is to be concise. I'll take three paragraphs.

The Jewish people have, of course, long suffered persecution, especially in Europe, culminating in a horrible genocide which destroyed one-third of world-wide Jewry and most of what was once a viable European Jewish culture. If there is any justification for a group to seek national independence, *escape from persecution* is, in my view, a very strong one. Jews have historically looked to Palestine as an ancient homeland and prayed for a return to Jerusalem. This long antedates Zionism and the phrase, "next year in Jerusalem" is in the prayers of even that small group of ultra-Orthodox Jews who are in fact anti-Zionists. (They believe that we must wait for the Messiah to make the return happen.) Zionists considered other places of refuge but remained centrally focused on Palestine. One early Zionist, Israel Zangwell, famously called Palestine "a land without people for a people without land." Sometimes our hearts can blind us to the truth. What is less well known is that Zangwell himself wrote years later, to his own surprise, that Palestine was already occupied, and he thought Jews were too humane to force themselves on the indigenous Palestinians. Of course he was wrong.

I believe that the way the Jewish dream of a homeland was implemented involved a violation of Palestinian rights and that that violation has continued in a brutal form through the current occupation. I believe that if the average liberal Jew who supports oppressed people in other parts of the world experienced firsthand the conditions under which Palestinians live, she would be forced to reexamine many of her beliefs about Zionism. *Personal contact makes a difference*. I have witnessed the lives and talked with Palestinians in towns, villages and refugee camps in both the West Bank and Gaza, and I believe Israel's policies are immoral. I also believe that they are inconsistent with Israel's own interests. I do not believe the current Israeli leadership wants a just peace. I also don't believe that the Palestinian leadership has done all it should for its own people. I believe there is a solution—not a perfectly just one but one enormously better than the current never-ending nightmare. And as American citizens, I believe *we* bear a lot of responsibility for not helping to end that nightmare in a way that considers the interests of all people, not just Israeli Jews.

To borrow from Winston Churchill, I believe that a two-state solution is the worst one possible, except for all the others that have been proposed. I am open to other approaches. There is room for a long argument

among thoughtful people, but the starting point must be the equal dignity of every person and the equal right of every Jew and every Palestinian to human and political rights.

Since my early years in Dearborn, my engagement with Arabs and Muslims has expanded far beyond the political. I have met and become long-time close friends with many Arab and Muslim students. In some cases we share a background as the children of immigrants or as Semites or simply as intellectually curious people. I became more and more interested in Arab and Muslim cultures, and I've traveled not only to Palestine but to nine other predominantly Muslim countries, seven times to Turkey. The Call to Prayer becomes a regular part of my day for months at a time. For me Islamic art and architecture is the most beautiful and enchanting form of religious artistic expression. And, professionally, giving talks at the American University of Beirut—on Zionism actually--and at Al-Quds University in Palestine are among the most satisfying professional experiences of my career.

We have something special in Dearborn and on this campus. When I tell Europeans from Belgium or France that a devout Muslim student, Emann Alleban, won our "best philosophy student" award, they are shocked. They see Muslims, mostly on TV, as people occupying their suburban ghettos. I see them, men and women but in particular often women wearing the hijab, as among the best students in my classes and among the best people I know, socially engaged and more interested in helping people than in self-aggrandizement. I've seen many of them in my medical ethics classes and then later as medical students at the University of Michigan hospital. And still later, as lawyers, physicians, and leaders in public health. I am enormously proud of these students and enormously honored for any contribution I have made to their careers. And to their lives. Whatever effect I may have had on them, I know that they have affected me more.

So, yes, we in America can be proud that our Muslim citizens are not living in ghettos and that our country has been a land that has, certainly not always but at least in its best times, welcomed immigrants and all people without regard to religion or race. But last week our country experienced the murder of eleven Jews in a synagogue and two African Americans at a Kroger supermarket. Both were hate crimes. When I came here 46 years ago, Dearborn was known for its racism and for a mayor whose campaign slogan was "keep Dearborn *clean*," and everyone knew what he meant. Dearborn has changed enormously for the better. And in my imagination, perhaps a bit romanticized by retirement, the University of Michigan-Dearborn is almost like that "shining city on a hill" that President Reagan talked about so often.

But I fear that our country is succumbing to fear and demagoguery. We have a president who calls "good people" those who chanted Nazi slogans. We have a president who wanted to prevent Muslims from

coming to this country, a president who began his campaign with an attack on Mexican immigrants. These are our neighbors, our co-workers, our friends. We have a president who spoke at the Republican convention of his commitment to LGBTQ people but has shown the opposite. We have a president who ridiculed a journalist with a handicap—and then lied about it. We have a president who bragged about molesting women. You’ve all heard this book of shame. So we cannot look to our nation’s leader to bring out “the better angels of our nature.” We have to look within ourselves. We cannot remain silent in the face of bigotry. We need to act and we need to act wisely and effectively. We can and will disagree about policies and candidates, and those choices are very important. But what is even more important, whatever our political ideology or party, is that we cultivate those great moral virtues-- kindness, an open heart, civility, reasoned debate, tolerance for difference but intolerance for hatred and bigotry. As the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber wrote, “we need...the ability to put ourselves in the place of the other individual, the stranger, and to make his soul ours.” That is also the most *American* thing we can do.

Thank you for listening.

