"A Life of Learning": 1999 Senior Lecture

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First, thanks a lot for inviting me; it's quite an honor that those of you who have studied with me actually want to hear more—and not even for credit. Let me start with a puzzle. Most of you were born in the year I began teaching at Sarah Lawrence; so I've been here for rather a long time. Why then do I still feel like one of the new people? Bill Park has been here forever; I'm one of the Young Turks who just arrived—twenty-one years ago. A related puzzle: I've had a beard since 1971, but when I get up in the morning and look in the mirror, I'm always a little surprised by it. So why do I expect the face of a 17-year-old to stare back at me?

Euripides wrote a play called the *Helen*. According to the plot, Helen never went to Troy with Paris; she was replaced by a phantom image fashioned by Hera out of air. The real Helen was whisked away to Egypt. As the play opens Helen identifies herself to us and, of course, we have to accept her word—that's what you do when you watch a play. Still, in another context the whole thing would be problematic. The two Helens are so alike that neither Menelaus, who has spent the last seven years with the phantom, nor Paris, who lived with her for ten years, know that she is not real. And, of course, the event that defines the Greeks as Greek—the Trojan War—was fought for the phantom. Now, were you a little cynical, you might say, "Isn't that just like men?"; still, what does it mean for the one who remained in Egypt to be the real Helen? What does our identity really consist in?

The *Helen* begins with a series of images that emphasize the split between motion and rest. Put these two together, and you get the gods, who are always the same in their role as paradigms (love, war, sky, earth, etc.) and nevertheless, as alive—as persons— are always changing (Ares may mean war and Aphrodite beauty, but they also sleep together, to the

consternation of Aphrodite's husband, Hephaestus, and the amusement and titillation of the rest of the gods). This is connected to the issue that dominates the *Helen* and almost makes it a comedy: nobody recognizes anybody else in this play. When Teucer, a Greek veteran of the war, comes to Egypt, he sees Helen and is amazed that there could be such a look-alike for the "real" Helen. Menelaus, shipwrecked and in rags, is upset that the old woman porter at the door of the king of Egypt does not recognize him for what he is. When he hears that there is a woman named Helen who lives in the house, he speculates that perhaps there is in Egypt a parallel world where there is even another man named Zeus. When Helen and Menelaus first meet, she does not recognize him even though she has been told that he is in Egypt, and he does not recognize her until he has been told by a messenger that the phantom Helen has vanished. The messenger at first thinks that Helen is the reappearance of the phantom Helen, whom he, of course, takes to be the real Helen. The connection between the togetherness of motion and rest and recognition emerges in the most puzzling line of the play. In the scene we have all been waiting for, where Helen and Menelaus eventually recognize each other, she first runs from him thinking he is one of her captors. He is struck by her face, but she seems not to be sure who he is. While she knows who he is supposed to be, she can't believe her eyes and says "O gods! For even to recognize friends is a god." At first we think she has recognized him and is grateful, but the recognition doesn't come until several lines later. So, here Helen seems to mean instead that it is as difficult to recognize even those closest and most dear to you as it is to recognize a god. Menelaus has aged in the seventeen years since she last saw him, and she cannot be sure who he is. It is as difficult to grasp the unchanging core of another human being as it is to recognize a god. The gods in their double being as constant (or at rest) and changing (or in motion) are simply bolder versions of the problem of human identity. We are at once the same as we were when we were

born (or when we were 17) and yet constantly changing and so never really the same at all. We grow and learn, become happy and bitter, graduate and teach at Sarah Lawrence, and so on. The *Helen* literally splits Helen at the beginning into her name—i.e., her phantom—and her body in Egypt. The name goes to Troy, and the result is *the* story of Helen and Menelaus, a story that necessarily holds them in some sense constant so that its motion is intelligible. Helen *is* "the face that launched a thousand ships," and Menelaus *is* the sacker of Troy. The real Helen, who presumably changes, goes to Egypt, which Euripides likens to Hades and so suggests is a place where nothing changes. What is peculiar about the play, then, is that to show us the difference between the name which hides Helen's reality by stabilizing her and Helen's reality, Euripides must tell another story about Helen, which of course necessarily treats her as in some way constant.

You could put the general problem this way. To identify something is to name it—to tag it, put a seal on it, or put it to rest. But what does it mean do that to a human being? *The* being that has as its being to be in motion is the soul. In Greek the word for name—*onoma*—is the same as the word for noun. Can one really turn a verb into a noun in this way? Can one be expected, for example, to talk about a *life* of learning and one's own life to boot? Have you asked me to do the impossible today as a sort of perverse revenge because I have so often given you impossible paper topics? Maybe I should change the emphasis of my very first sentence: Thanks a *lot* for inviting me.

Still, Helen pulls it off; she identifies herself by telling her story. And then Euripides tells a larger story about how she comes to do so. Stories—*muthoi*—are what they are by putting together rest and motion. So maybe I will tell a few stories, and with any luck, something of my identity will get through.

But not yet; first, Aristotle. There is really more at stake than whether I mess up the Senior Lecture. The first book of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is about happiness. Can we call anyone happy who has not experienced a complete life? Aristotle is thinking of Solon's famous remark that we should count no man happy until his is dead and so is indirectly reminding us of Solon's other famous saying that as he grows older he constantly learns many things. You can see the connection. Suppose wisdom is the source of happiness. If you are always learning something new, and if everything is connected to everything else, then you never really know what you think you know, you are not really wise, and so cannot really be happy. In his version of this problem of human happiness, Aristotle calls our attention to the life of Priam of Troy to attest to the dangers of premature judgment. No matter that you have fared very well for most of your life, if in your last days, your sons are killed, your wife and daughters raped, and the city over which you have ruled long and prosperously is ransacked and burned. It looks as though either one can never count oneself happy, or one could do so only if there were a place like Hades from which a judgment of one's life as a whole could be made after death. Here Aristotle makes a rather queer digression about whether the dead in Hades can be made unhappy by the shameful deeds of their living relations—you thought you were happy but your great-granddaughter gets caught shoplifting after you are dead. It all seems quite bizarre until one realizes what is at stake—the possibility of a perspective from which one can judge one's life, which is at the same time immune from the incomplete and precarious nature of life as it is lived. Hades looks to be absurd. Either you do not live on, in which case there is no vantage point from which to judge your life, and your life is never experienced as complete; or else you do live on, in which case you can still be affected by things and your life is never experienced as complete. Hades is simply graduate school. In either case you will never be able to count yourself happy,

and so will never be able to be happy in any final sense. You cannot say, "I am happy" because the "I" does not remain constant; this is not an accident of your particular life; it is rather inherent in the very character of what it means to be a self in the world. Life is by its very nature incomplete and incompletable.

Sorry, maybe we should talk about my childhood in upstate New York (like Priam and Paris, I come from Troy). Ok, but first, Rousseau. The third of his *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* begins with an epigraph—a familiar quotation from Solon: "I come to be old, while always learning." Rousseau laments this fact for reasons very like the ones we have seen. It looks as though learning always comes too late. Because we can never grasp our lives as wholes, we learn to live only after it is not of any use to us. Learning means discovering potentially terrible mistakes—perhaps without remedy. To avoid this situation, Rousseau decides that when he is forty, he will consider himself a completed work, simply adopt whatever views seem to him most likely, and live faithfully, and guiltlessly, for the remainder of his life using them as moral standards. Of course this is preposterous, and he knows it; Rousseau writes the *Reveries* when he is in his sixties and in the very next one, the fourth, tells us that the day before yesterday he meditated about whether lying was ever moral. So apparently his fixed moral principles are under constant revision. Still, we are meant to learn something about the structure of morality from this phantom stability. To be a moral being means regularly to jump outside of oneself to take stock of oneself as a whole. We may not know how it is possible for us to take this measure of our lives, but our everyday experiences of duty and obligation suggest that we are nevertheless doing it all the time. Rousseau placed the quotation of Solon over the third reverie as an epigraph to signal what it was about as a whole. Apparently it is possible to have sufficient distance on ourselves to know that it is our nature never simply to be complete. This is self-consciousness—

in its double sense of self-awareness and embarrassment. We capture ourselves in our awareness that we are always in motion.

Stories. I was born in a log cabin. That's not true, of course, but it is not as far from true as you might think. I was actually born in Albany, New York. My parents met in their mid-twenties and in the century's mid-thirties working in Gimbels' Department Store in New York City. It wasn't long before they were caught up in trying to unionize the store (the International Ladies Garment Workers Union) and it wasn't long after that they became members of the American Communist Party. When the war broke out, my father joined the Navy; they taught him to be a radar technician and then, because he had unreliable political views, sent him to San Clemente Island, California, where he spent three years manning the radar station and diving for abalone. After the war, the Party sent my parents to upstate New York to organize labor unions. My father got a job in Troy shoveling coal at a non-union factory—the night shift so that he could do his real work during the day. I was born at about this time. Their story is actually much more interesting than mine, but to make it short, they lost their faith, decided to leave the Party and, attempted to walk an impossible line between cooperating with federal investigators and withholding specific information about men and women who had been their friends for fifteen years. When it was all over they had no friends, and so decided to light out for the territory. They bought a half-acre of land in rural West Sand Lake, N.Y. about ten miles from Troy.

Here's where I come in. This was in the spring of 1951; I was three. They bought an Army surplus tent; my father cleared the land of trees (with an axe, not a chainsaw), and there we were, two adults and three small children in a tent on a piece of land that abutted the swampy end of a little lake. A log cabin would have been a luxury. My father had to build some kind of shelter for us in the five months before winter set in. The funny thing is that he had never built

anything before in his life. But he had all he needed—inexhaustible optimism and the ability to read. I still have the *Home Handyman's Guide* that he gave me when, having come to Sarah Lawrence, my wife and I found ourselves in a similar, if less dire, situation. The cost of living in Westchester County meant that we could only afford a house quaintly described as a "handyman's special" but in reality pretty much a wreck. Anyway, this very book had taught him how to talk about building, and so how to ask questions without being laughed at. It also guided him to other books that actually taught him how to build. We were lucky as well. Down the road from us (It was a dirt road that would have had weeds growing in a line down the center were it not for the oil the town poured on it every summer to keep the dust down. One of my strongest memories from that time is walking down this road hand in hand with my sisters to the part of the lake where you could swim; the oil was hot on our bare feet, and did not come off so easily.)…. Anyway, about a half-mile down this road lived a man who had an old ice house he wanted to take down so that he could build a garage. My father offered to help him deconstruct it if he could keep the ice house. First he removed the roof and then disattached the four walls from one another so that they collapsed atop each other into a square. Then he made a sort of harness fastened in turn to each of the walls and hitched over his shoulders. One by one he dragged the walls to our little plot of land and then reassembled the whole. Over the years, our house would grow in all sorts of quirky ways, but to this day Mr. Cumming's ice house is at its core. Shortly after this, my father bought an old yellow car, cut off the top in back, and turned it into a truck (later when it would run no longer, he cut the truck in half and made a trailer). He used both to haul building materials bought second hand from sites where old buildings were being torn down to make way for new construction. The living room he eventually built for this house was about twenty feet square with two adjacent walls completely windowed from floor to ceiling and

overlooking our swamp. The house was filled with wonderful details like this. On the other hand, there was scarcely a right angle to be found in it; learning by doing has its glorious side, but it also has its limitations.

I've spent so much time on this on the one hand because I enjoy thinking about it, but also because I learned from it the great power of intelligence and the enormous fun involved in its exercise. By inclination, but also by necessity, my father's view of the world around him, of its possibilities and limitations, was remarkably free of conventional expectations. He was not really a part of this world he had stumbled into, and being apart from it had enabled him to come to it in a curiously fresh way. I like to think this is an image of the fixed principle of the motion of my own life. My parents were city folk and former communists, she a Jew who grew up in a family of Yiddish actors and he the non-believing son of a freemason and a Christian Scientist. They found themselves in rural, conservative, Christian upstate New York. And they liked it. Over the years they became increasingly involved in the community, but without being resentful, they never lost sight of the fact that they were strangers in a strange land. Because they got in the habit of thinking of ordinary things as strange, they were at home with the strangeness of the world. It is impossible for me to describe them without running headlong into the inadequacies of my own descriptive talents. For many years, on the first day of spring my father would march his children around the backyard with pots and pans and spoons to bang on them—to welcome in spring he said. To understand him you need to know that there was never anything saccharine about this; it was more like a pagan rite, more an ironic philosophic wonder than flower-childishness.

Eventually I inherited this sense of alienation from them, but with an added wrinkle—I don't feel at home in the city either. At first though, I had no idea that we were peculiar. I had a

rather idyllic pre-adolescence—playing Vikings on the lake in an old wooden boat, catching frogs, playing baseball, and reading. My mother's notion of the classics was wonderfully inclusive—anything old that people had once liked. So I read Jack London, Sinclair Lewis, Mark Twain, and (my own addition) Chip Hilton Sports Stories. One Christmas I received as a gift a beautiful complete hardbound set of Dickens. Of course, it wasn't really complete. My mother had gotten it for two dollars at a used book store; it was so inexpensive because it was missing all of the best known novels. I am probably the only person alive who thinks of Charles Dickens primarily as the author of *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *Barnaby Rudge*. Needless to say my taste developed in a totally chaotic way. My parents were great but they didn't know anything about books, and I never seemed to run into anyone who did (years later, during a college vacation, I went to the local bookstore in Troy—Lavender's— and asked what they had by Plato; they asked me for his first name).

I was good at school, but altogether unselfconsciously. Then things started to change. At the beginning of the Fourth Book of *Emile*, Rousseau says that we are each born twice—once for our species and once for our sex. Sex forces you to look at yourself through the eyes of an imagined other; you desire and so want to be desired. Wanting to be noticed means noticing oneself. This leads to an increased sense of the conditions governing your own existence and so willy nilly of your own mortality. Love and death have a way of making themselves felt even in upstate New York. People respond differently, of course. I am sure I knew I was going to die before I was a teenager; nevertheless I remember waking up in a cold sweat on the night that it actually sank in. Or, maybe not; maybe I had been reading *Crime and Punishment*. In either case, I remember coming to a resolution: whatever I did would matter; it would be the very best thing I could do with my life. What I experienced that night has been called our "ontological honor." All

living things die; we are privileged to know in advance that we will die. This awareness of our own finitude places an enormous burden on us. We have to choose what we will do with our lives and accordingly are in one way or another compelled to ask the question "What is the best life?"

Now, an infinite threat tends to call forth an infinite response. Death first frightens you and then insults you. You get angry and devise ways to combat it. In the short term, my pretty unsophisticated response to death's insult to was to resolve to do everything, as though I were compiling the complete human resume to impress God. So I threw myself into sports, and school, and drama and lots of other things. But a part of me knew that this refusal to choose would not do in the long term. I wanted to find a choice that would allow me in some way to have it all. There seemed to my naïve soul to be two possibilities: politics, because it somehow dealt with everything, and physics, because it somehow dealt with everything. Had I been able to think through the meaning of my political longings, I would have seen that, like Plato's Glaucon, I really aspired to universal tyranny—"to be the universal beloved of all mankind." But, while my parents had been communists, I was thoroughly bourgeois; I thought I wanted to be president. On the other hand there was physics. Mine was the sputnik generation when physicists had suddenly become national heroes. But my theoretical bent simply concealed another form of the longing to be the universal beloved of all mankind, for if everyone else thinks you have lived the absolutely best life mustn't it be true? Had I been less innocent, I might have added a few alternatives. Had I known, for example, that "the poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world," I might have wanted to be an author. And had I known then of the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry, I might have wanted to be a philosopher. But no matter what I had thought I wanted, its reality would have been the longing for recognition.

Now despite my various high school triumphs, the guidance counselors didn't seem to know that, however polite and well behaved, I was still a destiny. I told them I wanted to apply to Cornell; they told me not to be silly (no one from my school had ever done that) and that I should go to a local college. Fortunately, I had inherited certain traits, impracticality, inexhaustible optimism (and the ability to read books); so, ignoring little difficulties like how the son of TV serviceman was going to pay for all of this, I applied to Cornell and got a scholarship. Life at Cornell was interesting. The rooms had right angles and, at the time, maid service and clean linens every week. And there were people there from prep schools; I scarcely knew what a prep school was. Most of the people in my freshman dormitory seemed to feel as though they were camping out—on temporary furlough from real life; to me it all felt like a luxury hotel. Now, on the one hand I didn't quite fit; people knew a lot more than I did—what calculus was for example. On the other hand, this place was clearly invented for me. But my master plan—physics and politics—wasn't in such good shape. I wasn't all that good at physics and waiting tables had taught me that I didn't much like being constantly judged on how I was serving people. The illogic of defining the best life as recognition from those to whom one fought to be superior had just about turned itself into nihilism when I encountered a truly remarkable man who changed my life—Allan Bloom.

Bloom wasn't yet famous (he hadn't written *The Closing of the American Mind* and so becoming the *bête noire* of the academic world was still in his future), but he was an extraordinary teacher. At first I didn't really understand what he was saying. It was enough that his love of the books he taught was palpable. He was wickedly witty and very good at making students feel the paradox of their non-judgmental self-righteousness. But he was never cruel. He lured us into perplexities only to make us long for the truth. Then he would tell us that the only

reason to read old books was the hope that you might find the truth in them. He never underestimated the difficulty of discovering the truth and never claimed to have it, but that only made the search more alluring. He was a world class apologist for philosophy, which he understood, following his teacher Leo Strauss, on the basis of a wonderful sentence in Pascal's *Penseés*: "We know too little to be dogmatists and too much to be skeptics." For the first time I began to get an inkling that a way of life might be possible that did not attempt to overcome death, but rather understood it and the alienation it implies as a condition necessary for everything that is good in human life—our ontological honor. A human being is the only part of the whole that is open to the whole, but this openness is only possible because of a certain detachment from the whole, a certain alienation. The possibility of knowledge is thus purchased at the price of the impossibility of complete knowledge.

But all of this was still in the future for me. At first, I saw in philosophy only another way to do everything—the choice of choices. I asked Bloom to be my advisor—he taught in the Government Department, so I became a Government major. Now, you can take the boy out of West Sand Lake, but you cannot take West Sand Lake out of the boy. So, because I took Bloom's praise of the philosophical life so seriously, in my trusting way I immediately went off to register in the philosophy department, where I would later take a double major. I had no idea that Cornell had at the time one of the pre-eminent analytic philosophy departments in the country—that they did not even acknowledge what Bloom was doing to be philosophy and that he returned their contempt in kind. They hated each other, but I wanted to be a philosopher. Where else would one go but the philosophy department?

I was lucky again. Bloom was such a seductive teacher, and one must admit that a certain cultishness developed around him and, perhaps, more importantly around his teacher, Leo

Strauss. At the risk of making complicated things much too simple, Strauss had seen that questions of truth are inseparable from moral questions, that ancient philosophers tended to be more attuned to and less skeptical of this connection than moderns, that such truth as is available to us is at best only very indirectly known and articulated, and that accordingly genuine philosophers have tended to practice an art of writing designed to reveal what they mean only indirectly. Wrench any of these insights from the others and Strauss can easily appear to be a moral dogmatist, a romantic who idealizes life in the Greek *polis*, or a perverse interpreter and elitist bent on the discovery of secret teachings available only to the few. Students, of course, are simultaneously attracted to and repelled by dogmatism, romanticism, idealism, perversity, and elitism, vices to which Straussians sometimes succumb. But having enrolled in the anti-Bloom, anti-Strauss, philosophy department, I had a sort of inoculation against these excesses. At the same time, Bloom kept me honest in the battle against the parallel seduction in the philosophy department—Ludwig Wittgenstein. So once more I was in the strange position of being simultaneously inside and out. The people in the philosophy department thought I was a little "off"; how could you trust someone who read Nietzsche? Bloom, on the other hand, could never understand what on earth I found interesting in Wittgenstein.

Now, all of this competition was exhilarating, but it was really a sign that I had not understood anything yet. Philosophy was still for me too much the pot at the end of the rainbow, El Dorado, and the Holy Grail. At the end of Plato's *Symposium* the drunken Alcibiades gives an account of Socrates after the battle of Potidaea standing in the snow for twenty-four hours straight looking up at the heavens in philosophical contemplation. But this is Alcibiades' view of philosophy, not Plato's. Plato's Socrates is much more likely to show his true nature in the give and take of conversation. I think I finally learned this when Bloom, on leave for a semester,

arranged for Richard Kennington to teach in his place. Kennington taught philosophy at Penn. State. At Cornell he gave a seminar on Descartes, and for the first time I saw someone enacting what Bloom had been so seductively advertising. Here was a man so utterly losing himself in thinking, in figuring out what a text and the world to which it referred meant, that I could imagine how the being who is open to the whole could take its deepest fulfillment in the contemplation of the whole. I could imagine how the philosophical life could be not a trophy to be won and displayed but a life to be lived.

When I told my advisor in the philosophy department that I was studying with the man Allan Bloom said knew more about Descartes than anyone in the world (Bloom was never shy of hyperbole), he asked me his name. "Richard Kennington," I said. He looked him up in the *Directory of American Philosophers* and discovered that at about age 50, he was only an instructor. He had never finished his dissertation. That might have deterred someone who hadn't known my father, but I had already made plans to begin graduate work at Penn. State the following year. People like Kennington were too rare to pass up. After all, I had inexhaustible optimism, and I knew how to read.

Now you no doubt are beginning to wonder where this will all end. So, let's put a stop to it. I taught briefly at three other places before I came to Sarah Lawrence in 1977, but I feel as though my whole life was a preparation for it. In a college where politics tend to be a little to the left of Che Guevera, I think I probably appear somewhere a little to the right of Genghis Khan. Where what is most prized is what is newest and most creative, and the old is looked at with considerable suspicion, I unapologetically teach the old. But the fact remains, and I am always a little surprised at it: they pay me to do this. At times it can be alienating, but properly understood alienation is a great good disguising itself as an unmixed evil. To be sure, we feel the loss when

irony moderates our enthusiasms, but we need always to remember that by doing so it keeps us in touch with our deeper selves. From a distance, alienation is our greatest consolation.