

# The Final Exam

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University of Dallas Church of the Incarnation  
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President Keefe,

Provost Berry,

Assembled Deans,

Esteemed Colleagues,

and especially, the class of 2011,

I was deeply honored and humbled when Nico stopped by my office last Friday to ask me to address you today. Then I was terrified. Another paper to write? Why didn't you tell me back in January that this was on the syllabus? And it's *really* due Thursday at 3:30? With no chance of an extension? Somebody's going to hear about this on the evaluation...

No, what really terrified me was: what to say to a class so accomplished, so talented, and--I want to say this from the outset—so close to my heart, and my family's hearts? --A class with a student who has studied floating magnetic frogs, a class with someone who can whip up a pair of boots, a saddle, or some seriously funky art-shoes? A class with *several* angelic voices—not saccharine but angelic—powerful, soaring? A class with people so “dumb” that they Google Calculus problems from Rome to keep that side of their brain active? A class replete with poets, and stuffed with songwriters you all sing along to, even if one is about, uh,

Oedipus' sin threatening a galaxy far, far away? A class with so many quiet thinkers who then turn in brilliant, elegant papers? A class that brought back medieval drama and climbed cliffs (even when, ahem, they weren't supposed to)? [A class that understands community (as Mr. Lococo so beautifully noted) as a world of charity resting not in vapid "tolerance" but rooted in orthodoxy and truth?] A class that immediately recognized Dr. Lowery's gentle sanctity and Father Jeffrey Steenson's life-changing integrity? A class that has produced not one, not two, but three vocations to the priesthood? What to say to a class with countless guys to whom my wife would point and say to my sons, "That is the kind of young man I want you to be when you grow up," and countless young women about whom she would say, "and that's the kind of girl I want you to marry"? What can I add to sum up your last four years that you don't already know better than I could express?

Eventually I gave up, and decided to fall back on something I know how to do. One last time, I'm going to give you a final exam.

This time, it has only one question, not two.

But it is the ultimate, the *final* final exam question, the one Dr. Alvis' two questions (What is the nature of reality? And How should a life be lived?) should prepare you to answer.

Here it is:

*Are you ready to die?*

Now, I want to assure you that, proposed legislation in the Texas House aside, under this voluminous late-medieval guildsman's ceremonial outfit, I'm not "packing".

And I know what else you're thinking: "Sweet Holy Job, Roper, I know you Irishmen like to read the obituaries, but could you make this any more depressing?"

It's supposed to be a happy time, a celebration—we're heading towards Commencement, a beginning, not... that." Well, I promise I'll bring this back around; the nature of reality is, after all, comic. I mean, you can't hold back grace and comedy in a world where Michael Kelsey can become a multinational pick-up artist, right?

But in fact graduation, leaving UD, can have as much a sense of a little death as of new life; students often feel bereft, find themselves grieving, over losing daily contact with the immediate and close circle of friends, the great professors who are my colleagues, the wonderful, endless yack about texts and ideas. (When I walked down the mall after my own graduation too many years ago, a five-foot Cistercian, Father Chris Rabay, the charity week jailbreak expert long before Father Maguire assumed his mantle, asked me how I felt. "It'll be hard to leave this place," I said, surprisingly choking on my words. "Oh, we have a saying in Hungarian," he responded: 'Life is one long goodbye'.") And soon after that you will find that student loans, marriages, children, mortgages, careers, all involve daily dying to self. I think it's providential that this remarkable class ended its time at UD with the events of Holy Week so close to finals, so I'm going to ask you my final exam question, whether you like it or not.

*Are you ready to die?*

The entire education you have received here, if we look at it in one way, has had this question looming from the beginning.

As you know, in the *Phaedo* Socrates says that "those who really apply themselves in the right way to philosophy are directly and of their own accord preparing themselves for dying and death" (64a) If this is true, that "true philosophers make dying their profession," (68) then quite honestly, I think a truly liberal university ought to have university-wide Senior Comps that ask this one simple, forceful question: Are you prepared for death?

Yet in many ways we UDers become liberally educated by learning about people who fail the exam.

Achilles was not ready to die. He “detests the doorways of death”: “Of possessions / cattle and fat sheep are things to be had for the lifting,” / “and tripods can be won, /” he says, “but a man’s life cannot come back again, it cannot be lifted / nor captured again by force, once it has crossed the teeth’s barrier.” (IX, 405-09) The first philosopher, he critiques the heroic code that motivates his fellow warriors precisely because he thinks that code is no answer to the question. He decides that “a man dies still if he has done nothing, as one who has done much” (IX, 320). And so he holds back, refusing to take part in life because this is its cost, and then in bitterness at his friend’s death becomes a killing machine, death itself, slaughtering indiscriminately, unfree, *bound* in his hate, his fear; his searing terror at the prospect of obliteration only subsiding when he sees, in the face of Priam, his own father’s grief at his impending death.

Simon Peter was not prepared to die. His fear of it got the better of him, such that he denied, three times, the very man he had proclaimed The Christ, whom he had seen transfigured. Years later, bugging out of a dangerous Rome down the Via Appia, in his “Quo vadis?” moment he turned back, ready this time to be crucified with Christ. One way to address the exam question might be to ask: what changed between those two moments?

Signor Alighieri was not ready to die. Filled with anger and frustration at being manipulated and blocked in his political ambitions, at being exiled away from the friendships and city that he thought sustained him, Dante turned from one thing to another—politics, *dolce stil nuovo* poetry—as he wandered northern Italy. Even Philosophy was not enough, so he had to make a journey *through* death in order to learn how to address the question.

In “A Good Man is Hard to Find”, Flannery O’Connor’s grandmother is not ready to die; she rests her faith on being a “good woman” in the sense of being well-born, polite, a “sweet” southern lady. The Misfit must teach her, quite violently, how little all that matters, until finally she learns charity: “She would of been a good woman,” the Misfit tells his murderous sidekick Bobby Lee, “if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.”

It might be comforting for you to know that *most* of us fail the exam—at least a few times—before achieving a passing grade. Here’s one example. In April of 1994, I found myself holding onto a sink in a hospital bathroom in Appleton, Wisconsin. I was in the hospital because my appendix had burst. My appendix had burst because, the previous December, when I was *pretty sure* I had appendicitis, the doctor had sent me home because, even though it sure hurt in the lower right quadrant of my abdomen, my white blood cell count was normal. When I doubled over with pain the next April, like a typical guy I decided that this time I was going to be darned sure before wasting all of that time in the ER. So I played indoor soccer with the students, taught my classes, went shopping... *Ten* days later, after I had passed out for the *third* time, Michele said, in the kind of wifely voice that will not be opposed, “You’re going to the hospital.” The reason I am still here to bore you with this story is that my small intestine, far smarter than I, wound itself around the burst appendix, protecting the rest of my abdomen from the peritonitis that was doing its best to kill me, given that I had helped it to a ten-day head start. So there I was, six days after the operation, in a humiliating hospital gown, finally standing, holding on to the sink . . . and my hands began to shake. And you know what I was thinking? “Greg, You. Are. The. Biggest. Idiot. Ever.” What a desultory, unheroic, just plain stupid way to go. I mean, who dies at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the wealthiest country on earth, from appendicitis? And the next thoughts I panted out showed how foolish I really was: “I can’t die right

now. I can't die. I've only been married for four years. I have papers to grade. I have an article I have to finish."

When you hear someone talking such arrant nonsense, you know he is unprepared for his death. Selfishness, pride, vanity: you can see them all ruling my soul, can't you?

So I want to reaffirm that it takes a lifetime for some of us idiots to answer the question properly. And it can be an easy question to forget, as life takes hold of you, and you venture beyond the Core. Junior Poets and Senior Theses, Orgo and P-Chem, oh my! Life's busy-ness and struggles can distract us. Of course we should not blame our majors; if the field we have chosen is indeed oriented to liberal education, if we approach our jobs, our roles as parents, as liberally educated people, these are not somehow pragmatic things we oppose to the philosophical Core, but should flow out of our Core learning into deeper channels. To make dying our profession is to make philosophy not a class but a way of life. A major at UD, for instance, has never been conceived as the "practical" thing you do after you have "completed" the Core-- or worse, "gotten it out of the way"; instead, the major is supposed to focus and refine the lens through which you approach the deepest questions. *If chemistry or economics or yes, even literature is not teaching you how answer the two questions so that you might come to this question*, I would argue, to heck with it. In so many other places, the way these subjects are taught has little chance of doing that, but of course here at UD you are taught to consider your chosen disciplines in a liberal way, looking at the deepest questions through the lens of Biology or Business Leadership or Education--and that is what makes this such a remarkable place. But even in a remarkable place, we forget the final exam that is awaiting us.

Now here is the wonderful paradox: when you *are* properly prepared for that final exam, you become—you saw it coming, didn't you?—free. You can live. In joy. As T. S. Eliot writes in the *Four Quartets*, "In my end is my beginning," and he's

right: in knowing our end, in every sense of that word, we can begin again, be born into a new life. That, too, is the meaning of a liberal education: not to make you obsessed with death, but to orient you through death to a new life. Hamlet, of course, *is* obsessed, engulfed with notions of depravity, and through that with a dark view of death, his “undiscovered country”. He didn’t know that the point is to take the exam, but then leave the classroom and live your life based upon what you have learned. Thinking all the time but not reasoning very well, isolated from a tradition, a community, a Church that might teach him how to deal with his dark thoughts, he spins in ever-narrower circles. On the other hand, Prospero, at the end of *The Tempest*, tells us that in his Milanese retirement “Every third thought shall be my grave,” (5.1.312), and I think *his* balance is about right. The properly-ordered, liberally educated human knows that there is death, that there will be many deaths, and perhaps most importantly, that there will be daily dying to self, but this knowledge does not crush him; it liberates him to live a full, rich life.

One way it can liberate you is with regard to time. Once you confront death and its proximity, you realize what Augustine tells us in those difficult Books XI-XIII of the *Confessions*: there is only now. And in a universe made and sustained by love (my answer to the “what is the nature of reality” question), there is only one answer to “how to live”: in gratitude for that love, returning love, right now, to the person in front of me right now. I persuade myself, too often, that I’m too busy, too distracted, too consumed by more important things, to love right now, or I kid myself that I’ll love when I have the time to do it right, time to do something big and important that will really make an impact. But that is Raskolnikov’s mistake, a utilitarian heresy that we cannot do anything good until it helps a great number of people. The tiny prostitute Sonya, and the little Albanian nun Mother Theresa, know different: “We cannot do great things, only small things with great love.” That’s what loving right now is all about. That’s how you form community, by answering the call to love that makes us worthy of the human family we belong to.

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When you all were still seniors in high school, deciding to come to UD, a little octopus called a Glioblastoma in my brother's brain finally got the better of him. We gathered in Denver on a Sunday in February of 2007 because the doctors had done all they could; his lungs were so ravaged, ironically not from the cancer but from the treatment, that not even a machine was able to force enough oxygen into his lungs to keep him alive. When he pulled out the breathing apparatus to say goodbye before heading to the hospice, Mark said, "Don't be sad, because I know I'm going to a better place."

*Spe salvi.* Mark, with only an Associate's Degree, beat our academic pope to his encyclical by nine months. "In hope we were saved." Without that hope, I think his death at age 49 would have haunted us, maybe even crushed us. Even my unbelieving oldest brother caught some of that hope in Mark's last conscious day: he told my sister, "It's amazing to be in there with him—I don't know what it is, but there's something there." My sister's response was, "Yes, Rob. We call that God." And for the first time I think I really understood hope—not as a *wish* for something, not a yearning desire that something you want just *might* happen, but the confident assurance that, because a God-man already suffered with us, for us, and conquered all of that, then all of the little deaths to self, the heavy crosses, and that seeming finality, ultimately mean this: joy. *That* is why, and how, the universe is comic. *That* is what Dante saw, what Peter learned.

Mark died that Thursday. It was one of the happiest weeks of my life. I thought: I just might pass that exam after all.

But you all knew all of this long ago, didn't you? Because you're all so much smarter than I am. Because your parents started you on this path, and an entire community of truth and love helped you on your way. Because you took advantage of the UD education my much smarter, wiser, and more accomplished



colleagues provided for you. In your love for one another, in the daily kindnesses you showed my family, in the ministering community you have formed based on the truth Christ bears to us in His Church, you prove daily your passing grade on this exam. It's what makes you a remarkable class. It's why your leaving here will be like a little death for all of us who will remain behind at UD, especially the Ropers. And know that we will grieve this death, but then we will smile joyfully for a long, long time.

Thank you.