

Aims of Education VIII 2000
Riding the Teeter-Totter of Education
By Richard Doetskott Professor of Oral Communications

The eighth Annual Aims of Education Address was given in the Chapman Auditorium before more than 800 parents and students new to Chapman University. A Chapman University academic tradition begun in 1993, The Aims of Education address is presented by a preeminent faculty member at my invitation. This year, I asked professor Richard Doetskott – a perennial favorite of our students – to verbalize his thoughts on the uniqueness of a Chapman University education. You are invited to share your reactions with professor Doetskott, or with me.
-James L. Doti, President of Chapman University

Preface: I am an oralist, and I subscribe to the theories of Ong, among others. An oralist avoids the printed word in speaking situations. This address was prepared from beginning to end without a single word ever being put on paper.

Conceptualization, narratives, organization, editing for time, polishing, etc., were all done through the spoken, not written, word. Since no text exists, what follows is a transcript of the event from a videotape. Oralists feel strongly that a printed record cannot capture the success of a speech event, similar to the drawback of a script in capturing the popularity of a play with an audience. However, when it is necessary to have the oral words reach a broader audience, an accurate transcript, particularly one including audience reactions, such as this one, is much preferred over other forms that claim to represent the oral event.
-Richard Doetskott

Professor Doetskott stood downstage center with a lapel microphone. Neither notes nor a podium were used. Time for the address was 23 minutes and 30 seconds.

How many here are in college for the very first time? True freshmen, raise your hand. *Cheers*. And how many here transferred from another institution of higher learning? Raise your hand. *Applause*. And how many here are directly responsible for paying for all of this? *Laughter*. I think you all have the same question in mind, or you should have. Is the time, the effort and the money that you are going to spend at Chapman over the next few years, going to be worth it? And that's the question I am going to address this afternoon.

Cell phone rings loudly in audience. If it's for me, I'm busy. Laughter.

I can remember the first day I was in college, and it was just like this, an orientation just like this. Now that was a long time ago, the 1950s. My 5-year-old granddaughter thinks that the world was in black and white in those days. *Chuckling in audience*. It was a long time ago, and we've had so many wonderful changes; important events have happened, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the Cold War, space travel, ... Pokemon ... *laughter* ... the movie ... *much laughter* ... and it is tempting to think that everything has changed. One thing has not changed and that's

you. You're the same as I was then. You see, human beings have not changed. At all. We are still the same flawed, forked, bipeds we have always been, capable of unbelievable artistic achievement, in theatre, music, literature, art. We are capable of incredible self-sacrifice, heroism, but at the same time, often in the same person, we are also capable of egregious violence to ourselves, to others, and to the planet. Chapman's sole purpose for being, and this has been for almost 140 years, is to take our students and, one by one, make them into the type of human beings that will be responsible for all of those good things we associate with human beings, and stay away from all of those terrible things that human beings do.

Now we do this through a process called education. I don't think there is anything more confusing to people today than education. I am not talking about knowledge acquisition; I'm not talking about training, I am talking about what Mark Twain was referring to when he said, "*I never let schooling get in the way of my education.*" I am talking about the education that is going to change your life for the rest of your life, for good. For the better.

Now that type of education (*taking out a wooden pen*) has been described as a log on which there is a dedicated master teacher and an eager and willing student at the other end. That's . . . (*cell phone rings in audience*) – I'm still busy. I like to think of it as a teeter-totter. Sometimes when I go by a playground (*looking to the right*) and I look through the fence and I see the teeter-totters and nobody is looking too closely, I take off my coat and tie and (*grand gesture*) I leap over the fence! *Laughter.*

Holding pose. In my mind's eye. Laughter.

I go over to the teeter-totters and sometimes there is a little boy or a little girl sitting on that teeter-totter. And I go up to that little boy or little girl and I say something like (*leaning down*) "I think I hear your mommy calling you." *Laughter.* And then they run off and I have that teeter-totter all to myself. *Laughter.* Again, I lift up high and . . . I come down hard. It's not the pleasurable experience I remember. Sometimes I put that little boy or that little girl on the other end of the teeter-totter. *Laughter.* Again, I heave up high and come down just about as hard, the little boy or little girl flies off somewhere. *Laughter.*

A teeter-totter is like the education I am talking about. It requires an equal force, an equal weight, an equal desire, equal effort on both ends. It requires a communication, an interchange, and when you have worked on it enough with a master teacher, a little bit of that master teacher becomes you and a little bit of you becomes that master teacher, just as it does on the teeter-totter, until you can kind of read each other's thoughts. Then, when that happens over a period of time, there is exhilaration, and a joy in what you are doing, that will stay with you for the rest of your life. You'll never forget the wonderful experience of both teetering and tottering. Nor will you ever forget the experience of a true education with a master teacher.

I want you to find you five master teachers at Chapman University for that reason. Now, why five? Well, I was looking back at my own undergraduate days, and I was thinking which ones really made that impact on me, and there was Blanch

Davis. She directed me in a play. My first play in college, it was a Shakespearean play. I had a small part . . . I should have had a large part. *Laughter*. And we worked very hard. We worked six weeks, we were about ready to open and she came one night to rehearsal and she said, "I am sorry, I am canceling the play." And we said, "Why?" "Because it's not good enough. It's not up to the standard our audience expects." "But we worked so hard!" "I know you did, but it's not good enough." By the way, it wasn't my fault, it wasn't my fault it wasn't good enough. *Laughter*. But I learned a lot that day. And I remember it to this day, I learned about quality, I learned about standards.

Well, there were five that made such a difference in my life, and I turned out wonderfully well. *Laughter*. So naturally I think five is the right number. But there may be more, there may be less. I want you to find them at Chapman. Now they might not all be on the faculty. You may find them on the staff, a teacher. Remember, we are all products of our teachers. That which is not genetically programmed into us, is given to us by our teachers, good and bad. Our parents, our friends, and here you may find a teacher on the staff. You may find a teacher as a friend, a newfound friend from another country, another culture, that could change your life for the rest of your life. You may even find such a teacher on the administration. (*long pause*)

It could happen. *Laughter, applause*.

I am going to introduce you to five master teachers right now. I have pictures of them and these five were chosen – first of all, the reason I know they are master teachers is because the students tell me. In my class, particularly the juniors and seniors, I ask them, who has made a difference in your life, who's the best teacher you have had, and we get the same names over and over again, as you might expect. But it's a large group. And I'm very proud of that. I am very proud of being part of this faculty, for that reason. Anyway, I have chosen five from that group. Now I've used two criteria. One, that they teach lower division classes, which means that they are available to freshmen and sophomores. And second because they represent a wide variety of disciplines. So I am going to get at that right now.

All right. Now, this is Don Booth, shown with an alumna. Don is from Minnesota, he is a professor of economics, and he's a Republican. *Scattered cheers, clapping*. Despite these severe handicaps ... *much laughter* ... he has made a difference to hundreds of students who have gone through his class. If you are going to get on the teeter-totter with Don Booth, you are going to get up early in the morning. He only teaches eight o' clock in the morning classes. *Groans*. Yes. He requires the same discipline he asks of himself.

This is on the occasion of his 40th anniversary of teaching at Chapman and these represent all of the different graduating classes that have come back to honor him. He recently received a wonderful honor, an alum donated a large sum of money and that sum of money, the interest from that, endows a professorship. It's a great honor to hold any honor, when that professorship is named after you, the Don Booth professorship in Economics.

This is Jim Miller. *Cheers*. Yes! Yes, yes, some of you know Jim! Jim Miller is from Texas; he is a perfect gentleman, a wonderful person, and a conservative.

Anticipation laughter. Despite these, he is a wonderful person. He is “Mr. Chapman,” he has given words into the Chapman lexicon, such as Millertest, now that’s all one word, and this is the way you use it: “Oh, I see where he is trying to walk to the North Pole in his bare feet. That’s a real Millertest.” His tests are legendary. *Looking at slide.* He is probably talking about his mother at this point. *Laughter.* Jim teaches a lot with his bare hands. Wonderful person.

Our third person here is, yes, Paul Frizler. *Cheers.* Yeah. Yeah. Now, Paul, when he first gave me this photograph, I asked him for this photograph, and when he first gave it to me, I said, “Paul, this photograph was taken 30 years ago.” *Laughter.* And he said, no, no, no, it was taken in the ‘90s. I said, “What, the 1890s?” *Laughter.* So, I checked. I went back and actually found a photograph of Paul in my files taken 30 years ago.

Laughter.

This is in his Sonny Bono period. *Much laughter.* So you can see, from the previous one here, that it was taken later. But this is how we really see Paul today – but before I show you that picture ... Paul is brilliant. He is one of the most brilliant professors on campus, one of the most enjoyable to be around, but it is difficult to talk to him. When I talk to him about something serious, I always think I am in the wash cycle and he’s already in spin dry. *Laughter.* If you were to have one lifeline, he would be it. *Laughter.*

This is the way Paul looks today. One thing about this picture, and I feel very strongly about this, I think that a professor’s private life . . . *much laughter* . . . is his own, and is not for us to judge. *More Laughter.*

This is Marilyn Harran. Before I talk about Marilyn, the first three professors, and I have to say this, are older than meteorites. *Laughter.* But they don’t look it, do they? That’s because they enjoy so much what they do, they look decades younger than they actually are. And there is also something to be said for maturity and experience, because it takes a long time to become a master teacher. You have to teach for just about decades, plus teaching the same class, perhaps at the same university. And the first three I showed you have that kind of experience.

But the students recognize good teaching wherever they see it and here is a wonderful teacher. She exhibits a trait that master teachers have, and that is they find different ways of engaging their students. She has developed programs outside the classroom. We have teachers who do that all of the time. We have a master teacher who developed a Costa Rican program; we have a master teacher that has internships in Washington, D.C. I urge you, in Interterm or whenever, to take advantage of these opportunities outside the classroom with these master teachers.

OK, now Marilyn has such a program, she has developed a number of programs, but the one that she is working on right now, is the Holocaust studies program. I guarantee you if you a class in Holocaust studies from Marilyn Harran, your life will be changed for the better.

Now this is the real puppy of the bunch. It’s hard to say who is the teacher and who is the student here. Ken Sumida teaches in Science ... is an unusual teacher, we have a number of them, but they are rare, and that is a person who is a research

scientist who is working on grants on the cutting edge of biology as he is, and he works at that, and gets these grants and does his research and at the same time he loves to work with undergraduates, lower classmen in the classroom. Not the fact that he can do both, but he *wants* to do both. He's a wonderful person. I like him particularly, because he is very deferential to his elders. *Laughter.*

Now, those are the five master teachers I wanted to introduce to you. We have a lot more, of course, but these are five that are representative. I happen to know that practically all five are here because they were worried about what I was going to say about them. *Laughter.* So at this time I want those five to stand and wave your hand so we may acknowledge you.

Prolonged applause This is what you are paying for!

Finally, I want to tell you a short story. At the beginning of this year, I was walking by this building, I was going in the door, and out burst an alum, a former student, and he was all excited. And I didn't recognize him, I hadn't had him in class, but he recognized me, and he was in a state. He was in his late thirties, early forties. And he said, "Do you know where I can get hold of Professor So and So." I said yes, and I told him. "Do you mind if I ask what you want to see her about?" And he said, "I want to tell her she's changed my life." Exact words he used. "Changed my life." And I said, well how did she do that? "She introduced me to Latin and Greek derivatives, and that has meant all the difference!" *Laughter.*

"Latin and Greek derivatives, you mean English words that come from Latin and Greek roots?" He said, "When I was here, when I started college, I knew I was smart enough and I was determined and I was going to work hard, and so forth, but I soon learned, to my horror, that my reading skills were not up to college level. I was falling behind, I got on probation, I was desperate. So I took a class, I was compelled to take it at the reading clinic, a remedial reading class and this teacher worked with me there, but it didn't seem to take, any more than it had in high school or elementary school. I couldn't do it. I couldn't get it. And then, after working with me one on one, she started to know me, she started to know how my mind worked, she started to know that I really liked puzzles; I had a scientific kind of mind, a logical kind of mind, a mind that likes mysteries and figuring things out. And so she introduced me to Latin and Greek derivatives, which is a kind of game of exploration, and I got into it. And I had really started to work with it and all of a sudden, I was reading, and enjoying it! And I got my reading level up to where it needed to be and I never looked back."

And I said, "Well, wow, that's, that's great. What do you do now?" He said, "It isn't what I do now, it's what I am going to do in 10 years. In 10 years, maybe less, when we bring back the rocks from Mars, I'm going to be on the team that's going to examine those rocks for life and what we can learn about the universe. I am a researcher at Cal Tech."

Wow! Can you imagine what a teacher feels like when that happens, you are affecting the world. You have opened the door and you have let the world come in. that teacher's name is Dr. Patricia Doetkott. She is the chair of the Communications

Department here. I am married to her. *Laughter.* And yes, she has changed my life (*laughter*) for the better, and she will the rest of my life. *Audible sigh from audience.*

I want you to have that experience, every one of you, to have that experience that alum had. When it happens to you, when you know it has happened to you, it might be right after the class, even during the class, or towards graduation, or after graduation, or way in the future, like it was for this alum. When that happens, when you realize that, then you will know whether the time and the money and the effort that you expended during these years at Chapman were worth it. And you will also know that not only were they worth it – they are priceless. *Prolonged applause.*

About the Speaker

Professor Richard Doetkott has taught Oral Communications (Comm 101) at Chapman University for 37 years. Students call him “Speech God” and have voted him Alumni Professor and Student Body Faculty of the year. His lecture sections are the largest at Chapman.

Professor Doetkott’s current interest is in founding a completely oral approach to beginning public speaking in higher education, based on his radically restructured and re-engineered oral communications program of the last seven years. In November, at the National Communication Association national convention, he is chairing a discussion panel he initiated on this subject.