

## Why I treasure Peter March

The Cranky Professor

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I treasure Peter March because, for Peter, philosophy is a mission. Peter thinks it crucially important that people think philosophically and that they do it well. Each of us would be better off were we to think about things philosophically, or so Peter maintains, and so, too, would the world as a whole be better. It's Peter's mission to see that people think philosophically and that they do it well.

Philosophy has three aspects. There's philosophical investigation itself, that is, investigation into the tensions philosophy seeks to resolve or, at least, to comprehend. There's philosophical discussion, the processes of making one's own investigations known to others and of coming to understand the investigations of others. And there's teaching philosophy, which is teaching people how to investigate things philosophically and how to engage in philosophical discussion. (Don't confuse teaching philosophy with teaching people philosophical ideas. The teacher of philosophy aims to create philosophers, and not just to inform people about what various philosophers have said.)

Peter's mission is the third, teaching philosophy, which means that Peter's mission encompasses all three aspects.

Key to thinking philosophically is thinking and judging without deference to tradition or authority or desire. The philosopher follows the argument wherever it goes and she follows it dispassionately, guided only by the canons of reason she herself accepts, and accepts for her own reasons. For the philosopher, nothing is beyond investigation, discussion, or criticism, not even whatever matters to her the most.

Each of us would be better off for thinking philosophically, Peter says, for in thinking philosophically a person can liberate herself from the myths of the age. The myths of our age include that God exists, that humans are more than another accidental feature of the universe, that religion is noble (even if false), that we have minds in addition to brains, that an action can be the right thing to do or the wrong thing to do independently of preferences, that there's a human nature in addition to whatever empirical psychology might discover—a human nature, moreover, that has significance for how we should live—, that we always act selfishly, that we possess a will indifferent to physical regularity. Liberating ourselves from these myths can be exhilarating. Yet many people are terrified even to consider that these claims are false, let alone pernicious. Peter says it is crucial that we liberate ourselves from them for only then can we live as richly and happily and humanely as we are capable of living.

To teach philosophy is to break people's bad habits of deference and wishful belief and to

instil in them the ability and the desire to think hard, to think critically and openly and fearlessly about even the most sensitive matters, and to think for themselves. To do this, Peter maintains, one needs to teach each student as an individual. Students respond vigorously to the attention Peter gives them—or, at least, most do. For Peter can be direct and confrontational in his approach, and not every student is keen to put at risk tenets central to her conception of herself.

A man on a mission can be a frightening thing, and Peter occasionally frightens administrators at Saint Mary's. When Peter posted the Danish cartoons of Mohammed, the Vice-President Academic made vague noises about human rights and removed the cartoons—twice. When Peter thought to inquire publicly about Islam and democracy, both his department and the university declined to sponsor him. Peter's decision to invite a racist to campus to debate social policy launched a storm of protest. When students upset by Peter's mission complained, the administration chose to coddle them, thereby denying them the opportunity to think dispassionately about their values. Peter received no help from the union in these cases—quite the opposite. But administrators and union officials have concerns other than discussion and teaching. A world in which administrators and other officers never act out of fear and pandering would be an ideal world indeed. Most distressing is the attitude of many Saint Mary's professors toward Peter and his mission. Few professors here have supported Peter's attempts to discuss important matters publicly, and none critical of Peter has been concerned to say anything clear or coherent about her lack of support. Would that more professors understood the point of a university and the mission of the philosopher.

This is all really too bad for all of us. Saint Mary's could have embraced Peter and his mission, and it would have been a better university for having done so. Our administrators and other officers could have pointed to Peter and proclaimed to the world that Saint Mary's University is happy to be a place where passionate professors are encouraged to pursue their calling. Instead of finding in Peter an asset, though, they mistook him for a liability.

Peter March retired at the end of last semester. Saint Mary's University has become a much smaller place.