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Lecture 10: Staying a Student of Trees and People As Your Hair Turns Grey

J.J. Kennedy
Utah State University

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the tenth LAST LECTURE

By James J. Kennedy
Staying A Student Of Trees And People  
As Your Hair Turns Grey  

Professor J. J. Kennedy  
College of Natural Resources

This last lecture began on a snowy day last December, when Jeff Noyes from the Honors Program brought the invitation to my office. I was looking out on campus at the time, watching snow pile up between me and the Salt Lake City Airport, where I was to deliver five visiting professors from northeastern China in four hours. My mind was completely absorbed with the risk and uncertainty of that journey—knowing full well the only option was to venture forward, through snow and uncertainty, on a journey with new Chinese friends and colleagues. One thing I didn’t need that morning was an invitation to another journey, through risk and uncertainty, to give this last lecture.

But here I stand, with palms about as sweaty as when I gave my first lecture—trying to cope with my fear of facing groups of people. You know, there’s a delicious irony in this. As a high school senior, an appeal of forestry was the possibility of escaping people and living among the trees. That’s career planning for you!

As a college student, I also believed if I was ever a professor with enough grey hair and seniority to be asked to give a last lecture, I would no longer have to cope with the stomach of a Charlie Brown. Somehow a PhD. and experience would put truth in my head, certainly in my stomach, and I would be able to
stand before you a certain and profound college professor. Well, it hasn’t worked out that way. I still feel like a student. There is so much knowledge about trees and, especially, people that I’m still pursuing. Much of this knowledge eludes me, causing me to feel a humble, an unfinished and constantly-striving student. To my surprise, the gift of the last 20 years of university life is that I’m now okay with being a student. Tonight I will share with you the journey of how I eventually learned to celebrate my studenthood, and why I am content to stay a student of trees and people. Forever.

I especially want to speak to undergraduate students, who come to universities for a mixture of idealistic reasons (e.g., quest for knowledge) and practical reasons (e.g., to obtain skills and get a job.) Both idealistic and practical motivations for a college degree are legitimate and have their good sides. There are good and practical motivations for freshmen and women to come to USU—to escape the status of being a kid and a novice—to become smart and skilled in some marketable area—to gain adult respect—and have someone hire and pay you upon graduation. But there’s great risk here, that anxious and insecure students will abandon their idealistic quests for knowledge and their patience with not knowing. That they will grasp for superficial knowledge. That they will stop being students and convince themselves that they know. Don’t do that. Don’t cheat yourself out of the rich and exciting journey of being a searching, excited and receptive student of life and living. I know from experience the pressures and temptations to
abandon one's student status and convince yourself, and others, that you have Graduated (with a capital G). That you now know!!!

In my undergraduate years at Pennsylvania State University (1958-62), I wanted to escape my student status as soon as possible. I was ashamed of not being clever and confident like the big boys and my professors. I hungered for a B.S. degree and professional forester status, so I could rest knowledgeable, exalted and proud.

As a young forestry student, I did not recognize the trap in my shame of being human. The shame of not knowing and the fear of making mistakes gripped me by the throat each morning I awoke—especially during finals week. Professors' red ink on exams or not being able to profoundly answer questions in class often caused me physical pain. Now that's not a pleasant feeling! So I was anxious to feel a confident and a secure professional as soon as possible. I didn't recognize it at the time, but I was very vulnerable to the attractions of professional dogmatism—as a quick cure for the risk and uncertainty of not knowing. I experimented with dogmatism in several areas of my beliefs. Let me tell you about one.

As a forestry graduate student, I recognized the importance of social science knowledge in natural resource management, but felt intimidated by the complexity of understanding human relationships. Most social sciences seemed inexact and did not provide me the confidence of my math and chemistry courses. These courses exposed me to the depth of my ignorance in the social sciences. They made me feel like a student again, and I wanted to be an omnipotent professional.
Then I discovered economics (the engineering branch of social science), and spent several years of graduate school using, and abusing, it to understand the social side of forestry. There's another delicious irony here. When I finally started making peace with my need to know with certainty, becoming more tolerant of sociology and psychology, and appreciating economics in its proper context, my economics grades declined. But that's a small price to pay in surviving the invitations of dogmatism—economics or any other type of dogmatism.

A caveat here. There is a good and a not-so-good, a yin and a yang side to all things and all types of knowledge—be it economics or ecology, physics or poetry. Intentionally or unintentionally, most departments on campus offer an invitation to dogmatic belief in their particular brand of truth. Tonight I want to focus on, to use a *Star Wars* metaphor, the dark side of the force—the dark side of the force of acquiring knowledge.

We also don't have to pick on economics. One can turn to ecology for examples of professional dogmatism. A kindred spirit that helped shape my life is Aldo Leopold—one of the planet's first wildlife ecologists. But young Leopold, like me, began his career as a forester, and true-believing dogmatist. Leopold displayed such professional dogmatism in 1920, giving a paper to the American Game Protection Association, when he concluded:

"It is going to take patience and money to catch the last wolf or [mountain] lion in New Mexico...But the last one must be caught before the job can be called fully successful."
Young Leopold believed in simplifying and controlling nature then--harnessing nature, like a broken, subdued mustang, to do his professional bidding. Of course one of the primary nature variables to control in those days were predators.

In his classic book *A Sand County Almanac*, published about 30 years later, Leopold recalls a wolf-killing incident of his young forester days, writing:

"In those days we had never heard of passing up a chance to kill a wolf. In a second we were pumping lead into the pack....When our rifles were empty, the old wolf was down, and a pup was dragging a leg into impassable slide-rocks."

Being a true believer allows one to kill wolves, people, or ideas with such certainty.

Leopold escaped the dark side of his professionalism, and this dying wolf helped open the path before him:

"We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes--something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean a hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view."

Until Leopold became haunted by the dying eyes of this wolf, he was on a dead-end street to becoming a game protection dogmatist.

The ancient Greeks might describe such pride and dogmatic certainty, unfolding to its tragic conclusion, as professional hubris. Icarus was a mythical Greek who fell from the sky, with melted wings, for the arrogance of pushing his puny technology...
too close to the sun. Alexander the Great was a living Greek whose hubris of believing himself a god drove him to an early and tragic death. Read *Inside the Third Reich* for a host of modern Alexander the Great tragedies, especially the poignantly narrated hubris of its author, Albert Speer—a professional architect who said yes to the temptation to taste the power of the gods. Happily, Aldo Leopold avoided professional hubris, becoming a famous and cherished human of this century. He did not stay a true believer, deluding himself (and others) by claiming he knew. He did not become more inflexible and reactionary with age. He did not use knowledge, like armor-plate, to protect his youthful, narrow views of truth. He permitted new knowledge to challenge and test his youthful beliefs, to open new doors before him. Leopold dared to remain a student of ecology and of life until the week he died—with grey hair no less. I’ve discovered that’s no small triumph for us humans—especially us humans with titles like professional, doctor or professor.

I’ve also come to believe it’s not the subject matter and theories of any field (from nuclear physics to forestry) that a professional person who wants to remain a student must guard against. It’s the discomfort with being human with which one must make peace. If one is comfortable being a constantly striving, learning, developing student of life, there’s little need for the certainty of dogmatism. Most importantly, students of life have a much better chance of owning their ideas, rather than having their ideas own them. Dogmatism is when your ideas own and control you. It’s the dark side of the force of knowledge and learning. It’s when the young, receptive,
searching student inside one dies--one's rigid and weighty dogmatic certainty suffocates it.

Dogmatism is one symptom of the tragic human failing the ancient Greek called hubris. Let's look at another symptom: alienation. As usual, I'll approach alienation in a round-about manner, and start with a personal example.

A lecture on bright and dark sides of professionalism that I always give in Principles of Forestry was on my mind about eight years ago, when I walked into the USU Bookstore. On the wall was a calendar with a picture that shockingly symbolized the dark side of professionalism. It was an Arnold Friberg painting (enclosed) of a Royal Canadian Mounted Policeman, in mythic hero pose, standing proud and aloof in the wilds. It illustrated so many professional attributes I tragically wanted to acquire as a young forester, namely:

* macho-strength and courage,
* proud independence and self-sufficiency,
* iron-willed control of myself and the world around me.

Behold the steely eyes and firm jaw. Note the John Wayne, mythic hero aura that so bewitches us in paperback novels, Saturday morning cartoons, Star Wars or Indiana Jones myths. Does this person make (and/or admit) mistakes? Does this human depend on or need other human beings? Observe the dominant and paternalistic way the female deer, nature symbol, is carried (or captured) in his arms! Smell the professional hubris! This was my totem as a young, professional forester--when I was still
haunted by the hunger to be a mythic hero and omnipotent professional. I tried to become that type of adult male. I tried to become that type of professional forester. Happily, I failed in both.

A professional, like this Canadian Mounted Policeman, who always is:

* in control,
* detached and objective, and
* who never makes (or at least admits) mistakes,

is on the path of hubris. When I was on the path of professional hubris, everything became my enemy, everything intimidated me:

* forest ecosystems were unpredictable and would not always yield to my will, knowledge and technology;
* my emotions and human weakness were a source of shame; and
* other people were often viewed as unpredictable and threatening constraints that complicated my grand plans.

Daily, these things challenged me and proclaimed my feeble humanity. I could not tolerate it! So, I pursued more education and degrees, searching for more fool-proof models and technology to master myself and the world.

Observe the tragic irony here! Why did I get into forestry in the first place? What noble quests called me to my profession? Answer, I cared about American trees and people. I wanted to help them! Yet on the path of professional hubris, trees and people often became the foe—just by being—just by being their unpredictable, independent and beautiful selves. My drive to master and my analytical, objective detachment was
As an educator and professional foresters, I believe confrontation and discussion are necessary if we are to learn from our mistakes and progress. The professional forester must understand the profound damage to individual profession and land they should serve. The draft 1970 Forest Service Policy Act recognized this. They must also comment on the professional scientist, so must also comment on their profession. These are two of the more potent approaches to natural resource managers' understanding and decision-making. One of the greatest services the proud, especially interdisciplinary professionals, we can give each other is to acknowledge their contributions to one another. Does this argue...
alienating me from the very trees and people I sought to understand and assist. That's tragic. Greek or American, ancient or modern, that's tragic.

As an educator and role model to professional foresters, I believe confronting students with the dark side of their quest for professionalism is no trivial, philosophical exercise. Professional hubris can cause real and profound damage to individual professionals, plus the people and land they should serve. The drafters of the National Environmental Policy Act (1970) recognized such dark sides of professionalism. They legislated that significant environmental decisions no longer be made by professional monocultures, like civil engineers in the Corps of Engineers or foresters in the U.S.D.A.-Forest Service. Important environmental decisions must now be made by interdisciplinary teams of different types of natural resource professionals, landscape architects and social scientists, so they can confront each others' biases and assumptions—providing expanded, group-professional vision. Furthermore, the public must also comment on their professional wisdom. These are two of the more potent antidotes to natural resource managers' professional hubris in the last two decades.

One of the greatest barriers to good, interdisciplinary decision-making occurring in agencies like the Forest Service is the proud, specialized and mythic-hero way natural resource professionals were educated and role-modeled. For interdisciplinary teams to operate well, team members must acknowledge their mutual dependence upon one another. Does my
Mounted Police totem or omnipotent professionals readily recognize and admit their dependence on other people? For a professional forester like me to work well on an interdisciplinary team, I must ultimately have the wisdom and humility to acknowledge my dependency on other professionals for their values and technical skills in archeology, fisheries management or the social sciences. Directly or indirectly, I must say, "Come into my life. Let's work together. I have sensitivity and expertise that is important, but unfinished and inadequate without your contributions. I need you. The public and the land are dependent upon you and me challenging and cooperating with one another. We can be more together, as a group, than as independent and isolated John Wayne, omnipotent professionals." Acknowledging such human interdependence has not been easy for me as an American male or as a professional forester. But it has happened, and has allowed me to better nurture the unfinished, unfolding student in myself and in others.

So much for the forester part of my professionalism. What about the professor part. How can professors (like me) succumb to hubris, becoming tragically alienated from the knowledge they seek and the students they should serve? Actually, I found I became more easily alienated from my students than from my trees.

I recall as a twenty-five-year-old graduate student, teaching my first lectures, having nightmares about standing in front of the class, being bombarded with student questions, and not knowing the answers. When that occasionally did happen in
class, I provided responses even though I didn’t know the answers. Tragically, such blather usually shut them up.

As a young teaching assistant, I sometimes found myself dreading student challenges, their questions, and irreverence with my exalted T.A. status. I was ashamed of being human and incomplete. I wanted to be awesome and omnipotent like some of my mythic-hero professors. If I had remained haunted by such super-professor images, fear and insecurity might have dominated me, and the students I wanted to serve could have become "the enemy." I could have become tragically alienated, and viewed students as threats and foes, rather than fellow student pilgrims on a mutual quest for knowledge. Together. Incidentally, by the time I was thirty, it was easy to say, "I don’t know," when I didn’t, which was often the case.

In the process of going from a twenty-five to forty-five-year-old educator, there occurred another fundamental change which helped me avoid alienation from students: It was a shift from an image of myself as a professor-Savior to that of a professor-stimulus. When I saw myself as a savior in the classroom, I had the arrogant and paternalistic attitude that students were potential professional vessels, filled with emptiness and rubbish that I would replace with the right stuff. I would cram the right stuff in, monitor it in exams, and crank out new, improved forester models each June.

I now see the arrogance of assuming that I knew the right stuff; and even if I did, it would endure time and always be right. More tragically, I was teaching to achieve the goal of filling up student heads, rather than offering students attitudes
and learning processes which would encourage them to be excited and effective students of trees and people after they graduated and left my watchful eye. You see, I was output oriented, rather than learning-process oriented. And I was wrong.

Another alienation trap for savior-professionals, is that of rarely feel adequately appreciated for all their caring, effort and wisdom. There's often little justice for savior-professionals.

I recall a conference on college education, when most professors were lamenting that their students didn't care about the quest for knowledge, that they didn't come to class prepared, that they never told us professors how wonderful we were; so it is no wonder professors burn out (i.e., become alienated), and no longer care. In other words, student injustice justifies professor alienation and burnout. Rubbish!

Well, I lost my temper at that conference and accused them of sounding like the wailing prophets of the Old Testament, plucking their beards and rending apart their garments, crying, "Where's justice, Lord? I fast and obey the law. I study scripture and show up for lectures on time. Why don't those heathen students appreciate me? I demand justice, Lord."

A distinguished colleague challenged me, asking, "What do you rely upon for your relationships with students, if not justice? After all, justice is a fundamental building block in law and other relationships between people." That was five years ago, and I was embarrassed and stammered when giving them my reply. Tonight, I'm a bit embarrassed to tell you what keeps me
going as a professor, because that macho-male, Mounted Police
mythic-hero still must have some hold on me.

My answer tonight, as it was five years ago, is that I’m a
professor for the love of it. I love student-people, I love the
land and society we seek to understand, I love being a pilgrim of
knowledge with students. I’ve discovered that when professors
are lovers, there’s little need for justice! I’ll come to class
with my heart and head ready to give my best and I’ll be turned
on and excited about my quest of knowledge that day. I’ll give
my best, not because students deserve my being prepared,
attentive or complementary, not for the money or the respect
given me by the taxpayers of Utah, but because I love students, I
love the land, and I love the quest. Who needs justice! I’ve
tried the constant weighing and calculating of justice. It gave
me a headache and parched my soul. Love works much better!

I’ve provided enough examples tonight illustrating that I
was not a fast learner in the struggle to become a student of
life. As a forester, I should have learned sooner an important
lesson from the trees I loved. I should have learned sooner that
green, flexible saplings symbolize life and growth, not tall,
rigid, mature trees or snags or telephone poles. Lao Tse in
chapter 76 of Tao Te Ching, written 2,500 years ago, knew this
when he wrote:

A man is born gentle and weak.
At his death he is hard and stiff.

Green plants are tender and filled with sap.
At their death they are withered and dry.

Therefore stiff and unbending is the disciple of death.
The gentle and yielding is the disciple of life.
There are tragedies of professional or academic hubris occurring weekly at USU and on other campuses, as people of any age no longer have the wisdom or courage to remain active, vulnerable, receptive students of life. When they want to "come in from the cold" of being unfinished students. When they want to become established, certain and sedate in their beliefs in engineering, literature, economics or ecology. Don't succumb to such temptation. Hold onto your studenthood. Learn to celebrate its vulnerability and receptivity to continuous learning and growth.

My last lecture is likely twenty or so years from now. I'm assuming, of course, that your invitation to be here tonight is an honor rather than a suggestion that I stop now. I hope in the next 20 years to encourage students to confront the deadly comfort of knowing as they search for knowledge--to cling to their receptive and searching studenthood--to have the awareness and courage to remain green and growing students of life--until their body dies.