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## Eileen Gregory: On Education

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1 JP: Today is Thursday, 19<sup>th</sup> (of October, 2017) and I'm here with Dr.  
2 Eileen Gregory. Thank you for sitting down with me.

3  
4 Dr. Gregory: You bet. You bet. Happy to.

5  
6 JP: So, to start off, why did you decide to become an English  
7 professor?

8  
9 Dr. Gregory: All right. I think because of an inspiring teacher. I think that's  
10 often a motive and she really had very high aims for her – it's Dr.  
11 Cowan. She had very high aims for her students and we just kind  
12 of naturally assumed that we were going to become college  
13 teachers. Also, just that I did have a feeling after a certain point, as  
14 an undergraduate, that I had received so much. You know, I was  
15 just full of all this passion for my subject and I had received so  
16 much. You know, you just kind of naturally WANT to pass it on.  
17 It's just kind of a natural thing to want to because you want to talk  
18 about it and you want somebody to share in the passion.

19  
20 JP: How long have you been a professor here?

21  
22 Dr. Gregory: 44 years.

23  
24 JP: 44 years? Wow! What advice would you have for a first-year  
25 teacher or professor?

26  
27 Dr. Gregory: Okay, I do think – you know, you're coming out of an education  
28 background in which you are taught methods and kind of have a  
29 framework for approaching the classroom and all of that, but even  
30 so, when push comes to shove you are there in front of students.  
31 And I guess, you know, looking back to my very first teaching  
32 experience, you kind of begin with models of teachers that you've  
33 known that have been effective and that really have affected you.  
34 It's hard not to have their example in mind. You know, how would  
35 so and so do this? Often, it's a little bit paralyzing because that  
36 teacher was so spectacular. You feel always like you're never  
37 going to match them but I think we just have a lot of models. So, I  
38 don't think there is anything wrong with that, you know, that you  
39 begin with images of the teachers that you know.

40  
41 Also, I think one thing that has kept me from still loving what I do  
42 is that it's important to connect individually with your students as  
43 much as possible and get to know them individually. It's very hard  
44 to do that. Well, you're in education so you're going to be dealing  
45 with lower school students, right?

46

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- 47 JP: Yeah, actually, I'm in a high school.
- 48
- 49 Dr. Gregory: Oh, in high school?
- 50
- 51 JP: Math.
- 52
- 53 Dr. Gregory: Oh, I see. Math? Uh-huh. Well, you know, I think the thing that  
54 matters the most to young people at any age and especially at that  
55 age and in college, is when a teacher really recognizes who they  
56 are. They recognize what their potential is. They are looking at me.  
57 They are seeing me. So, I do think that's what gives you, you  
58 know, allows you to have heart but it also really makes it effective  
59 for the students. I was a science major when I was in high school  
60 and coming into college and I had wonderful physics and  
61 chemistry and math teachers that recognized me. Yeah, me... me,  
62 personally.
- 63
- 64 So, those, for me, are the two things. Don't hesitate to model  
65 yourself after your teachers and, you know, discipline and all that,  
66 I don't know what to tell you about but those two things are  
67 important.
- 68
- 69 JP: One of the things we've been talking about recently in class is how  
70 to integrate, like you said, an emphasis on recognizing the student  
71 and their potential along with the curriculum and kind of the  
72 balance that those have. In teaching the core curriculum in the  
73 **grade books** works. What is your response to students who don't  
74 really see the purpose for studying **grade books** versus just kind of  
75 a general English curriculum?
- 76
- 77 Dr. Gregory: Well, I do think that a curriculum needs justification. I mean, that  
78 is it ought not just be accepted as a given and, you know, the  
79 answer to a student who is bewildered about it and saying, well,  
80 this is just the way it is and these are great works. We're reading  
81 them because, you know, somebody said they were good. That is  
82 just NOT – I do NOT use the word great and I try not to use the  
83 word classical. But I think it's – I want us to be reading them. I did  
84 think about this question and, you know, the way I say it is that  
85 these ideas, these books, made you who you are. They shaped your  
86 world. They shaped who you are.
- 87
- 88 I mean, so we think of things the way that we do in part because of  
89 these writers and thinkers of various kinds. So, it's not just that  
90 your world exists because of them and is the way that it is because  
91 of them but YOU are the way you are. You are the way that you  
92 understand, you know, more like the way that you understand
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93 thinking. So, it's kind of like not wanting to know them firsthand is  
94 kind of like not wanting to know your grandparents. It's kind of  
95 like that's where I come from. So, to me, another way of putting  
96 this is ancestry. It's your genealogy.  
97

98 But I do think that at the high school level, I mean, you're doing  
99 math and so that's kind of specialized thing but at no point can a  
100 teacher just kind of tell a student we're reading it because we're  
101 reading it, you know. You really need to make a case for it and  
102 take the question seriously.  
103

104 JP: Right. I mean, it's especially true in math where a lot of students  
105 are kind of, you know, why are we learning this? That's something  
106 that I kind of struggled with going into my student teaching.  
107

108 Dr. Gregory: Right.

110 JP: But I do think you're right. You need some sort of answer. It can't  
111 just be we're doing it just because.  
112

113 Dr. Gregory: Right. Right. We can't FUNCTION without math.  
114

115 JP: Right. Right. So, in the sense that these works are kind of a  
116 foundation for our modern understanding, how do you think  
117 students have reading habits as these books have changed over the  
118 course of your tenure?  
119

120 Dr. Gregory: Well, to tell you the honest truth and this is true about writing too,  
121 I don't think, in my experience, that student's reading habits have  
122 necessarily changed or that their writing has gotten worse. I feel  
123 like there are two scenarios. There's an academics – you know,  
124 when academics get together they only thing they can agree to talk  
125 about is how bad students are. So, I don't like that. I mean, I  
126 HATE it. I hate when teachers get together and, you know, they're  
127 doing this and they're doing that. It's kind of like old codgers  
128 grumbling.  
129

130 The default attitude is that things are getting worse generation, so  
131 the default attitude is a declined model and I just don't buy that. I  
132 just never experienced it. Students, when I first see their writing as  
133 freshmen, it leaves a lot to be desired but I think I've had the same  
134 impediments, you know, that same hump to get over with freshmen  
135 as long as I've been teaching here and before I taught here. It's  
136 because they need to learn, you know, and write. So, I don't think  
137 – I mean, we're privileged at UD in the sense that we get students  
138 who already have basic preparation even so.

139  
140 So, in terms of reading, I do understand that it may be some  
141 students just haven't had a lot of experience reading the kind of  
142 books they read in the core that are really very dense and very  
143 demanding. They're reading Plato's Republic the first semester,  
144 you know, and The Alien the first semester but I think those ARE  
145 difficult books. It doesn't surprise me at ALL that the students  
146 have difficulty reading them. So, I guess I've never been  
147 concerned with that question, you know, with a decline in habits. I  
148 mean, again, it's partly just that we have a privileged arena here at  
149 UD.

150  
151 I do think technology is adding a level of distraction that I don't  
152 know quite what the end result of that will be but that's not really  
153 necessarily reading and writing.

154  
155 JP: Right. Do you see any change in perspective on these types of  
156 books... these kinds of fundamental ideas in both their writing and  
157 their interpretation of them as they read? Because, obviously, there  
158 is kind of – or at least there is talk about a big shift in perspective  
159 from a modern generation versus an older one. Do you see that at  
160 all in your classroom?

161 Dr. Gregory: I don't. This is the thing, JP, the students who come here come  
162 here because they want to, or their parents want them to. So, I  
163 don't know whether the answers are accurate answers in terms of  
164 the wider culture because I don't think the curriculum such as we  
165 have has been in common place for decades and decades. So, I  
166 think the typical situation of not having a curriculum in a college  
167 university has been in place for about 50 years (since the 60s), so  
168 it's really in the 60s and 70s the curriculum began to be just tossed  
169 out. And along with that, any kind of expectations of being a kind  
170 of cannon of works that you ought to know.

171  
172 So, I think that attitude still prevails at-large and that most people,  
173 even if they ARE readers, and if they are fairly well-educated in  
174 terms of a good college, they know only contemporary things and  
175 they think only about contemporary things. I don't know whether  
176 that's really your question.

177  
178 Dr. Gregory: I mean, it's kind of going against the grain to ask people to read  
179 and it's even disapproved of for political reasons to ask them to  
180 read, you know, Dante or Homer.

181  
182 JP: Yeah, yeah. Looking at –

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- 185 JP: Looking at higher education, as a whole, do you think students  
186 view college differently now than when you began teaching? Do  
187 you think that they look at it more as kind of an expectation for  
188 them or still kind of as a privilege to come to a place like this?  
189
- 190 Dr. Gregory: I think that has been shifting more in the past couple of decades  
191 than before, especially since 2008 because there was a HUGE  
192 outcry then about liberal arts education being worthless and a  
193 waste of time. The only thing valuable was some sort of vocational  
194 training, so skills education and a real concerted attack on liberal  
195 arts education publicly all over the place was not abetted. I mean, it  
196 was abetted, in fact, by the government, by the Education  
197 Department in emphasis that Obama put on things but I'm sure the  
198 same thing that were really continuing from Bush.  
199
- 200 So, the kind of – whenever politicians are thinking about education  
201 they are not thinking about a traditional education at all. They're  
202 thinking about basics such as reading and writing. They're thinking  
203 about jobs. They're thinking about jobs, so I do think that students  
204 and parents are very, very concerned about jobs. Maybe more than  
205 I have seen in the past. It may pass because I think there's a lot of  
206 counterarguments being made about the value of certain kinds of  
207 education. But, I mean, I think the whole idea of a university  
208 education is really in transition, you know. I mean, it's big scale  
209 transition we're under. So, I don't know in 50 years whether we'll  
210 even HAVE universities, so we're really in a transitional time.  
211
- 212 JP: Right. Kind of going off that, if you could have some sort of say in  
213 what college education would look like down the road, what would  
214 you think a couple of major points would be that you'd like to see  
215 going forward?  
216
- 217 Dr. Gregory: Are you talking about college education generally?  
218
- 219 JP: As a whole or even just at UD, the next ten or so years down the  
220 road, based on your experiences and moving forward.  
221
- 222 Dr. Gregory: Well, there are two different things I would wish for. You know,  
223 it's hard to talk in general about what I would want from a college  
224 education because it's SO huge. I mean, the universities are so  
225 huge. They offer such a diversity. Excuse me, I've been talking all  
226 day.  
227
- 228 JP: No, that's fine.  
229
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230 Dr. Gregory: The one thing that we do here, which is good, is we teach students  
231 to be reflective. You know, if they don't learn to be reflective  
232 when they're in their own families or influences coming into  
233 college, then we teach them a way, kind of a discipline of really  
234 thinking through questions, thinking through issues, you know,  
235 questioning and doubting themselves and their own attitudes. So, I  
236 do think that it's important. I think, however, education generally –  
237 well, if there is anything that at a state university, say, or at a large  
238 university, people STILL associate with liberal arts virtues.

239  
240 Well, it's called critical thinking and I hate the phrase because, I  
241 mean, I'm not really thinking about that. That means you can  
242 analyze a social circumstance be skeptical of it and not swallow  
243 things that are given to you by politicians and stuff like that. But  
244 moral reflectivity, you know, moral reflection is just not that  
245 common. Anyway, it's hard for me to generalize about education.  
246 We have enough of that. I mean, we do that and what I would hope  
247 for us is at the other end I think we need to embrace the  
248 contemporary moment more and really articulate to students and  
249 encourage them to consider WHY what they've learned is  
250 important in relation to the contemporary world. So, I think we just  
251 have too much of a divide between everything you've learned here  
252 and then a contemporary world. So, you know, where ELSE except  
253 in encountering the issues in the contemporary world would you  
254 find the greatest value in liberal arts education? So, we just don't  
255 do enough of it and I wish we had more variety in teaching religion  
256 as well. You know, it's just that our students need to know world  
257 culture, world religion more than we teach. So, our focus has been  
258 western but we just have almost nothing, you know, one or two  
259 courses. So, those are the things I wish we could grow into.

260  
261 JP: Kind of going off that, what role do you think faith plays at the  
262 University of Dallas **begin** a Catholic university and a lot of the  
263 student population being Catholic? What role do you see that  
264 playing in the classroom setting?

265  
266 Dr. Gregory: In the classroom?

267  
268 JP: Yeah.

269  
270 Dr. Gregory: Well, to tell you the truth, I hope it doesn't play a lot. I hope it  
271 doesn't have a lot of visibility in the classroom except in theology  
272 classes where it can't be avoided. When you're in history class  
273 you're talking about – I mean, you're always reading writers who  
274 are speaking from some sort of context of faith. Our work is  
275 intellectual. So, I mean, I do feel fortunate in being at a Catholic

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276 school because I think strangely the Catholic faith has always been  
277 to intellectual inquiry and it has been my experience that there is a  
278 certain kind of – even though the church puts restrictions as to the  
279 kinds of things that are heretical and not heretical, and there are  
280 certain kinds of limits, apparently, as to where you can go, you can  
281 go pretty far in terms of intellectual inquiry.

282  
283 But there is just a spirit of being able to ask questions about things.  
284 I think that's very liberating and, in fact, it doesn't exist when you  
285 don't have faith. You just don't ask, or you don't have a context of  
286 faith, you just don't ask questions. It's my faith, it's your faith, it's  
287 my idea, it's your idea, so you're not really thinking in the context  
288 of let's talk about this or is that really true or why do you think that  
289 way? So, for me, it's a wonderful context in which to conduct a  
290 liberal education. But, to me, the cultivation intellectual life is our  
291 job. It's my job. It's not my job to talk about, to promulgate faith.  
292 We read writers who are, like Dante, who is totally within it but  
293 it's an imagination of faith. It's an imagination of the afterlife. I  
294 don't know whether I believe in Dante. I mean, I believe in him in  
295 as much as – but I believe in Homer. When I'm reading Homer, I  
296 believe in the Homeric gods, you know. It's hard for me to believe  
297 in Milton's God but, again, I'm saying – so, you understand what  
298 I'm trying to get at?

299  
300 JP: Yes.

301  
302 Dr. Gregory: I think in the classroom, you know, it ought to be there inasmuch  
303 as our subject matter leads us and as much as it has a presence  
304 within the thing that we're teaching. Then we view it somewhat  
305 critically. So, in history, for instance, you are constantly talking  
306 about any of these faiths from the historical perspective and they're  
307 very limited and there are lots of bloody mistakes along the way.

308  
309 JP: Very tied in with the idea of a cover of self-reflection and critical  
310 thinking, you would say?

311  
312 Dr. Gregory: Right. Right, uh-huh.

313  
314 JP: What is your goal for your students? When you begin a year or  
315 halfway through the year, what do you hope for them to take away  
316 from a class that you would teach?

317  
318 Dr. Gregory: Yeah, I gave some thought to that question and I think, you know,  
319 teachers have subject matters and so at one level I WANT them,  
320 you know, I'm teaching literature and I really want them to love  
321 the books that we're reading. I want them – I'm the kind of teacher

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322 who just likes to have them really enter into the imagination of the  
323 work and see its richness because I really think the works are just  
324 amazing. But beyond that, you know, I'm going back to what I  
325 said before. I want them to have the capacity for reflection. As a  
326 literature teacher, I want them to have a passion for language. They  
327 love English and that's when teaching writing comes into it.

328  
329 The care with writing... just caring about your own writing, much  
330 less caring about just the amazing things that writers of English do  
331 with the language. So, that's my particular disciplinary motive.  
332 That's what our junior poet project really does. Students fall in  
333 love with their poet's work and they live in the language. Then, of  
334 course, I want them to mature distinctly into who they are, you  
335 know, and that's why I'm going back to getting to know students  
336 individually at least as much as you can because you want them to  
337 – they are each distinct, so all of the writing that we ask you to and  
338 the thinking that we ask you to do is partly so that you can find  
339 your own position and your own place in relation to what you're  
340 reading.

341  
342 JP: What has continued to motivate you to keep teaching throughout  
343 these years? What makes you come back every year?

344  
345 Dr. Gregory: Yeah, well, I just have a lot of fun. It's a lot of work but, I mean,  
346 I've thought about this because I've thought a lot about retiring.  
347 I'm at the retirement age and, I mean, at the beginning of the year  
348 thinking should I retire this year? Should I retire maybe next year?  
349 I get into a classroom and I'm just having such a blast and so  
350 there's just – a classroom is just a wonderful container. It's just a  
351 wonderful container. I mean, and unlike any other experience you  
352 have in life where you are the teacher, you're in charge of it, you  
353 can make something happen, you can illuminate something, you  
354 can bring something to clarity, and if you're really lucky, you've  
355 got a whole class coming with you.

356  
357 So, it's being in the presence of, for me, these wonderful writers  
358 that are SO amazing, so large, and then it's also just having this  
359 experience of really great students, you know. I mean, I've got a  
360 Lit. Trad. 4 Class right now that I just have so much fun. I just  
361 LOVE it, so it's hard for me to think of giving that up.

362  
363 JP: Yeah, definitely.

364  
365 Dr. Gregory: I mean, I have been in context in my first years of teaching when I  
366 had – in my first year of teaching I had all 8:00 classes, all  
367 freshman composition, and the students in those classes wrote in

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368 about four different dialects and it's very demoralizing. I mean, so  
369 the experience I have had is a very privileged experience. But, you  
370 know, I think even then those extremely hard and extremely  
371 demoralizing where the rubber hits the road as the student is really  
372 thinking that the student really has been liberated somehow just in  
373 terms of something was crippling them in the writing and they can  
374 kind of get past it. So, that's it.

375  
376 JP: That's awesome. Well, is there anything you'd like to add?

377  
378 Dr. Gregory: I think I've said my say.

379  
380 JP: Okay. Awesome, awesome. Well, thank you so much for your  
381 time.

382  
383 Dr. Gregory: Yeah, you bet. You bet.

384  
385 **[End of Audio]**

386  
387 **Duration: 31 minutes**

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