Thanks and acknowledgements. . .

My wife and I love Boston and we love this neighborhood, but my usual policy is not to come to Boston until after Patriot’s Day. I probably haven’t been to Opening Day at Fenway since 2008, and we were excited about that, so that was great for us, but we’re usually afraid of the weather here at this time of the year, and, seeing the reports of the snowfall here last weekend, we were a little concerned. It’s been great to be here in such nice spring like conditions.

I wanted to talk today about what exactly it means to be an academic; I have some understanding of that, and I wanted to try to reach for a better understanding of it, and I thought maybe this would be an appropriate place to do that.

Many of you, I would guess, would be happy enough to be described as academics or as scholars. I might describe you as scholars, but the term “scholar” has a slightly quaint resonance to it, and I am guessing that if I described you as academics, you might not take offense to that. In any case, my point is that I would never describe MYSELF as an academic, but in baseball, that is how people think of me. . .that Bill James, he’s a kind of an academic guy, he has a lot of peculiar ideas, but he’s OK, really; he’s just kind of an academic guy.

OK, so. . .I’m an academic, but I’m not REALLY an academic, so what is an academic? What does it mean to be an academic, other than that you are part of an academic institution?
I suppose I should stop for just a moment and explain how I see what I have done for a living, since my view of what I do is quite a bit different from other people’s view of what I do. I can explain what made me who I am in just a few words; it’s actually really simple, and it doesn’t have anything at all to do with statistics.

When I was a young person, all sports writing analysis—100% of it—began with a position on the issue. If a writer was writing about who should be the Most Valuable Player, he would write that Dave Parker should be the MVP, or that Mike Schmidt should be the MVP, or that Dave Winfield was the real MVP, and then he would pick and choose those facts which supported that position. What I did was really simple. I said, “Let’s start the discussion with the question itself, rather than with a position on the issue.” That’s all.

But when you begin with the question itself, rather than with a position on the issue, that leads to more questions. What IS value, for a baseball player? What is the relationship between offense and defense? Who is really more valuable, a pitcher or a hitter, and why? How do you know?

When you reach THOSE questions, you realize that you don’t know the answers. By this process, you start to see your own ignorance. When you start with a position on the issue, you work with the facts that are available to you, so you don’t see what you don’t know. But when you start with the question itself, you run into black holes of ignorance, where you realize that there are critical questions to which you have no answers.

What made my career meaningful to baseball was that I made baseball people aware of the things that they DIDN’T know, and this started different trails
of research. People started researching the questions that I had pointed out that we didn’t know the answers to, and as a result of that research we wound up knowing a lot of things we didn’t know before. I often get credited with the research actually done by other people, which is embarrassing, and I try to minimize that, but all I really did was find a great number of questions to which I did not know the answers.

I would certainly be happy to be thought of as an academic, but I would never apply that title to myself, for the same reason that I would never describe myself as a historian or a statistician. To describe myself in that way might be claiming skills or attributes which I don’t have. I write a lot about history, but I certainly would never describe myself as a historian. Which leads us back to the same question: certainly I have SOME of the traits of an academic, but I don’t have others. So then, what are the traits, and what are the skills, that make one truly an academic?

One thing, certainly, is that to be an academic you have to be deeply committed to the study of whatever it is that you study. I think, on this scale, I’m OK. I think I have probably worked as hard to try to understand my subject as almost anyone in the room. My subject is baseball, but all of my hobbies are also baseball or baseball type stuff, so I pretty much do baseball 24/7. Most of that is in some way or another study. I am always trying to figure something out about baseball that I didn’t understand yesterday or didn’t understand this morning.

But how exactly is this different from just being a baseball fan? There are an awful lot of people who love baseball and who know a great deal about
baseball and who put a lot of time into baseball, but who would never be called academics. Every baseball professional tries to know as much about the game as he can, really. The Red Sox first base and third base coaches are people who try to know as much about baseball as they can, but no one would describe them as academics. Or, on the other hand, there is one guy in every barroom in America who can list the starting lineup for the 1961 Yankees and the 1975 Red Sox and the 2010, 2012 and 2014 San Francisco Giants and can tell you what everybody hit, but he’s not an academic; he’s just a drunk who likes baseball. What EXACTLY is the difference between us?

One thing that defines an academic, I think, is that an academic is primarily concerned with the ideas inherent in real things, rather than with the objects themselves. If I were to sit down with the Red Sox third base coach, for example, and try to have a conversation about when he should send the runner and when he should hold up a stop sign, it would be difficult for us to have this conversation. First of all, he would know 100 times more about the subject than I would. I have an idea of which outfielders have good arms and which do not, but I have a general idea he; he would have very specific knowledge about each and every outfielder, and he would have built on that knowledge and re-enforced that knowledge by watching video tape about the other team before each series. In the 1960s, 1970s, it was good enough for the coach to have a general idea about the throwing arm of each outfielder, but in 2017, it’s different; now you really have to KNOW. If the outfielder hasn’t been throwing well in the last couple of weeks after he dived for a ball in Toronto, you have to know that now; you didn’t have to know all of that stuff a generation ago.
The third base coach would not only have THAT kind of knowledge, he would also know a wide variety of things about his runner. He would know how fast the runner was, but also he would know whether his runner tends to cut the base sharply or to make a wide turn, he would know whether the runner is 100% at the moment or whether he is fighting a leg injury, whether the runner slides well and can evade a tag or whether he can’t, and he would know whether the runner picks up the signal early or whether he tends to watch the play and turn his head to the third base coach only when he has to. I wouldn’t know any of that stuff.

My interests in the discussion would be rather different. I would be interested in questions like, when you are making a judgment about sending a runner, are you more interested in an outfielder’s arm strength, or his accuracy? What we call an outfielder’s “Arm” actually has several characteristics: arm strength, accuracy, quickness of release, and also, sort of in the same package, the outfielder has to move fast enough before the throw to maximize his opportunity to make the throw count, so how quickly he will cut off the ball is very relevant. What I would be asking the third base coach is, how do you weight each of those things compared to the other?

The real answer, I suspect, would be, “it’s just instinct.” The coach has seen so many plays in so many games that when he sees the right fielder running at a certain angle toward a ball hit down the line, he just knows how long it is likely to be until the throw arrives at third base. That answer is different if the angle of the outfielder to the wall is 90 degrees or 70 degrees or 45 degrees. The base coach probably doesn’t know whether the angle is 90 degrees or 70 degrees
or 45 degrees, and he probably doesn’t know whether the time that he has is 3 seconds or 5 seconds or 7 seconds or whatever, but he just has a highly refined instinct to compare the time needed for the runner to the time available to the fielder. I can’t discuss that with him, because I don’t have that instinct; I don’t have that base of knowledge.

One thing you hear people say several times a year in my profession is that if a third base coach never gets a runner thrown out at home plate, he’s not doing his job. The understanding underlying that argument is that a third base coach deals with unknowns. He is making his best estimate of whether the right fielder can make a throw home in time to get the runner, but he can’t possibly KNOW. If he’s not getting anyone thrown out at home plate, what that means is that he is SO conservative that he is letting runners stay on third base.

If a runner stays on third base with two out, then, no matter who the hitter is coming to the plate, his chance of scoring is less than 50%. So if there is a situation where the runner on third has a 50/50 chance of scoring and there are two out, probably, logically, the third base coach should send the runner. But I would suspect that almost all third base coaches do NOT send the runner, in that case, because, if the runner is out, people will second-guess the coach.

I have never actually had this conversation with the third base coach, this one or the last one or the last one, because. . .well, it’s awkward. If I try to talk to a coach, the first thing I have to do is to make sure the coach understands that I am trying to learn from him, not trying to tell him how to do his job. Frankly, I’m not all that comfortable dealing with people. I know John Farrell reasonably well, and I like John, and I can talk to
John, but I don’t want John Farrell thinking that I am messing around in his business.

But back to the third base coach, if we had that conversation, my interests in the conversation would be in the IDEAS inherent in the problems of a third base coach, rather than in the realities of it. The realities of it involve getting videos of the next team loaded onto your computer or your IPad before the flight, so that you can study the video of the teams you will be playing while you are flying to California. A reporter has an interest in that process. An academic studying baseball tries to separate the process from the ideas.

I should also say that some of this will be different in the next generation. When I started studying baseball in a serious way in the 1970s, I was living in Lawrence, Kansas, and working as a night watchman at a pork and beans factory. It’s a long way from the professional people. It’s not that way anymore. Now, people who study the ideas inherent in baseball work alongside the people who deal with the practical day-to-day problems of baseball from a young age, and they know one another, and they can talk to one another without the barriers that were there 40 years ago, or 20 years ago, or ten years ago.

But anyway, my point was that I am like an academic in two respects—one, that I work very, very hard to study my subject, and two, in that I am always most concerned with the ideas inherent in a problem, rather than with the practical mechanics of the problem. And here’s a third way in which I am like an academic: I am perpetually and addictively trying to learn something, even if it has nothing to do with my profession.
I am one of those people who, no matter what is said, is always pulling out some device that will connect to the internet to check the facts. I am going to ask for a show of hands here; how many of you are like that? I am like that, and actually, all of my kids and kids-in-law are like that; they are all people who, if they are watching a movie on Netflix and the movie tells some story about the Ford administration, they will jump on line immediately to see whether that actually happened and what actually happened. Even my son-in-law, who is not at all an academic type of person, will do that. He’s not a student or a scholar in a conventional sense, but he can give you a full history of every band which has had a hit in any genre since 1995.

In that way, I suspect, we are like academics, in that we are compulsively trying to store knowledge. But I suspect that many people are not like that, at all, and basically never do that. I suspect that it relates to a general view of the world, and I suspect that this is one of the list of things that defines an academic mindset: that we place a high value on knowledge. So there are three things that mark us as academics:

1) That we are willing to work very hard to study our subject,

2) That we are most concerned with the ideas inherent in the subject, rather than the concrete aspects of it, and

3) That we place a very high value on knowledge in general, whether related to our subject or not.

In what respects, then, am I NOT like an academic?
Well. . . respect for the traditions of the field. From the time I was first assigned to write a term paper, which was when I was in the 7th grade, I would always make jokes in the paper. I remember once I was writing about Sandro Botticelli, and I was writing about the belief that he had worked as a young man in a stained glass workshop, which had influenced his work as a painter. I gather that this is now believed to be a myth, although it used to be in the Encyclopedias, but anyway, in the paper I remarked that it was fortunate that he hadn’t worked as a youth cleaning out pig sties. I had worked the previous summer cleaning out pig sties, so it seemed to me like a normal thing to say, but my teacher, Mrs. Moline, admonished me for making this inappropriate remark in the paper. I paid no attention to this criticism, and when I wrote the next paper I am sure that I made some similar joke, probably more inappropriate than the first one.

This is one of the differences between a writer and an academic, I think: that had I been a natural academic, then when a teacher told me not to do something in a paper, I would probably have paid attention to that, and not done it again. But being naturally a writer, rather than an academic, I thought, “Well, that got a reaction; I should do that again.” Almost 50 years later, I can remember a dozen times when professors told me in different ways that I shouldn’t make jokes in class papers, but I always did anyway. I remember a professor named Myra Hinman. In her class she gave four tests, and I got the highest score on the test all four times, but she gave me a B anyway because she said that my papers showed a lack of seriousness. But when I think back about it, I don’t think that I ever gave ANY consideration to not doing it in the future. I just don’t think that that ever occurred to me, even though my professors were constantly trying to push me in that direction. The way that I saw the problem
was, I imagined the teacher grading papers, and I always imagined that the teacher was falling asleep as he or she was going through the papers, so one of my main purposes was to wake her up.

When I think back about it, I realize that this is illogical; if your teacher is falling asleep as he is grading the papers, probably the LAST thing you want to do is to wake him up. The teacher is basically looking for mistakes in what you have done; the more asleep she is, the fewer mistakes she is going to find. But that isn’t the way I saw it at the time; at the time, I saw the teacher as a reader, my target audience, so it was my responsibility to see that the teacher was engaged with the article. That’s ego, right? I was looking at the problem from MY perspective, rather than for what it actually was. It was ego, but it was also a writer’s perspective: we don’t want people falling asleep on us. If I have to say something borderline outrageous in order to wake you up, I’ll say something outrageous. If I have to defend Richard Nixon or Josef Stalin in order to get you to wake up, I may defend Richard Nixon or Josef Stalin. I’m not saying this is good; it’s just kind of the way I am.

A scholar, I suspect—not being a scholar myself—a scholar, I suspect, would never look at the problem this way. A scholar would worry first and foremost about what he or she thought was TRUE. For me, the absolute truth is generally unknowable; I am always much happier suggesting that something MIGHT be true than actually arguing that it is. Because I am usually merely arguing that something MIGHT be true, I am liable to say almost anything, unless I know it to be false.
A writer naturally indulges his ego in ways that I suspect are not popular in academia, and which actually are not popular in baseball, either. In baseball it is contrary to the ethics of the game to attract attention to yourself. I remember about ten years ago 60 Minutes did a profile of me; Morley Safer came down to Florida to spend a couple of days with me, and back up here CBS crews filmed me walking around Fenway Park. People would see us coming down the sidewalk, and would rush to the other side of the street. It took some people three years to talk me again after that.

As a writer, you generally co-operate with people who are writing about you or who want to interview you, because you just do; it’s part of the job. But as a part of a TEAM, you don’t call attention to yourself. I suspect that, as an academic, I would always be on the wrong side of the line here. People would always say that I wasn’t a team player, or...well, there are less nice things that people say about those that they believe are not team players.

I have ways of defending myself against those attacks, but it’s just not the way I see the world. I just don’t have the level of respect for the traditions of the field that I would have to have if I were building an academic career. It’s not just about making jokes; it has to do with respect for the field.

Another way in which I am not like a good academic is that I lack discipline. To a certain extent this is a conscious choice or was a conscious choice, although also, to a certain extent, I regret it as a conscious choice. I have never been very good at making myself do things that I didn’t really want to do. I don’t think, as a young man, that I had any clear understanding of what “Discipline” was, and certainly I had no clear idea of what the value of discipline was. I more or less
consciously rejected the idea of getting things done by forcing myself to do stuff I didn’t like doing, and decided instead to focus my energies on doing things that I enjoyed doing. In some ways this has worked out great for me; in other ways, such as my weight, this attitude hasn’t been helpful. But I wasn’t a disciplined person when I was 20 years old, and I’m not a disciplined person now, and in this way I am not like a good academic.

When I look back at the things that I wrote 40 years ago, I can see that I was trying, at that time, to build an academic tradition of studying baseball in the way that I study it. All these years later, I can’t really understand how I came to that position. This has succeeded beyond my wildest dreams, whether because of my efforts or not, but in any case the field of knowledge that I was trying to nurture now has a very robust level of activity, far beyond what I could ever have imagined. If you go back and read things that I wrote 30 and 40 years ago, it is clear that I anticipated that there would be such a field of knowledge, and that I spoke about it as if it existed when in reality it hardly did. I can’t really understand now how it was that I was bold enough or arrogant enough to do that, as a man in his twenties.

In any case, there IS a strong research tradition in my field now. I have great respect for the traditions of my field—going forward in time. There are now a thousand young men doing baseball research which is in the general tradition of the work that I did years ago, and it is tremendously important to me to be respectful of their work and appreciative of their work, even when I don’t understand it, which frankly is most of the time.
But what you have to understand is that, had there been such a field of research when I was a young man, I would have had to do something else. A few years ago I spoke to a class over at Tufts, and there was a rude kid in the back of the room who kept kicking out remarks which were I think unconsciously designed to embarrass me. He would ask things like “When was the last time you actually played baseball?” I think the professor who invited me to speak to the class, Andy Andres, was kind of embarrassed, but I actually felt a certain level of affinity for the young man, and I wanted to give him as much space as I could to say what he had to say. That was me, when I was a young man. In retrospect, I would have liked to have been a nice young man from a good family, pleasant to everybody, clean and handsome and with a bright future. I am sure that would have been more fun, but that just wasn’t me; I was the rude kid in the back of the room.

I never met that young man after that one day, and that was years ago, but I am certain that since then he has found a lot of doors closed to him. When I was young it wasn’t so much that doors were closed to me as it was that I simply ASSUMED that doors would be closed to me. I wanted to be a baseball writer. I grew admiring the Los Angeles Times sports columnist Jim Murray, and I wanted to be Jim Murray.

I lived in Lawrence, Kansas, then, still do, but in those days Lawrence had a newspaper with a sports staff. They still have a newspaper, sort of, but in those days the Kansas City Star had a sports staff of about 40 people, I think. I would have liked to have been one of those people, but I knew that I wasn’t the kind of young man that they were looking for. I believed that then, and I still believe it
now; I am fairly certain that I could have knocked on 200 doors looking for work as a sportswriter, and no one would have hired me. I invented my own profession because I had to. I had no choice. I didn’t have the discipline or the respect for tradition to be an academic, and I didn’t have the way about me, the manner or manners, to succeed as a lawyer or a real estate agent or a bar tender. I did what I could do.

There was one thing I wanted to mention that Ann kind of alluded to in the introduction, which I think she picked up from having seen me speak before, which is the tremendous value that a liberal arts education has had for me.

I know that in my years as a student, I didn’t work very hard, and I wasn’t a great student; I was kind of a B+ student. Actually, that class that I mentioned earlier, when I got the top grade on every test but got a B in the class anyway. . .that class kind of discouraged me from being a better student. I know that what the old biddy had in mind was to teach me a lesson and make me straighten up, but it had the opposite effect on me, as a student, in that after that I realized that there wasn’t any point in my trying to play the game, because I just wasn’t very good at it, and I never would be.

If you divide my life into four-year segments, I think you’d find that I probably worked harder in almost every other segment than I did when I was going to college. I was a lazy student, whereas I have never really been a lazy person otherwise--and yet I know that in my years in college I grew more, I learned more, and I changed more than in any other period in my life. I don’t really know how to explain that, other than that it is the routine miracle of a
University, that if you take bright young people and put them together and expose them to ideas, something wonderful happens.

I know a lot of people who say that their education never really mattered to them except that they had to have a degree, but I’m the exact opposite of that. My degree has meant nothing to me, but my education has meant everything to me. I have never had a resume, and I haven’t applied for a job in 40 years. I didn’t meet my wife in college, and although I did form friendships that I still have today, I did not make connections in any way that helped to launch my career. But if I had never gone to college, if I had never been exposed to the ideas of Adam Smith and Paul Samuelson and Milton Friedman and Robert Fogel and others, I know for certain that I could never have done what I have done.

An academic is a part of a long tradition of building knowledge and building understanding by sharing insights in an organized way, and I believe absolutely in that process; I believe in it as deeply as any of you do. I believe that the world is vastly more complicated than the human mind, and that therefore the only chance we have to gain any real understanding of where we are and who we are is to work together on the project of building understanding. I believe in this as deeply as any of you do, but I’m just not very good at respecting the rules of that process. I am, and I need to be, a person who makes up my own damned rules to suit myself. If I couldn’t be that person who makes up his own rules, I wouldn’t be anything, because I’ve never been good at following the rules.

Another way in which I am not like a good academic is that I never properly prepared myself, as a young man, with a solid grounding in scientific methods. I absorbed the general principles of science. . . .that is, that to take a step forward
we have to be able to prove that what we are saying is true, and that we will believe what the facts show to be true, rather than what the leading experts BELIEVE to be true. I got the general ideas, but there was a lot I didn’t get.

I call the field of knowledge in which I work Sabermetrics. When I was young and arrogant and thinking through what Sabermetrics should be, I had certain goals for us. One of those was that we would write in plain English so that we could communicate with the public at large, rather than developing our own jargon so that we could talk to one another and ignore everybody else.

I completely failed in that. Sabermetrics now has as much jargon as any other field of enquiry, and people who are in the field mostly talk to one another. I lost that argument, but what I was saying still seems right to me. To be an academic does mean to be a part of a tradition, but it seems to me that when academics speak their own language, and when they speak mostly to one another, that that limits their influence on the culture, or, if you will let me into your group, it limits our influence on the culture. Maybe I’m wrong about that, I don’t know, but anyway I lost that argument.

Ms. Cudd was telling me about a competition that you guys have, the three-minute dissertations. That seems to me like a GREAT idea, a sensational idea; that’s what I was talking about. If you have to boil a dissertation down to three minutes and one power point slide, then you have to find the essential ideas, and make them understandable to a general audience. I think if you do that, that’s a way of making yourself relevant.

I lost THAT argument in my field, but in a larger sense I won my argument with the world. I saw an inspirational sign somewhere just a couple of days ago
that said “Before you can change the world, you have to believe that you can change the world.” Well, I have been credited by many people with changing the baseball world or the sports world, but I certainly never believed that I could or that I would.

Baseball is not truly important, and sports writing is not truly important, but I always believed that what I was doing was important relative to the things that other sportswriters were doing. I always believed that, but I never for a moment expected OTHER PEOPLE to believe it. I thought that I could convince a few people to look at the game the way I looked at it, a few other misfits and a few hundred over the course of a lifetime. But the number of people who adopted my way of thinking about problems in baseball turned out to be vastly larger than I would ever have believed that it was. That is what I mean by saying that I won my argument with the world. It was education which enabled me to do that.

So I am thankful for that opportunity, and I am thankful for this opportunity, the opportunity to speak to you today and to take your questions. Before I close, though, I have to wedge in a commercial break. I have a book coming out this fall. It is not about baseball. The book is *The Man from the Train*. It tells a truly horrible story about a murderer who lived a hundred years ago.

I was talking earlier about making jokes in term papers, but I don’t actually make jokes, in term papers or in speeches; it is just that things happen in the middle of a sentence that seem peculiar to me. But there are very few jokes in
The Man from the Train, because it is simply such a dark story that there is no way to make fun of the things that happened without being offensive.

This is my second book in the true crime genre, but what I do in the crime books is, to me, exactly the same thing I have always done in baseball books. I pick up something that happened, try to find the most interesting questions that that event poses, and then I work on those questions. It’s essentially the same process, although it seems different because the questions are different.

What I was always trying to do, in baseball, was to move the discussion. A lot of discussions in sports writing are circular. They’re stuck in sand. You can read Most Valuable Player arguments from 1935 and from 1970, and they are almost the same except for the names. The argument was just spinning its wheels, generation after generation.

What I always tried to do was to move the argument. I was always trying to find a way to contribute facts to the argument, hard facts which would create traction under the wheels, and enable the discussion to jump forward.

What I try to do in crime writing is the same thing: I am trying to move the discussion. Crimes are terribly important events. They are life-shaping events for the persons involved, but of more relevance to us, they are events that shape our culture in important ways. I am trying to create a discussion about that. It’s a long haul, but it gives me something to work on in my old age.

I have lived for the most part a comfortable life, and I have been given much more credit than I deserve for changes which have taken place in baseball, many of which I know would have occurred about the same without me,
probably. I see that there is a microphone there, and I’ll be happy to answer your questions as long as my voice holds out.