

December 22, 2013

Dear Alumni, Students and Friends:

Happy New Year! I hope you're well. Please allow me to share with you some reflections as this, my last year as Chair of the Department of Philosophy has reached its mid-point.

As the newspapers often remind us, liberal education, and the humanities in particular, is suffering through a difficult time. Enrollments around the country are in sharp and rapid decline, as students, fearful about the job market and determined that their education pays a practical dividend, are flocking to technical fields. We here at Boston University have not been immune to this trend. The number of our majors, for example, has gone down over the past few years. Even a quick glance at the plans BU is making for its future, especially its campus, speaks volumes about the priorities of our university. The New Balance Athletic Field has opened on West Campus, as has a new Student Services building near Kenmore Square. Work on the Engineering Product Innovation Center is underway on Commonwealth Avenue, and the old Hillel House is being transformed into the Admissions Reception Center. Directly outside the north-facing windows in our own building, a major addition to the Law School is going up as I write. The next major addition to the university's physical infrastructure in the works is the Center for Integrated Life Science & Engineering.

While there is no doubt that the humanities are slipping in importance here at BU and everywhere else, I remain optimistic, and for one reason: people like you are reading this letter. Regardless of how large technology looms in our world, philosophy—good, old-fashioned thinking, talking, reading and writing—is anything but dead. Indeed, it is, and will continue to be, a fundamental human possibility. People of all ages, from all places and times, will still ask questions about the world they live in, the language they use, the sciences whose triumphs are daily trumpeted, and the governments of which they are citizens. Both Plato and Aristotle identified the origin of philosophy as wonder. Thinking people don't simply accept what is in front of their eyes as the end of the story. Instead, they experience all regions of human life as interesting, strange, curious, amazing...as wonder-ful. As a result, they are provoked to examine them. At bottom, philosophy is the rigorous pursuit of the questions that people from all walks of life seem driven to ask themselves.

I've taught at a wide variety of institutions: a private high-school, a city university, an elite liberal arts college, a state university, and BU. I've taught rich kids and poor ones, citizens and international students, students whose great-grandparents were born in the

United States and those who have only recently arrived. I've made video courses that have been watched by non-academics and even given classes in an assisted living facility. In each of these venues, I've had the same experience: there will always be someone out there whose interest is piqued, who comes alive at the prospect of questioning, who feels some identification with the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Rousseau or Mill (just to name a few of my favorite philosophers). To be truthful, the number of such students is never very high. Most people, however intelligent or well educated they may be, are not particularly philosophical. But, and this is the key point, there are always some, and I can never predict who they will be. Sometimes a student who has sat silently through a lecture is the one who has been most touched by it. Sometimes it's the talkative student who trails me to my office to continue the discussion. Whoever they are, I can count on the fact that such people will always be there. One of our jobs in the Department of Philosophy is to make sure that ours is a place where the spirit of questioning is affirmed, even celebrated. We want our students, alumni and friends to feel welcome here.

In this sense, then, I remain optimistic. Even as the on-line world becomes increasingly ubiquitous, even as the technical fields grow even larger in the administration's imagination and on the physical campus of our university, philosophy will stay alive. We're a permanent feature of the human landscape.

Some more mundane news:

\*\*\* We just hired two terrific new administrators, Laura Hubbard and John McGargar. They're dedicated to the department and work hard to make it run smoothly. I couldn't have done my job without their assistance.

\*\*\* The administration approved our proposal to hire a new faculty member to teach Ancient Greek Philosophy. We've been shorthanded in this area for several years, so this will be a welcome addition. We begin our international search this month.

\*\*\* Our faculty continues to be remarkably productive. Books on Nietzsche, Aristotle, Hobbes, Rousseau, Fichte, the philosophy of physics, the morality of genetic medicine, the phenomenology of perception, contemporary ethics—to name just a few of the scholarly subjects on which my colleagues have written—are either in print or on their way.

\*\*\* Our faculty travels all over the world to deliver lectures. In the last year or so, BU professors have made appearances in China, Norway, Scotland, Italy, Germany, France, England, and New Zealand.

\*\*\* We had about 1,200 students enrolled in our classes in the Fall of 2013. While the number of our majors may be going down, we're still attracting students to individual courses, and this is good news indeed.

\*\*\* Even though the market is shrinking and the competition fierce, our Ph.D.

students have been successful in landing tenure track positions at universities such as Bridgewater State, Clemson, Quinnipiac, University of New Orleans, Ben Gurion University, the National University of Mexico and Louisville.

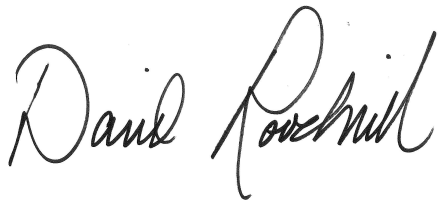
\*\*\* Allen Speight will become the Chair of the Department of Philosophy on September 1, 2014. I'm sure he will do a fine job.

On a sad note, Krzysztof Michalski died unexpectedly in February. His long service to the department and his many contributions to European philosophy were acknowledged in a memorial service conducted on October 6, and hosted by his friend Alan Olson.

Victor Kestenbaum and Jaakko Hintikka are retiring at the end of this academic year. They will be missed.

Should you live in the Boston area, or are visiting, please do come by our offices at 745 Commonwealth Avenue. We'd love to see you and catch up. And feel free to email me with any questions about the department that you might have.

All best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "David Roochnik". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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