

September 2008

## **LAST LECTURE**

**by**

**Ronald G. Ehrenberg**

The “Last Lecture” was written in February 2004 for presentation at Mortarboard’s March 2004 annual “Last Lecture” series. Mortarboard is a national undergraduate honor society and each year it sponsors a last lecture series at Cornell in which two professors are asked the following: “If you were retiring tomorrow and had a half an hour to give a last lecture to your students, what would you say?”

As the attached should indicate to you, I took the charge quite seriously. The lecture was written before we learned in August 2004 that our son’s brain tumor had begun to grow again and, that as a family, we would once again be facing a very trying time. I gave the lecture to my class to read that fall to explain to them why they would only see me on the screen in the classroom; I was going down to Washington, DC to be with my son and his wife while he was treated and would be teaching them from the Cornell-in-Washington Center. His hospital stay lasted almost two months and when I returned to Cornell a number of students told me that this lecture was the most important thing that they had read during their years at Cornell. So I now share it with my undergraduate students each year in the hope that the messages in it will be of use to them during their lifetimes.

Our son’s second bout with his brain tumor left him with additional disabilities. However, he remained optimistic about life until May of 2008 when complications resulting from his original treatment struck. After a three month battle, he died in August 2008. At the time of his death he had a 3 year old daughter who he loved very much and who brought him great joy.

R. Ehrenberg  
February 29, 2004

## THE LAST LECTURE

### I. Introduction

Age 57 is a bit early to be delivering the last lecture of one's career, especially since January 1, 1994 when Congress and the President saw fit to eliminate mandatory retirement for tenured faculty members. Like many other prolific Cornell faculty members, I cannot conceive of doing anything other than what I am currently doing. However, I became a first-time grandfather in late January and becoming a grandparent is a natural transition point in life. So the timing of this lecture is actually very appropriate for me.

Six years ago I was asked to write an essay titled "My Life and Economics" for the *American Economist*, the journal of the national undergraduate economics honor society. While age 51 was even an earlier time to be writing a retrospective about one's career, that essay was written at another important point in my career, when I was contemplating whether to continue as a Cornell Vice President or to return to my faculty role. The messages that ultimately came through in that essay were that we are all products of our environment and experiences, that families, friends and students mean much more in the long-run than all of the publications on one's vita, that committing oneself to a single institution during a career can be overwhelmingly satisfying (although sadly many of you will never have the opportunity to do so) and that famous economists are not spared from adversity and must learn to cope with the problems that present

themselves during life, just like anyone else. Several of these themes will reappear in today's lecture.

## **II. My Years at Cornell University**

I received my PhD in Economics from Northwestern University in 1970 at the age of 24 and, after brief stays at Loyola University of Chicago and the University of Massachusetts, I moved to Cornell in 1975. I have spent the last 29 years here teaching undergraduates and graduates, conducting research on labor market and educational issues, serving as a Cornell Vice President, and most recently founding and directing the Cornell Higher Education Research Institute (CHERI).

My career at Cornell has been a wonderful one. A tenured professor at a major university has the freedom to address whatever issues he feels are important and I have focused on policy related issues at the federal, state and institutional level and thought and wrote about fundamental issues that our society confronts. I have authored or coauthored about 120 articles and 18 books. I have won an undergraduate teaching award and coauthored a leading labor economics textbook. These things have led to a level of professional recognition that the son of two New York City public school physical education teachers never dreamed would be possible.

In 1987, Cornell made me the first Irving M. Ives Professor at the University. Ives was a U.S Senator, the founder of the ILR School and its first dean, and, when he was a member of the NY State Senate, coauthor of the first state employment discrimination statute in the United States, New York's Ives-Quinn Act. This act predated the Civil Rights Act by 20 years and because I spent a good deal of time during my career

analyzing the effects of social legislation, I have always felt a close affinity to Ives and was greatly honored when Cornell chose to associate my name with his.

I am now marking my 34<sup>th</sup> year as a publishing economist. Throughout the years, the 35 PhD students whose committees I have chaired and the countless other PhD students that I have worked with have a hard time believing the early insecurities that I tell them I felt, the dry periods I tell them that I experienced when nothing seemed to go right, and the fears that I had early in my career that I would never generate another idea. They look at my long publication record and question whether I am lying to them. But I repeatedly tell them these stories anyway to emphasize that their “heroes” are mortals and that the fears that they are themselves are feeling are not unique. In academia, as in many other professions, individuals are never supposed to display their weaknesses and insecurities to colleagues. However, I believe that those of us who have achieved great success have an obligation to discuss these matters with our students to facilitate their embarking upon their careers.

Most of my research has been coauthored with my graduate students and my contacts with them have been among the most rewarding parts of my professional life. I have often joked to my two sons, that these students are the sons and daughters that I never had, and many of my graduate students have become life long friends. At this stage of my career, the joy I feel from seeing their professional successes far outweighs the joy I feel from my own successes. Many of these graduate students have been female and I have learned from them (and they from me) that mentors do not have to be of the same gender. Mentors also do not have to be of the same/race ethnicity of their students and I was

elated this year when an African-American PhD student of mine received tenure at the University of Michigan.

Since my return to the faculty in 1998, I have also made a concerted effort to involve undergraduate students in research and during the last few years have coauthored papers with five or six different Cornell undergraduates. One of my students – who I published three papers with while he was at Cornell - is now a first year PhD student in the MIT economics department – the number one economics department in the country. At graduation last year he thanked me for all that I had done for him – I told him that he had it backwards and that I should be thanking him for all that he had done for me. Working with students like him is a treat that few faculty members in this nation ever get.

The true love and foundation of my life has been my wife Randy and in June we will have been married 37 years. She graduated from college in 3 years so that we could get married when she was 19. In addition to love and support, I also get research ideas from her description of the issues she has faced as a teacher, school principal, deputy superintendent of schools and, since July 2001, superintendent of schools of a large high-performing suburban school district in the Albany area. Adjusting to a commuting marriage after 34 years of marriage was not easy for me to do, especially since I am the one who does virtually all of the commuting. However my Road Runner connection in our home in the Albany area has made life much easier and my students are in constant contact with me regardless of whether I am in Ithaca or Albany. While I deeply regret missing Cornell basketball and lacrosse games – my two big passions in Cornell sports- the happiness that comes from seeing one's spouse achieve her professional ambition is also extraordinary.

### **III. Coping with Trials and Tribulations and Life's Lessons Learned**

No one ever said that life would be easy or is fair. My wife lost her father when she was 23 (and he was 49) and he never got to see our first son, who was born three months later. The loss of a father is something that one never fully gets over, however, our having experienced this early loss made it a lot easier for me to counsel one of my freshman students this fall when her father was dying. What goes on outside the workplace often influences how we behave within it.

A mediocre cross-country and track athlete when I was in college, I took up jogging when I was in my early 30s and it became my life's passion. While training for a marathon at the age of 37, I ruptured a disk in my back and even after an operation I was unable to ever run again. I was depressed for 5 years because of what I had lost. I did not realize then what I know now – namely that throughout life we inevitably suffer losses and that those people who are the happiest are the ones who can gently let go of what they have lost and develop new passions to replace their losses. Put in the jargon of an economist, we all should have a portfolio of interests in life rather than a single interest so that if we lose the ability to pursue one interest, we can still enjoy the others and also invest in new interests. I am much happier today now that I realize this, although I also am 50 pounds heavier.

Perhaps the period of greatest stress in my family's lives occurred in 1990 when our oldest son was diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor, while he was a junior at Cornell. For over a year, his younger brother, my wife and I put our lives on hold to help him cope with multiple surgeries, chemotherapy and radiation therapy as he battled an illness whose prognosis was highly uncertain. At one point, after he had permanently lost

¾ of his vision as the result of several operations, the tumor had grown back and he was totally blind. The doctors said to us that he would never see again, that the chemotherapy that they were going to give him would probably leave him totally deaf, and that the real question was whether he would still be alive in three months.

Happily, last October marked the 12<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of all my son's treatments. He no longer has a pituitary gland and thus he is on complete hormone replacements. However, he regained sight in the inner half of his left eye and that is enough vision for him to read with and to navigate around Washington DC. He wears hearing aids in both ears, but is not totally deaf. After a year away from school, he was able to return complete his studies at Cornell, to attend and graduate from Georgetown Law School and to obtain a position, with the help of an ILR-Cornell alumnus, as an attorney with the Civil Rights Division of the Solicitor's Office of the U.S. Department of Labor. He also met a woman (who sadly is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania), who saw through beyond all of his disabilities, could live with the constant fear of the recurrence of his illness, and fell in love with him. They now have been married for almost 4 years. I often joke that if she were not Jewish, she clearly would be a saint.

Our son's experience has taught me many profound messages. First probabilities that doctors give you when you are suffering from an illness are only probabilities. Either you beat the illness or you don't. Even when the odds are very low, as they were in his case, there are some winners and you should not lose the hope that you will be a winner. Stephen Jay Gould, the noted Harvard evolutionary biologist, who died in May of 2002, some 20 years after being told that he had a rare form of cancer and less than a year to live, has conveyed this message more eloquently than I could ever hope to in an article

titled “The Median isn’t the Message” that appeared in *Discovery* magazine. This article is widely available on the web and if any of you or a friend or family member ever faces a situation like my son did, I encourage you to download a copy of this wonderful piece.

Second, my son’s experiences have taught me that life is all about changing expectations. All of a father’s hope and expectations, or at least this father’s hope and expectations, are tied up in his first son. When in high school, my son decided that he wanted to be a Supreme Court Justice because during Robert Bork’s confirmation hearings, or rather I should say non confirmation hearings, Bork said, he wanted to be on the Supreme Court because it would be an intellectual feast. Although my son graduated from Cornell Arts and Sciences magna cum laude, the disabilities he had developed and his illness had a profound effect on his ability to do well in law school and, as a result, the position he was finally able to attain, is far below what he and we had aspired for him.

I was fortunate, however, to have a colleague in ILR, Professor Robert Stern, who was the most remarkable person I have ever met. Bob, who died two years ago, had a severe case of childhood diabetes. This led him to have several eye operations, to have his kidneys fail and go on dialysis, to have a heart attack, to have a kidney transplant, to develop stomach cancer as a result of the rejection drugs from the transplant and to have multiple parts of his body progressively amputated. When Bob died at age 51, he had two artificial legs and the use of a total of three fingers on one hand. However, until the final few months of his life, he remained an optimistic happy person.

Bob visited my son when he was first in the hospital and conveyed a very simple message to him. “Don’t compare yourself to what you were (because this will not bring you happiness). Don’t compare yourself to the people around you (because again this will



not make you happy). Rather simply ask what can you do to make yourself and the people you care about, feel as fulfilled and happy as possible?” Translated into the language of an economist, Bob was saying that our goal in life should be to maximize our utility functions subject to the constraints that we face – constraints which in his case were always shifting in. While it has taken my son over 10 years to begin to internalize this message, my wife and I “got it” very quickly. It does one absolutely no good to be envious of others who seem to have gotten a better draw in life and all we now hope for our son is that he has as many days of happiness as possible.

Perhaps still another way of saying the same thing is that inevitably in life, one’s problems increase, rather than decrease as you age. The rate of increase is different for different people. Some people, like Bob Stern and my son, suffer serious losses at early ages, while others seem to get free passes throughout most of their lives. The secret of happiness is one’s ability to cope and those people who are happy are the ones whose ability to cope increases at a faster rate than their problems do.

Third, my son’s experiences also reemphasized what I have long known – if you can’t find humor in practically any situation you are not going to be a happy person. I vividly remember the neurosurgeon coming into my son’s hospital room at 6am the morning before his third brain surgery with three large coffee cups perched on top of each other and telling my son that “he was really hung over after going drinking last night”. While I turned completely white, my son burst out laughing because he understood much faster than I did that the doctor was simply trying to reduce his tension and relax him. Laughter has always been an important part of my family’s lives and my wife and I are still best friends in large part because we always find something to laugh

about at otherwise serious and solemn events. Humor has also always been an important part of my teaching style, because my students remain attentive to what I am saying because they don't want to miss the next joke.

Finally, my son's experiences have reemphasized to me the importance of friends and community. Life is with people and having a community that you can turn to in times of need and can contribute to throughout your life is very important. In spite of our busy professional schedules, my wife and I have always been integral parts of the .communities in which we lived and, although I am only in Ithaca three and a half days many weeks, I still find time to serve on the board of the Tompkins County Public Library

#### **IV. Concluding Remarks**

When I was 32 years old I spent three months agonizing over whether I should get a non malignant brown spot removed from my face for cosmetic reasons. I often look back on that experience and ponder whether I would have behaved differently if I knew then all the lessons that I subsequently learned. I've concluded that half the fun in life is making mistakes and that it is better to learn from experience than to know everything at the start. Besides, you get a second chance at life through your children and then a third chance if you are lucky enough to have grandchildren.

Within a few years, my wife can retire from her school superintendent position and we can once again live together all week in one house. The typical "retirement position" for school superintendents is to teach part-time in a college of education. However, Cornell does not have an education college and there are few other employment opportunities for my wife in the Ithaca area. So we are both pondering what

the future will bring for us. Should we move to Washington DC to be near our grandson and both try to find employment there? Should I accept a senior administrative position at another university (hopefully in a warmer climate), with it hiring my wife as a part-time faculty member as part of the deal? Should she continue in her school superintendent position indefinitely and should I move to an academic institution in the Albany area? Or should we stay in the community that we love and I continue at the institution that has been much more than an employer for me, with her fully retired? Perhaps my final message to you is that the trite phrase that “nothing is certain in life other than death and taxes” is a fairly accurate landmark of what your lives will be like. By all means make plans, but be prepared to regularly revise them.