

# Three Sayings

**Canadian Bioethics Society Annual Conference, Hamilton, Ontario  
June 2009**

## **Lifetime Achievement Award Address**

*By Michael McDonald*

I was genuinely surprised when I received the note from Canadian Bioethics Society President Paddy Rodney that I was the recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award for 2009. It was especially gratifying to receive the news from Paddy, who is a former student. I am most grateful to my colleagues in the CBS for this award. Thank you especially to those who put my name in for nomination. I have learned so much from all of you over the many years I have been associated with the CBS.

This occasion calls for appropriate remarks. But speaking as a philosopher, I cannot resist the inclination to offer a prolegomenon or a set of meta-remarks to set out my criteria for a speech that is appropriate on receipt of such an honour. I believe there are three criteria. First, the remarks must be relatively brief – we have been in sessions for nearly two full days and are reaching the super-saturated point. Second, the award is given following lunch so one's remarks should be digestible and not spoil the meal. Third and most challengingly, acceptance remarks must show some wit, but also display some seriousness.

An anecdote

So I begin with an anecdote. Years ago when I was in the Philosophy Department at the University of Waterloo, my then senior colleague and still close friend Rolf George told me a story about a conversation he had on a flight to his sabbatical in Germany. His seatmate asked what Rolf did. Rolf said that he was a philosopher. "Ah a philosopher", said the seatmate, "Tell me some of your sayings."

With his droll sense of humour, Rolf came back with the idea that each philosopher should develop some of his or her own sayings. Perhaps, Rolf suggested, faculty members could post their sayings on their office doors for potential students to contemplate.

Now this story may sound a bit strange to non-philosophers, but I find it most natural. I recall my first philosophy course which was in ancient philosophy at the University of Toronto in 1961-2. In that year-long course, we spent an entire term studying the very cryptic sayings of pre-Socratic philosophers who left only fragments of their work. As I recall, Thales talked about the composition of the universe claiming that everything is made of water. Heraclitus spoke about the nature of time and cryptically remarked that one can't step into the same river twice. I also have now rather dim memories that

Parmenides worried about existence or the nature of being, but what remains fixed in my mind is that his followers, the Pythagoreans eschewed eating beans – thus linking being to non-bean. All this was done before we were allowed to read Plato and Aristotle. As students, we were very grateful for finally having readings with premises and conclusions rather than cryptic sayings.

Nonetheless, sayings have their place, and one of these places is just such an occasion. Sayings are not arguments. To one person, a particular saying may appear highly insightful, while to another it may seem like empty rhetoric. This is because sayings are context sensitive. So take into account this context – the receipt of an award at the CBS. I can then dispense with the standard philosophical qualification “*ceteris paribus*” or “other things being equal” and climb out on a rhetorical limb.

I have three sayings from my life experience in ethics and bioethics.

My first saying is that in ethics, what seems most obvious may be the most difficult and important to understand and act upon.

I found this in the work that I have done in research ethics particularly when I was a member and Deputy Chair of the Tri-Council Working Group on Ethics (TCWG) in the mid-1990's. I served on the Working Group with a number of distinguished academics including the late Doug Kinsella who served as President of the CBS. The Working Group produced the document that eventually became in 1998 the Tri-Council Policy Statement on the Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans. The tumultuous history of this paper is chronicled in a paper that I have just published in the *Health Law Review* (April 2009).

In this process, what shocked (and saddened) me was that most of the interventions and comments on our work were about the situation of researchers and how they might be disadvantaged by our formulation of research ethics norms. In the literally hundreds of pages of comments, we heard very little (outside the bioethics community) about the rights and interests of research participants, but we had numerous complaints and concerns about the rights and interests of researchers. I came to realize that the voices of research subjects were seldom, if ever, heard; while the voices of the research community and sponsors dominated the correspondence and protection processes.

As we conversed with the research community, I realized that researchers had made assumptions about the burden of proof. The common view was that it was the responsibility of the TCWG and critics of current practices to show that something was wrong with the then current arrangements for research governance. It seemed obvious to me that the burden of proof lay on the research community to show that research subjects were effectively protected. This insight led to the work that I led on our report to the Law Commission of Canada in 2000. In that report we noted that while research ethics abounds with norms and procedures there is really no attempt to garner evidence of effectiveness of those norms and processes.

In the work that I have done on research ethics since that time, I have come to realize that on paper what happens to research participants is supposed to be central to research ethics norms. However, almost no one really systematically tracks the experiences of research subjects. This simple and obvious insight led to our current research project on the experiences of research subjects.

Finally, I have noted that while research ethics is profoundly shaped by its history, we as Canadians study and invoke the US history of human research protection but typically ignore our own history and situation as Canadians.

My point in all this is that in puzzling through the often controversial process we had in the lead up to the Tri-Council Policy Statement, I was led to think very hard about how we in Canada govern human research protection. With colleagues I have launched multiple research projects, including research into governance and into the experiences of research participants, to address what seems like the most obvious and yet most neglected questions. It has led me to argue in favour of an evidence-based system of Canadian human research protection in both academic and policy forums.

Finally, I want to say that research ethics is a crucial part of bioethics. It is essential for those who work in this area make it a prominent part of each CBS meeting. It is also essential that we engage in serious scholarship on the history of the Canadian experience in human research protection.

My second saying is that before there can be occupants, someone has to build the house.

Let me offer some examples of building the house of bioethics from my career. One was the creation of the applied ethics strategic research theme at SSHRC that funded work in bioethics and other areas of applied ethics in the late 1980s and 1990s. This was only possible through a concerted effort on the part of several bioethicists including Sue Sherwin, and Abby Ann Lynch as well as my research assistant at that time Daryl Pullman. A second is the work that many of us did to ensure that when CIHR was created ethics was a cornerstone of its foundation that is even a part of its legislated mandate. Another was in the creation of the highly interdisciplinary W. Maurice Young Centre for Applied Ethics at the University of British Columbia. I was also privileged to be part of the movement that brought about the integration of social sciences into bioethics. Finally I would mention the CIHR ethics training program that our Centre has had with Dalhousie University.

My point here is that many of the things that we now take for granted were not always there. Someone has to build the house before there is a roof over our heads. We need institution builders. This requires entrepreneurship and creative partnership working for the common good. The items that I mention were not things that I could have done on my own. They required a shared effort and putting aside personal ambitions and partisan agendas.

My third saying is to be passionate and thoughtful, but above all be compassionate.

What we do in bioethics should ultimately matter to patients, families, research participants, our community and our world. We should be making a positive difference for their lives as well as our own. Bioethics requires thoughtfulness and insight. The issues we engage with are intellectually and practically difficult.

We will encounter resistance because what we say will threaten the comfortable and powerful. As bioethicists we need to have the courage of our convictions and not only speak truth to power but demand that the powerful be truthful. That is not easy and is certainly not, in my experience, without personal cost. In difficult moments it is crucial to have supportive colleagues. I have been blessed with these particularly in the Centre, on the Tri-Council Working Group, the CIHR Standing Committee on Ethics and in other circumstances.

But above all I urge you to be compassionate. Two years ago I was shocked to learn that I had a serious cardiac problem. I was no longer the ethics consultant and teacher walking into the hospital, but a patient with an ill fitting gown and a fear-filled mind. My family physician said to me that perhaps I would learn something from this experience that would be useful in my work as a bioethicist. She was right about this. I did learn something from family, friends and caregivers as well as fellow cardiac patients. What I learned is the importance of compassion and caring.

As bioethicists we have the intellectual platform and practical opportunities to inspire and nurture a culture of compassion in health care and health research. I urge you to continue to take such occasions with the passion that they deserve.

So these are my sayings.

I trust that I have not over-burdened the occasion or your digestion. I hope that these sayings will either have resonated with you or, if not, have pushed you into useful indignation. A good feature of sayings is that they are not really arguments but hints at ways of life. They require some sharing of life experience and that is what I have tried to do on this occasion. Finally thank you again for this wonderful award.