

Thomas Victor Morris '74

"The guy is a philosopher."

That's something we say about the plumber who sees the beauty in a monkey wrench. Or about the bus driver who extracts a higher level of meaning from the sign that warns pedestrians to "Walk with Light." Or about the doctor who eases suffering as much by his bedside understanding of the human condition as by the medication he prescribes. These are people who build bridges from the world of everyday existence to the world of ideas and imagination.

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That's something we can say most precisely about a small slice of humankind, people whose lifework is to build the bridge the other way, from the world of ideas and imagination to the world of everyday existence. These are the professional philosophers.

They exist primarily in the university. At Carolina, we have had many of the best, among them George Schlesinger (in the philosophy department) and the late Bernard Boyd (in religion). These two provided the inspiration to a rock and roll musician from Durham, a young man on his way to seek fame with a guitar, to move instead into that world of ideas. Their student, Thomas V. Morris, graced by their teaching, went on to doctorates in philosophy and religion at Yale and in 1981 to the faculty at the University of Notre Dame. He has, in the decade since, become a leader in the world of academic philosophy. He has published 10 books and many dozens of essays and articles in the top international professional journals. He is on the editorial board of two scholarly journals and is the General Editor of the Library of Religious Philosophy of the University of Notre Dame Press.

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But he has, in ways that draw the attention of us nonphilosophers, dedicated himself to building the bridge from the world of ideas to the mundane world that seems to demand all the attention that we have to give.

He may toss a frisbee at a target in the classroom to illustrate how ideas must hit their marks. He may turn out the lights in a simulation of the near death experience. He may break out that old guitar for a chorus of soul music to capture a commonplace example of a concept in the philosophy of religion. He calls a meeting after the first quiz of the semester of everyone who scored a D or an F — he calls it the Below Sealevel Club — to exhort greater effort. Within six years of becoming a teacher, Tom won Notre Dame's Thomas P. Madden Teaching Award, and last year was named the Indiana Professor of the Year by the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education in Washington, D.C.

His appearance on cable television's The Learning Channel, a lecture on "The Ethics of Everyday Life," caught the imagination of people of all stripes. At that same moment executives in the advertising agency putting together a campaign to sell to the public Disney's new series of Winnie-the-Pooh videos were about to conclude they were engaged in an impossible mission. They wanted a philosopher of stature who could speak with authority but not intimidate potential purchasers. On the Learning Channel, they found their man.

It is a rare person who can tie together the abstractions of Greek philosophy and the musings of Pooh. Tom Morris does it.

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