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## 01. Richard C. Richards, I Hardly Knew Ye

### Abstract

I first met Richard Richards at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, in the fall of 1996. I was a Freshman who had a curious interest in philosophy; yet, at the time, I was a Biology major planning of a life in Hawaii where I'd be conducting research on sharks while teaching at the University of Hawaii and surfing before and after work. Little did I know that my life would be changed forever, after a chance meeting with Richard. [*excerpt*]

### Keywords

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### Disciplines

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**Richard C. Richards, I Hardly Knew Ye**  
Peter Francev

I first met Richard Richards at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, in the fall of 1996. I was a Freshman who had a curious interest in philosophy; yet, at the time, I was a Biology major planning a life in Hawaii where I'd be conducting research on sharks while teaching at the University of Hawaii and surfing before and after work. Little did I know that my life would be changed forever, after a chance meeting with Richard.

During the first week of the fall quarter, I walked across campus from the biology labs and headed over to the Philosophy Department offices; I was planning on double-majoring and sought some much needed advice. Richard was the only professor in his office, so I nervously stopped and knocked on his door. He called out to "Come in." I did, not knowing what to expect. There, sitting before me, was a rather lanky individual, whose face was buried in some papers.

He quickly told me to sit down and asked what he could do for me, stating that I didn't look familiar, asking which of his three classes I was in. I told him that I wasn't a student of his- yet- but that I was a Bio major and was interested in double-majoring. He told me that this was "Good. Good", and that Philosophy would be a fine second major,

especially one where the analytical thinking skills would complement the scientific ones that I would surely be learning during the next four years.

He asked what my interests were in philosophy and before I could answer, he followed up with inquiring what philosophers I had read. “Nietzsche and Camus.” He quipped that Nietzsche was “alright” and Camus was a “good guy”. He said a few other things, mainly about which classes to take, including his own History of Philosophy sequence. (Richard taught both, History of Ancient Philosophy, History of Medieval Philosophy, Existentialism and Philosophy of Love and Sex. And as an eighteen year-old, it was the last course that he mentioned that had piqued my interest.) I knew that my previous exposure to Nietzsche and Camus, which was merely “recreational” reading that I had done on my own, would require the course on Existentialism, and his two history courses were core required classes. Apparently, I was going to be seeing quite a bit of this Richards fellow—and he’d be seeing a lot of me.

#### Philosophy 465: Philosophy of Love and Sex

Right. So here I was sitting in Richards’s Love and Sex class, along with about 80 other students, most of whom were wearing sweatshirts with the Greek letters of their fraternity or sorority sewn on the front. At exactly 6:00pm, on the first Tuesday of Spring Quarter 1997, Professor Richards walked

into our classroom (in one of the Engineering buildings, for some reason), put down his books, notes and syllabi down and announced the following disclaimer to the class: “Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. This is Philosophy 465: the Philosophy of Love and Sex. I am your professor, Professor Richards. This is not, let me repeat that: this is NOT a course in which we are going to discuss the pleasure of sex; we are not going to talk about why your boyfriend can’t get you to orgasm; we are not going to search for the “g-spot”, like Indiana Jones on some quest. We are going to look at all types of loves from a PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE. Period. If you’re interested in any of the aforementioned classes, please see Dr. So-and-so’s class on human sexuality or Professor What’s his name’s class on the psychology of relationships. Understand? Good.” At that point, exactly 1/3 of the class stood up, grabbed their things and walked out. He then turned to the remaining students and went over the syllabus BEFORE he took roll and dealt with the adds and drops.

Hold on a second. What’s this? Look, look. It says “PORNOGRAPHY” for Week #7. YES!! I knew it. I knew that there was going to be some sort of porn in this class. And then he discussed the unit on pornos. We’d be watching a porno and discussing the merits of the porn with the writer, director and star of the flick. Wow. This was awesome; this really was a

senior level philosophy class. And then, six weeks later, at the end of week #6, Richards cued us in on what to expect for next week's lecture and discussion: it was going to be...wait for it...wait for it...a foot fetish porno. What. The. Hell. Is that!?!? Well, dear reader, it is exactly what it appears to be: a porno of feet. Feet walking. Feet running. Feet jumping. Feet putting on shoes. Feet taking them off. Socks covering feet. Socks seductively coming off. Feet in red high heels. Feet in black pumps. Toes "playing" with grapes. Toes "playing" with earthworms. Feet, feet, everywhere and not the slightest hint of moaning or groaning.

At the end of the class, I submitted a research paper where I argued the merits of Romeo and Juliet being in love and NOT in infatuation. Richards totally disagreed. He pitched his arguments during office hours; I pretended to listen and agree. However, this was MY paper and I was going to write it my way. And my way I did...and I received my lowest grade in any of Richards's classes. I earned a "B".

### Philosophy 312 and 313: History of Ancient Philosophy and History of Medieval Philosophy

The following year, I was fortunate enough to take two more classes with Richard: Philosophy 312 and 313: History of Ancient Philosophy and History of Medieval Philosophy, respectively. If I remember correctly, I had one class on Mondays and

Wednesdays and the other on Tuesdays and Thursdays, which meant that I had four days of Richard, his dry wit and the wealth of knowledge of nearly 2,000 years of western philosophy. I remember doing well in both classes; for History of Ancient Philosophy, my end of term research paper was a comparison of Plato and Aristotle on poetry. When I handed him a rough draft for his commentary, he merely quipped: “When it comes to poetry and pretty much anything else, Plato is a bastard.” From that moment onwards, I knew that one of my undergraduate advisors was an Aristotelean.

The History of Medieval Philosophy was a bit more subdued. We covered the major figures, using Frederick Copleston’s multivolume tome as the foundation of our reading. It was during the medieval class that I learned two important things from Richard: first, despite all of the godliness, the medievalists were an intellectually rich group of thinkers; and second, luckily, the Arabs thinkers kept Plato and Aristotle alive. He instilled in all of his students that if it wasn’t for the Arab philosophers, then the medieval period would really have been “the dark ages”.

#### Philosophy 480: Existentialism

Existentialism was my baguette and butter. Remember, back when I was a punk in high school, it

was Nietzsche's aphorism "God is dead." and Albert Camus's novel *The Stranger* that ignited my interest in both Existentialism and philosophy as a whole, and now I was going to have my fourth class with Richard. It was my junior year. We began the quarter painstakingly looking at L. Nathan Oaklander's Introduction to Existentialism. We briefly looked at Husserl as the Existentialists forefather, and spent the bulk of the class looking at Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre, Beauvoir, and Camus. While most time was spent fairly evenly, I again learned two more crucial things from Richard that have stayed with me to this day: first, if Plato was a 'bastard' by Richards's account, then Heidegger went above and beyond Plato's bastardness and was a "s.o.b." Secondly, and most important of all, Camus is a fantastic philosopher. I learned the nuances of Camusian philosophy and this is Richard's enduring legacy on me and my students. If it wasn't for his methodical and meticulous analysis of Camus, then I would not have been motivated to attend graduate school at University College Dublin, where I would have written a Master's thesis on Camus's early philosophy of the Absurd. If it wasn't for Richard and his appreciation and respect of Camus, then I would not have gone on to co-found the Albert Camus Society UK/US or the *Journal of Camus Studies*. And, if that wasn't enough, it was because of insistence that Camus is a philosopher that I have been

fortunate enough to expose my students to the rigors of Camus's philosophy.

Philosophy 499: Independent Study: Albert Camus

During my Senior year, as I was thinking of grad school applications, I was drawn to UCD's strengths in Continental philosophy- not to mention the fact that it was a student-oriented program (I will explain this in detail, in a moment.)- I approached Richard about working with me on an independent study, where I could focus on Camus exclusively. In hearing that I wanted to go to grad school in Ireland and write my MA thesis on Camus, Richard suggested that I look at Dostoevsky as an early influence. (This would be key because a year later, my MA thesis would have a chapter devoted to Dostoevsky's influence on Camus. That chapter would stem from my research the previous year, in the final class that I had with my mentor.) I read *Notes from Underground* for the first time; I saw immediate connections to Camus's characters Meursault and Clamence, from *The Stranger* and *The Fall* respectively. Even today, when I teach *Notes*, I still get goosebumps thinking back to my excitement at what I thought was discovery while sitting in Richard's office.

### Post-BA Graduation

Following my graduation, I enrolled at University College Dublin; one year later, I walked out with a MA in (Continental) Philosophy. I taught high school for a couple of years; turned down a PhD program in Philosophy (scared of being \$125,000+ in debt by the time I finished and not having a tenure track job.); went back to graduate school (MA in English); and began a life of teaching at the community college level (Currently, with one year left before tenure and finishing a PhD in English.).

I am a product of Richard's dedication to his field and to his students. There isn't a day that doesn't go by that I do not think of him, or what he taught me, or how he showed me to always believe in your students. He demonstrated to me that you push your students, even when you don't think they can handle the pressure or the criticism, because often times they will surprise you. He was a model professor: he expected a lot from his students; he pushed them to their limits, but he was always by their sides encouraging them to never give up. He taught me to care and be respectful of our students, just as he was with me. It is his impact on my life that allows me to impact the lives of students whom I come into contact with every day. So, Richard, on behalf of the countless number of students that had the pleasure and honor to sit at your feet and learn from your wisdom, I thank you for everything.