Father John asked if I could talk to you about what I learned from JJ – Yes, I was his teacher and his advisor – but that doesn't mean I don’t also learn from my students and advisees. For me to tell you what I learned from JJ however, I need to set a bit of context. This is the third time I have stood here to speak about a Virginia Tech student we have lost, all too soon. The first time was over 20 years ago – the second much more recently – and yesterday we commemorated the loss of 32 of our students and colleagues – add to that those we have lost so young in recent and past wars, in car accidents, and other random acts of violence plus those others, not part of the Hokie family, but part of the human family, we have lost from famine and natural disasters and poor health care and plain starvation. It is enough to create a sense of despair – those of us who are teachers teach for the future and when we lose the young we see the future fading away.

That said, the last week has found me unable to get the picture of a young man’s smiling face out of my head – JJ. I have been seeing that smile and recalling the boundless intellectual energy and love of life he brought to us all and it has forced me to rethink despair.

What I relearned from JJ was that indeed it is the case that the young are the future and that the future, despite our collective failings, remains a promise worth fighting for. No one can replace JJ, with his special ability to make you think hard about things you thought you had already settled and to make you laugh. More to the
point, JJ was the very instantiation of hope. He gave us hope by his very being and he saw hope in everyone around him – this was his special gift – to not just see the hope others brought but to make you see that hope as well. He was always showing me how much his fellow students had to offer and why I should listen to them – he would constantly tell me how important something was that a fellow student said in class. Most importantly he let us see his hope – for example, he just refused to believe that even the most intractable philosophical problems couldn't be solved – imagine!

My favorite images of JJ come from a course he took with me and my memories of when ever he came to my office. In the class in question JJ sat in the very middle at the very back. It was a room with poor acoustics – but given his size and his booming voice you couldn't miss him. The image that is stuck in my head is JJ trying to sit down but so eager to get into the material that his hand was already up in the air. The second image – when JJ would come to my office is that of this presence filling the door and saying “Hi Professor Pitt, I’ve been thinking that………” you fill in the blank! That opening inevitably led at least an hour’s vigorous conversation. I will miss those conversations, but I now once again I have hope, thanks to JJ, that the next student coming through the door will bring that same enthusiasm and intensity. So, yes, JJ taught me about hope, and I can't get that smile out of my head.