Dr. Brian McCuskey
Delivers the 42nd Annual
Last Lecture

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“Here’s a tip to write a last lecture: take the advice of the King of Hearts. Begin at the beginning, go on till you come to the end, and then stop,” said Dr. Brian McCuskey as he began the University Honors Program’s 42nd annual Last Lecture this year.

The University Honors Program invites honors students to nominate professors who have mentored them and changed their academic lives in fundamental ways. A committee of students then interviews finalists and selects one outstanding professor to imagine giving the Last Lecture of his or her career — and to share with students, faculty, and the community the ideas that might emerge in that lecture.

On the stage of the Caine Performance Hall, Dr. McCuskey orchestrated a showdown between two beloved characters: Alice (in Wonderland) and Sherlock Holmes.

“Ever since I was a kid, I’ve had Alice and Sherlock stuck in my head. Let me explain today why I think everyone should always keep both of them in mind.” McCuskey continued by quoting Alice’s opening question—“What is the use of a book … without pictures and conversation?”—and then asking, “If literature has a use, what is it?”

Using illustrations of Alice under siege by the Queen of Hearts and her pack of cards, confused by the Cheshire Cat, and befuddled by the Mad Hatter’s tea party, he showed how she represents all of us. “Alice is useful,” he said, “because she helps us to think about the world in her particular way.”

He warned, however, that there are also risks in thinking like Alice. The pure madness of Lewis Carroll’s story and Alice herself “has come to symbolize the dangers of pure subjectivity, the perils of going way, way too far down inside your own head.”

The on-stage screen lit up with thousands of Google results for the terms “through the looking glass” and “rabbit hole”: everyone is eager, it seems, to denounce the subjectivity of other’s ideas, particularly when those ideas are political. McCuskey showed the audience briefly how often Alice is connected to almost every hot issue today. “Politicians and journalists and bloggers and cartoonists and scientists all using Alice to attack one another,” McCuskey argued.

McCuskey then turned his attention to what seems to be the opposite kind of approach: “If you’re Alice, and I’m not, then who am I? It’s obvious, in fact, it’s elementary.” A photo of Benedict Cumberbatch playing Sherlock Holmes filled the screen. “I am the opposite. I am the anti-Alice,” McCuskey said, in the voice of Sherlock.

McCuskey showed how science and pseudoscience has turned to the seeming authority of Sherlock: self-help authors, scientists, and even Albert Einstein himself have all adopted a Sherlockian style of thought to support their views. After several headlines and book titles, McCuskey expressed his reservation: “Even I start to worry when real scientists begin identifying with fictional characters.”

McCuskey then turned to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s writing, showing how Sherlock’s reason and deduction are actually circular and intuitive. Sherlock’s flawed logic always seems flawless, however, because he is a fictional character inhabiting a world created just for him.

“He’s right because his wonderland is everybody else’s reality,” McCuskey explains, adding ironically, “It’s a good thing no one we know is trying to think like Sherlock Holmes in real life.”

Conan Doyle himself was guilty of the same kind of circular logic when he converted to spiritualism later in his life and attributed his experiences to pure objectivity. Today, searching Sherlock Holmes on the internet yields 15 million hits, thousands of which link to conspiracy theories.
theories that claim pure Sherlockian objectivity. McCuskey argued that by following Sherlock in what seems to be the opposite direction, away from nonsense and subjectivity, we still end up through the looking glass.

Who can help us avoid becoming like Sherlock? “I can. I’m the anti-Sherlock,” McCuskey said while showing an image of Alice.

So, who knows best? Admitting that he knew from the start that what he called a smackdown would end in a draw, McCuskey asked, “Why stage a face-off between these two characters if you know in advance it’s going to be a tie?”

The USU Honors Program website flashed on the screen, and McCuskey pointed to the motto: “Dare to Know.” Citing computational social scientists, he described how on the internet, truth is determined by what fits your narrative.

“Literature is useful precisely because it is not informational,” McCuskey added, saying that literature refuses to fit your narrative, even when you try to make it do so. Instead, literature makes readers question their own stories, challenge them, discuss them, and even revise them. Literature pokes holes in your narrative so that you are able to better see those around you.

In the end, McCuskey claimed, “It was never Alice vs. Sherlock. It was always Alice and Sherlock vs. you.” He invited the audience to “aim for objectivity, without fooling yourself. Allow for subjectivity, without losing yourself,” and he finished the lecture by joining Alice and Sherlock, who “double dare us to know” and thus to “keep thinking about how we think.”