Shultz lecture offers compelling life lessons | Stanford Daily


From the 1930s through the 1950s, Stanford Law Professor Harry Rathbun annually delivered his famous “Last Lecture,” which discussed how purpose and values lead to a meaningful life. A $4.5 million gift to Stanford from the Palo Alto Foundation for Global Community continues this tradition, funding activities that encourage discussion about morality, personal values and beliefs. This gift established the Rathbun Visiting Fellow program that supports a series of events held throughout the year, including the “Harry’s Last Lecture” program.

This year, former Secretary of State George P. Shultz served as the 2009 Rathbun Visiting Fellow, following Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, who held the fellowship for 2008. Shultz delivered his own “Harry’s Last Lecture” presentation entitled “The Power of Ought” on May 11 to a large audience in Memorial Church. In the course of his speech, Shultz—a former director of the Office of Management and Budget who has served as United States Secretary of Labor, Secretary of the Treasury and Secretary of State—discussed his experiences in politics and the challenges of balancing family with the duties of public office.

The editorial board expresses its gratitude not only to Shultz, but also to the Palo Alto Foundation for Global Community for making the event series associated with the Rathbun Fellowship possible. “Harry’s Last Lecture” is an important tradition because it provides a forum for students to discuss and reflect upon the meaning rather than the substance of life.

Stanford, of course, prides itself on providing students with “substance” the technical skills that will prepare them to make contributions to society. Indeed, Jane and Leland Stanford outlined the University’s mission in the Founding Grant, dedicating Stanford to preparing students “for personal success and direct usefulness in life” and to promote “the public welfare by exercising an influence on behalf of humanity and civilization.” Technical skills are the meat and potatoes of the research university, but Stanford still has a responsibility to encourage students to pursue careers they find spiritually and intellectually fulfilling as well.

It is easy to get lost in the day-to-day grind of “direct usefulness” and the practical aspects of our academic studies. But the “personal success” that Jane and Leland Stanford directed the University to prepare us for consists of much more than the skills we have as scientists, engineers or historians. Shultz forced students to contemplate the features of personal success by offering deeply personal anecdotes about his family life, close friendships and career in the public eye. His lecture, as well as smaller conversations with students, highlighted the importance of being a well-rounded citizen and of finding meaning in one’s whole life, not just in one’s work.

Stanford has many programs in place to enhance students’ quality of life, but the Rathbun Visiting Fellow program is crucial because it provides a setting for discussion of what quality of life really means. The editorial board does not mean to wax poetical, but a tradition like the “Harry’s Last Lecture” program goes a long way towards broadening students’ perspectives on the greater meanings of life beyond the Stanford gates.