



Bradley professor, a published TED Talk-er

BY ANGELINE SCHMELZER ON OCTOBER 12, 2018



Dean Cantu, professor of teacher education, delivered a TED Talk in March. Photo via Dean Cantu.

Dean Cantu, the department chair and professor of teacher education, gave his TEDx Talk titled “Memento Mori: The Personification of Death” at the University of Tulsa in March.

“For me, it was the perfect topic to research further,” Cantu said. “It’s my love of teaching, so to me, doing a TED Talk is a form of teaching; it combines my love for history ... there’s a historical narrative that runs through my TED Talk, sort of the evolution of our depiction of death.”

He has done presentations on the topic and is now in the process of writing a book.

Cantu's colleagues served as his curators during the creation of his talk. His leadership team was staff members Maureen Kelly, Hari McNally, Twila Lukowiak, Jane Cushing and Colleen Slane. They helped Cantu with grammar and timing aspects of the presentation.

"He was so passionate about it. He did it so gracefully," Kelly said.

"[Death is] one of the few shared experiences that we have as a human race," Cantu added.

Cantu said that this creates an emotional response to death.

Cantu wonders if we try to normalize death to reduce the innate fear of it.

"Why is it that we seem to be compelled with ... we seem to have this desire to try to normalize death," Cantu said.

"Personification of death is pretty much ubiquitous relative to the cultural and social landscape of America, certainly if not, of the world, so it really has become part of our zeitgeist," Cantu said.

According to Cantu, we can see the personification of death everywhere in art and popular culture.

"When it's part of popular culture ... it's almost in a surreptitious manner that we're kind of introducing death and getting you used to it, sort of normalizing the concept of death," Cantu said.

He has spent several years researching the personification and depiction of death. The historical narrative of death, including the black death, attracted Cantu to the topic.

"This is not a look of death from a biomedical perspective," Cantu said. "This is more a look at death from a historical, a sociological perspective."

Cantu said that this topic was a crossroads of different roles he has played in his life.

He was a military intelligence officer, which he loved, but then he realized that teaching was his true calling. Cantu taught social studies at the high school level after he got out of the army. He then continued to teach at the college level after studying for his doctrine.

Cantu received the Charles M. Putnam Award for Excellence in Teaching this past Founder's Day. He said that he was humbled to receive the honor that is part of a Bradley tradition

since 1957.

“He is the most deserving person of that award,” Kelly said. “His students feel the passion.”

Cantu said he is impressed with the students he has taught at Bradley throughout his ten years at the university.

“I feel I am the one who is privileged and blessed to teach something I love,” Cantu said. “I have the tremendous fortune of getting to teach the students here at Bradley.”

During Cantu’s acceptance speech he quoted a poem: “we are the music makers and we are the dreamers of dreams” to demonstrate what teachers do.

“His true love is in that classroom and that’s evident,” Kelly said. “When he comes out of the classroom, he’s beaming.”

“It’s nice to be in a profession where you’re sort of paying it forward and touching future generations through the work you do with those who are going into your profession,” Cantu said.
