In 2009, the faculty communicates through a range of media, but the professor we honor today is a master of face-to-face conversation. Even students sometimes skeptical of lectures describe this professor’s lectures as “mesmerizing.” These students recognize that his extraordinary lectures, delivered as an ordinary part of his workday, are grounded in a profound appreciation for words. As one recent graduate puts it, his precise diction demonstrates the lecturer’s care for “the material, his students, and the act of communicating.”

Writing essays for such an exacting communicator can be daunting. After all, this is a professor who collects papers one class period and returns them the next, with even the typographical errors in footnotes marked. Consequently, one former student confides that she was virtually paralyzed as she sat down to write her first essay for this superb stylist. The student persevered, however, and now, like many others, she credits him with helping her to develop her voice as both a scholar and a citizen.
The discussions that our recipient leads are as transformative as the lectures. He emphasizes both the minute details of a text and its links to many other texts—not only written words, but also music, film, visual art, and more—all in the quest “to read a good passage well.” After graduating, students find the analytical skills from these discussions essential to their daily lives. As one graduate writes, “I cannot overestimate the role that he played in nurturing my ability, desire, and courage to think critically about the sources of information around me—newspaper articles, political speeches, films, and so on—and the ways I respond to them.”

Even more remarkably, this professor manages to guide students from an assigned reading, to a variety of texts than can inform understanding of that assigned reading, to what one student calls “issues of identity.” He never forgets that the people reading, talking, and writing in his classes are individuals, with distinctive
backgrounds and perspectives, and he encourages them to analyze not only texts, but also themselves. A former student tells the story of getting involved in “a heated discussion” with a classmate during a seminar, when today’s recipient intervened to ask, “What do you personally have at stake in your reading of the text?” This alumna reports that she recalls that question often: “Even today, as I find myself in heated discussions at work, in my community, or at home, I can hear his question echoing in my head, reminding me to pair self-reflection with confidence as necessary ingredients of critical thinking.”

Yet in our recipient’s classes, these powerful “issues of identity” do not lead only to introspection; they also lead to a fuller consideration of others. To quote another of his students, “I learned far more than academic content in his courses; I learned how to interact with those who are different, marginalized, and oppressed.”
His former students describe his courses as providing “new eyes”—a surprising gift when we consider that he often teaches stories that many students know, or think that they know: a story about a man, a woman, a serpent, and a piece of fruit, for example; or a story about a son who wastes all his money and is nevertheless welcomed home. In his courses, such stories do not yield tidy moral lessons. Instead, these stories provide occasions for exploring the urgent tensions between past and present, self and other, head and heart.

Today, in words less polished than his, we express our admiration for a professor whose lessons and care for his students last long after Commencement ceremonies have ended, and we recognize you, Dr. Karl Plank, with the 2009 Hunter Hamilton Love of Teaching Award.