



THE IDEA OF A LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION

by President Thomas E. Cronin

As president of a liberal arts college, I am often asked about the idea and value of a liberal arts education.

I am a champion of liberal arts learning and liberal arts colleges. Liberal arts colleges, at their best, create an ideal environment for learning, for asking critical and fundamental questions, for fostering the freedom to grow and excel and, perhaps most important, for cultivating the courage to imagine.

This tradition is rooted in the ancient Greek and Roman curriculum, a course of studies designed to develop powers of intelligence, observation, reasoning and imagination.

This tradition first focused on the arts of reading, listening, writing, thinking logically, and speaking persuasively. The mathematical arts of arithmetic, geometry, harmonics, and astronomy further prepared the student for physics, metaphysics and ethics.

The liberal arts tradition is an educational philosophy more than a body of knowledge and is just as much concerned with the process of learning as it is with content. Thus this approach views learning as a verb more than as a noun, as an ongoing process of questioning, searching, probing, exploring. Since they are arts, the liberal arts aim at active engagement rather than passive reception, at understanding rather than the memorizing of neatly packaged facts, figures and equations.

This kind of education is not necessarily liberal in a political or partisan sense. It is intentionally a liberating of the mind from ignorance. The mission is to unlock the imagination and curiosity in every student. The liberal arts are fundamentally liberating and freeing arts. "It is about freeing oneself from one's prejudices, one's assumptions, to look again, to remain curious," notes Tom Gerety. It is about freeing students from sloppy thinking, unexamined conventional wisdom, complacency and ethnocentrism. It encourages criticism as well as skepticism.

Great liberal arts teachers, like the great books in all cultures, raise questions and ask what is worth knowing, what is worth affirming, what is justice, what is beauty, what is courage, what does it mean to be a citizen, a human being, and what are our obligations to others, to the environment.

Addressing these questions and shaping one's character through an examination of these questions is necessarily a daunting or even disturbing experience. There is no easy comfortable road to learning. A liberal arts education asks that we submit our beliefs and values to rigorous scrutiny, that we ask a lot of "what if" or counterfactual questions, that we question our intuitions, that we confront our unexamined world views with historical understanding, new theories, and intercultural perspectives.

A liberal arts education is, as well, an ideal place to explore what it means to discover one's self and one's obligations to others. The message is the same one Pericles encouraged in Athens — that a community's flourishing is everyone's business, and that an ethic of collaboration and empathy for others is critical to the resolution of societal

problems. Liberty and duty go together; a liberally educated person grasps the importance of personal as well as civic responsibility, of civility, inclusiveness and the need to give back to one's community.

Constitutional democracy, social justice, a sustainable environment, freedom, and healthy communities don't just happen. They require countless acts of imagination, courage and leadership. And so it is that the contemporary liberal arts academy encourages every student to imagine a better world, better businesses, better science and medicine, better government, better international organizations, better understanding of human nature and the possibilities for progress. Students are encouraged to imagine a world without poverty, disease, homelessness, injustice, racism, terrorism and war, for imagination has to precede actualization, and we pay a high price for the failure to do so.

If it is true that talent is a muscle that needs constant exercise, then the aim of liberal arts learning is to exercise and refine the intellectual talents of students and faculty, to expand on our capacity for under-

standing truth, justice, liberty, community, efficiency, and rights. It is with this understanding and breadth that young scientists, teachers, attorneys, artists, or business professionals will find their way when faced with practical dilemmas in their chosen fields.

A liberating learning experience emphasizes the role courage plays in most important breakthroughs. Inventions and great art, for example, are not accomplished by cowards or wallflowers. And though we cannot inject courage into college students as a physician injects a vaccine in a patient, "we can talk about the role that courage plays in every aspect of life," writes historian Page Smith. "We can make clear that the most important discoveries in science, the most important revelations in the arts, in virtually every field of human endeavor, have had a major component of courage."

with its respect for skepticism, speculation, exploration, verification by repeated experiments, and modification of theory to fit new data, offers essential practice in analytical thinking. Through their exposure to rigorous methodologies in all the disciplines, students learn to pose central questions, to search for tentative answers and try to discover which hypotheses yield the most compelling solutions.

Liberal arts colleges emphasize breadth rather than specialization, for a primary goal of the liberal arts college is to educate rather than train. Consistent with this aim, the student is encouraged to take courses across the curriculum in order to appreciate the interconnections among a wide array of disciplines. Training for the professions of law, medicine, engineering, finance, journalism, or similar fields can

recognizes that a lot of learning and personal growth takes place beyond the classroom and lab. Thus students are encouraged to form study groups, collaborate and to do research with professors and fellow students.

The good college also promotes a variety of fitness and wellness opportunities and recognizes the important interplay between mind and body. Former Yale University President Bart Giamatti was right to remind us that "Athletics" — and I would add fitness programs — "teach lessons valuable to the individual by stretching the human spirit in ways that nothing else can."

The teaching strategies of a liberal arts college emphasize extensive discussion, writing, debate, hands-on research and scholarship, field trips, internships, and study abroad opportunities. All of these and community

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THE IDEA OF A Liberal Arts Education

Unlocking the imagination and nurturing the soul are also essential. It is only with the heart that some things can be seen. The arts put us in touch with the incredible richness of the human imagination and help us to see and imagine things we have never seen before. The artist, poet and composer are often more able than the rest of us to capture the paradoxes of the human condition.

The liberal education provides for the study of poetry, ceramics, music, dance, painting, theatre, film, photography and digital art technologies.

A liberal arts education involves a critical reading and rereading of the notable texts of both western and non-western traditions. In reading and reflecting on great writing and great art we test out our own ideas and clarify and strengthen our personal values.

Liberal arts includes a whole variety of science disciplines as well as arts, humanities and social sciences. It did for the ancient Mediterranean cultures, and it does today. The scientific method

come later. Indeed, most liberal arts college graduates go on to professional or graduate studies after their undergraduate education.

American culture tends to encourage one to specialize as part of the process of becoming an expert and a "success." Yet leaders in our society are usually those who have explored a variety of intellectual disciplines, learned to understand foreign languages, diverse cultures, the scientific method, poetry, music, economics and history.

Liberal arts colleges are about as safe a place as one can find for making mistakes and finding help to pick oneself up and learn from mistakes. Students come to understand that the greatest mistake one can make is to be afraid of making mistakes — and thus new challenges, boldness, and risk-taking have a genius, power, and magic in them for those who are unafraid of a life of continuous learning.

The good college nowadays

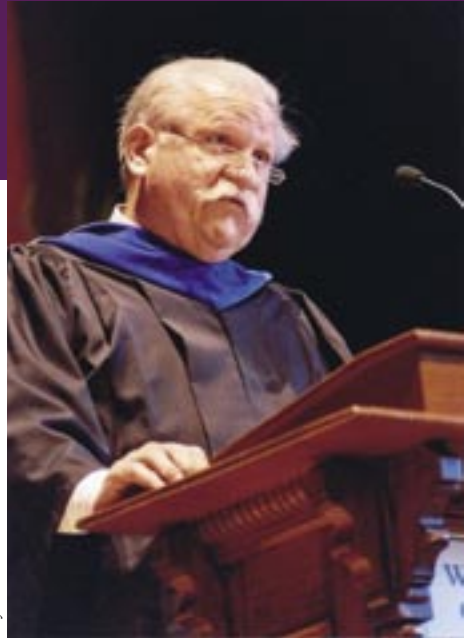
service and leadership development opportunities properly integrated with liberal learning provide an ideal recipe for lifelong learning.

The liberally educated individual is, I believe, better able to help us create options and opportunities, clarify problems and choices, build morale and community and provide a vision of the possibilities for better organizations and a better world. Leaders with breadth and communicating abilities can have those indispensable qualities of self-confidence, optimism and idealism that enable them to mobilize others to undertake challenges they never dreamed they could undertake.

President Tom Cronin is a political scientist whose latest book is the second edition of The Paradoxes of the American Presidency (Oxford University Press, 2004).



Pursuing the WISDOM TRACK



Kay Marrero

THE 2003 CONVOCAATION ADDRESS

By Craig Gunsul,
Professor of Physics

Retired Whitman College history professor Tom Edwards once related that the first community institutions that new settlers created were churches and schools. And somewhere I read that the intended purpose of Harvard, the first college established in the United States (1636), was to educate and supply Protestant ministers to new settlements. Harvard's motto is *Veritas* (Truth). School mottoes supply interesting insights into the mindset of school founders. Harvard's motto was adopted seven years after its founding. Two additional mottoes were adopted in later years. *In Christi Gloriam* (To the Glory of Christ) in 1650 and *Christo et Ecclesiae* (For Christ and Church) in 1692. The early Christian intent is seen in other institutions as well;

Columbia University's *In Lumine Tuo Videbimus Lumen* (In Thy Light We Shall See Light); Brown University's *In Deo Speramus* (In God We Trust).

How about Whitman? On our original school seal is the inscription: *Christo et Patriae* (Christ and Country). Furthermore, Whitman's founding documents indicated that its president was to be a "Christian Gentleman," which, if you think about it, eliminates a good many contenders. . . . While this college was established to honor the memory of Marcus Whitman, a missionary to this area, clearly we are no longer in the business of educating Protestant clergymen.

Given that times change, what is college supposed to be about? The college mission statement asserts that Whitman College "offers rigorous learning and scholarship and encourages creativity, character, and responsibility . . . foster (ing) intellectual vitality, confidence, leadership, and the flexibility to succeed in a changing technological world." No reference to religion here.

But secular ideas also have a long American tradition. In 1845, Ralph Waldo Emerson, in an essay titled "The American Scholar," proposed a replacement for the traditional ministerial vocation. He did not reference the historical tradition, but cited Talleyrand, the opportunistic and successful survivor of the French Revolution and its chaotic aftermath. Emerson invoked a very worldly context when he recalled the question that Talleyrand said should be put to politicians. Not "is the person rich, or committed, or even well-meaning," let alone "is the person partisan, radical, or conservative," but "does

he stand for something?" What does Whitman stand for? How does it fit into the contemporary world?



In a sense, one cannot be faulted for seeing in the collapse of the Twin Towers, in the demise of large corporations such as Enron and Worldcom, or in bloody conflicts — Liberia, Rwanda, Iraq, Afghanistan — signs that things are falling apart, that, as William Butler Yeats wrote in "The Second Coming":

Things fall apart; the centre
cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the
world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed,
and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is
drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while
the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

We cannot deny all that is wrong with the world. But neither can we conclude that all is rotten. Every day we see role models of excellence, goodness, and courage who bring joy, beauty, justice, and comfort to their fellow human beings.

I find that students often do not have an answer when I respond to their passionate, cynical, and lengthy criticisms about the corrupt and disintegrating world with, "So, what are you in favor of? What do you affirm?" That's a tough question because it gets at values. Criticism is easy; affirmation is harder. Should a higher education supply values or provide the tools for the determination of values? My answer is yes.

I recently encountered a new

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biography of Benjamin Franklin. In 1749 he presented a template in a pamphlet titled *Proposals for the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania*. Unlike other American Colonial colleges, the new school would not focus on education for the clergy. Instead, it would prepare students for lives of business and public service. His educational prescription was to focus on theory and practice, to gain knowledge for its own sake, and to use knowledge to thrive professionally while serving humanity. Franklin understood that a specialized education sealed off from arts and sciences would weaken the ability of graduates to lead a good life that benefits others.

We can describe Franklin's visionary integration of theory and practice as a wisdom track. In a world awash in information yet parched for wisdom, Whitman is the kind of place to pursue Franklin's posited "wisdom track." Of all the trips you take, none is longer, stranger, or more rewarding than your steep, upward journey toward wisdom.

But what is wisdom? Brilliant thinkers, artists, and theologians have wrestled with this question for thousands of years. T. S. Eliot once said, "Someone told me that ancient writers are so remote from us because we know so much more than they did. Precisely, and they are that which we know."



In Core we examine these "ancient writers" and immediately encounter the notion of heroism. It's unavoidable. Hero — not a word one hears much these days. I've even read that we live in an age without heroes.

You must have seen this too. But is it true? And if true, does it matter? And if it is not true, why do so many seem to believe it? What is a hero?

"Heroes are models for ideals," a first-year student wrote some years ago in my Core class. We can easily name heroes of the American past — George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln. . . . and, within my lifetime, Eleanor Roosevelt, Martin Luther King, Jr. As a professor of physics I elect Albert Einstein, Marie Curie, and John Bardeen. Marie Curie won two Nobel Prizes, one in physics and one in chemistry; and how many of you have ever even heard of John Bardeen? He won two Nobel Prizes in physics. In any case, we all get to insert our own choices on the hero list.

Let me interject some more recent history here. In January 1982 an airplane taking off from National Airport in Washington, D.C., crashed into the ice-filled Potomac River. Six people managed to survive the crash and were clinging to the tail section. It was bitterly cold, and the people were freezing to death. A helicopter was dispatched to the scene. It descended perilously close to the icy water and lowered a lifesaving ring. One of the survivors on that tail (described as having an "extravagant" mustache) grabbed the ring and stuffed another person into it. The helicopter carefully ferried the survivor to the shore and returned to the tail. The extravagantly mustached man, though weakening, repeated his deed, and another was ferried to safety. This happened five times. When the helicopter returned for the man, he had succumbed, slipped into

the water, and disappeared. Roger Rosenblatt wrote an essay in *Time* magazine titled, "The Man in the Water."

He was there, in the classical circumstance. Man in Nature. The man in the water. For its part nature cared nothing about the five passengers. Our man, on the other hand, cared totally. Rosenblatt concluded, "He was the best we can do." My recollection was that we didn't even know his name. Researching for this address, I discovered that he was identified and was a rather ordinary fellow. That man was a hero.

To claim that our age has no heroes is to ignore the man in the water. To make this claim is to assert that we have no contemporary examples equal to the historical figures I have named or any which you might choose. But before we declare heroes historical artifacts, should we not ask whether ours is an age capable of comprehending heroism? It may be that it is not heroes we lack but the critical values necessary to recognize and to affirm the virtues of heroism. The heroism of the man in the water smacks us right in the face. Was he an aberration?

I don't think so. We do face several identifiable problems, however. The cult of celebrity has corrupted the distinction between self-indulgence and self-denial and has devalued the idea of honor and debased the notion of selflessness. The public voracity for celebrity is ugly, ignorant, and dangerous. Ugly because so often those celebrated are crude and rude (some musicians or athletes come to mind here), ignorant because the worship of fame for its own sake



Convocation 2003, Cordiner Hall

they are subject to a relentless media pursuit of even the most trivial details of their private lives. Indeed, for a potential public hero there is no place to hide. And if, almost inevitably, small sins are discovered, they will be transmuted into monstrous moral derelictions. In such a world, a world without context or proportion, heroes cannot live.

Take an historic example, and imagine that example moved forward to our time. By today's standards, Abraham Lincoln would be considered a racist. There is no doubt of it. He believed blacks to be inherently inferior to whites, a view repulsive to us. But do those views, however much we may think them profoundly wrong, mean that Lincoln cannot be a hero? Does that moral failure wash out the greatness of a courageous leader whose armies destroyed slavery and whose steady vision saved our nation? I don't think so, but I doubt that Lincoln's moral derelictions would survive a modern media onslaught, the certain impact of which would be to blot out the possibility of a mature and rounded understanding of a complicated but undeniably great man.

Consider then the media feeding frenzy and the coverage of presidential campaigns: Walter Mondale shedding tears, Geraldine Ferraro's husband's alleged connection to the mob, Gary Hart with a babe on his lap, Hillary's refusal to bake cookies, did George W. Bush smoke dope in college, etc. Who cares?

I recount these examples, none of them particularly uplifting, because I believe in heroes, and I hope that in this place, we can nurture heroes who can inspire and enrich. I speak with some confidence because in my 34 years here I have observed and know how deeply ingrained is the standard of excellence. To put not too fine a point upon it, Whitman is a community capable both of producing heroes and of comprehending heroism. Heroes come in many forms and in all fields of human endeavor. They are just as likely to live anonymously as to light up the wider world. An excellent grade

school teacher may well be a greater hero than a Nobel Prize winner; a successful single parent may be more authentically a hero than the world's most brilliant inventor. Who are your heroes? Think about it, and I hope you will see my point.

There are many kinds of heroes, yes, but the critical ingredients of heroic lives are few, persistent, and consistent. The first and indispensable is a passion for life. Second is a restless, indeed relentless, energy which reflects a questing intelligence and a thirsty spirit. Emerson said it well: God offers to every mind its choice between truth and repose. Take which you please. You can never have both. The hero never elects repose. The third is courage, courage of many kinds: moral, intellectual, spiritual, physical, but always courage. Finally, heroism rises from a conviction deeply felt that one life, if rightly lived, must be about more than one life and must touch more than one life. That one life, if lived profoundly, can change the world.

The sad truth is that not all of us have it in us to be heroes. I know that and so do you. But equally true and perhaps more important is that every one of us is capable of acts of heroism that partake of those heroic qualities I have just described. And it is the example of the hero, the true hero, that makes it possible for the rest of us, sometimes to our great surprise, to do heroic things.

You students are young. None of your best dreams can yet be old. Live so that when you are old, your best dreams will have defined a life of high and shining achievement, not an old age of bitter and impotent regret. To live that life, you must believe in heroes and see in yourselves the possibility of some eternal things that might, just might, make you a hero, too.

While Whitman College specifically and higher education in general may no longer be educating Protestant clergy, we are undertaking a most serious enterprise.

The Bottom Line: WHY I TEACH

BY RUTH RUSSO

*Associate Professor of
Chemistry and General
Studies*

It was Homecoming weekend — a warm, blue October Saturday, when the last thing I wanted to do was to chit-chat with alumni at a paper-cup reception. But then I fell into a fascinating conversation with Glenn, the husband of a former student. It was one of those discussions a friend of mine calls “perspective talks,” chance encounters that throw a new light on why we do what we do.

I liked Glenn immediately: strong handshake, quizzical smile, intense eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses. In his early 30s, Glenn met his wife while learning to ballroom dance. Currently, he works for a regional accounting firm, running computer systems — a job that seems very far removed from my job of teaching in a small liberal arts college. He was describing to me how, during last year's economic slump, he had moved halfway across the country, only to have his new company fold months later. “I've learned a lot,” he grinned, “about how to ask smart questions during the job interview, the ‘stealth’ questions that enable me to gauge whether ‘the bottom line’ is in the red or the black.”

“That's the difference between academia and business,” I replied with a laugh. “I wouldn't know a bottom line if I tripped over it!” I told Glenn about one of my colleagues, a new faculty member recently hired from a chemical firm. In a contentious department meeting, she bemoaned the fact that making deci-

sions in academic life is harder than in industry. “All decisions in industry ultimately lead to the bottom line, the absolute requirement to make a profit while trying to maximize other goods. But in academics, there is no profit. So how do we make decisions?”

“But you obviously do make choices,” Glenn countered. “There must be some bottom line, some standard or goal that you are trying to reach.” He paused. “So why do you teach at all?” The question floored me, and for a moment, I had nothing to say, so wide was the divide between the polite small talk I had been prepared for and this inquiry which cut to the heart of my vocation.

I thought for a moment. “It's like putting on a banquet,” I said slowly. “I set out different dishes: this book here, this problem there, a drink of this thinker or work of art or algorithm. I have a pretty good idea what I need to feed my students now, at age 19 or 22, but I'd also like to feed the people my students will become at age 30 or 50 or 70.”

“It's like planting a garden!” Glenn burst out. “Our new house — the soil isn't so good. We're putting in some new trees. If the soil is acidic, I add lime. If it has too much clay, I add sand. But I know I don't cause the trees to grow, I just set the right conditions and let the trees do their thing!” In a flash, I remembered the knee-high Douglas firs I planted with my grandfather on a blackberry-brambly hillside in the heat of August 1970. Respectably tall now that my children are old enough to play among them, the trees have done their thing.

“Then the bottom line of teaching,” I said, blinking, “is the setting of conditions for future



Ruth Russo, associate professor of chemistry and general studies, has taught at Whitman since 1990.

growth. That's how we make decisions, by asking what will promote the most fertile growth.” Glenn smiled and shook my hand, and put his arm around his wife. The pair wandered off, as I stood, grateful and humbled.

My quiet, gentle grandfather plants feathery-green seedlings that he would not see grown to maturity in order that his grandchildren's children would profit by them somehow. And this intelligent, earnest businessman shares his life with a lovely, kind woman in whose accomplishments I have played a tiny role. He works at a hard job, and plants a suburban Eden in the hopes of soon having babies to play underneath the leaves and flowers. I will likely never meet these children, and yet their lives will contain a bit of my life, just as the Douglas firs growing above Bear Creek have some of the sweat and salt of my grandfather in their needles. It's a good reason to teach.

INFLUENTIAL

Faculty members write about books which have been of consequence in their academic and/or personal lives.

Books



Reflections on Wisdom

**Professor Clark Colahan,
Spanish**

As a Spanish rabbi living in the late Middle Ages, Shem Tov Arduziel shared with other Jewish intellectuals of his time and place an empirical, thoroughly modern worldview that during 30 years has continued to amaze me. His *Reflections on Wisdom*, sometimes referred to by critics as his *Moral Proverbs*, has been compared to literary writings by 20th-century existentialists.

Though that is probably something of a stretch, its proto-scientific, skeptical, and avowedly relativistic perspective did not impede its popularity among Renaissance Spanish Jews. Readers have wondered if this reception can be explained by exposure for generations to the tri-cultural and tri-religious milieu of medieval Spain, perhaps legitimized for Jewish scholars by reading ancient Greek philosophy as preserved in Arabic texts. Whatever the reason for the book's popularity, the Inquisition documented that one prisoner was able to recite all of its 3,000 lines by memory.

The inspiration that this text has provided for me is grounded in my childhood as the son of a skeptical Irish-American engineer and an English teacher deeply rooted in the traditional beliefs of the Anglican church. How to resolve the tension between individualistic pragmatism and the preservation of the wisdom passed down by tradition was the project — intellectual and emotional — that drove my youth down some unexpected paths. One was a period of fascination with Judaism — for its blending of respect for the past with

a virtual disregard of dogma in favor of the practical concerns of morality.

Shem Tov, who professed an underlying skepticism while remaining a respected spiritual leader, radiated this combination of call-them-as-you-see-them courage tempered by reflection and humility. As both a scholar and a teacher, in the wake of his book — about which I wrote my dissertation — I have been better able to listen to others' opinions, perceive their individual perspectives, and still feel a commitment to forging whatever measure of truth may be our lot in this life.

Wages of Whiteness

**Professor Nina Lerman,
History**

I grew up in a progressive town with newly integrated schools — meaning that some kids walked to a school near home, and other kids rode buses across town. Bus Children ate lunch in school; most kids who walked to school, as I did, went home for lunch. My second grade teacher, an older woman with a distinct southern accent, always had Bus Children line up in a separate line from the rest of us. Child of parents committed to racial justice, I knew but could not name my discomfort. David Roediger's book *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* is provocative and parts of it controversial among historians, but it enabled me to turn my residual adult discomfort with my own skin into a constructive intellectual analysis.

Roediger explores the ways that working men resisting the changes of industrialization drew on whiteness as a badge of pride, the key to distinguishing the increasingly controlled workingman from the obviously controlled and obviously un-white slave. Along the way Roediger examines the changing meanings of words like "artisan" and "mechanic" and offers psychological explanations for why white men loved to watch blackface minstrels. He argues that the whiteness of the emerging person called "workingman" became so inherent in the construction of the new category "free labor" — clearly distinct from "slave labor" — that it no longer needed to be articulated: workingmen became by definition white. The word white no longer needed to be spoken; it superseded national and sometimes class background, and it became so obvious nobody had to stop to notice who was being excluded.

This idea that whiteness might become invisible to the very people who benefit from its privilege has influenced my teaching as well as my research. When I first read the book, it helped me understand the apparent sympathy of wealthy white philanthropists for the poor white boys they tried to reform or educate, amidst a general disdain of the poor and dependent. In teaching, it helped me realize and explain the degree to which most white Americans do not think of themselves as having a race, so silently have they been taught their own identity. Roediger's book helped me name and describe the silence, to unpack the lessons of being in the group not called Bus Children, and to teach whiteness as a historical category — which is to say that its meaning in the past need not be its meaning for the present and the future, if we choose to work at changing it.

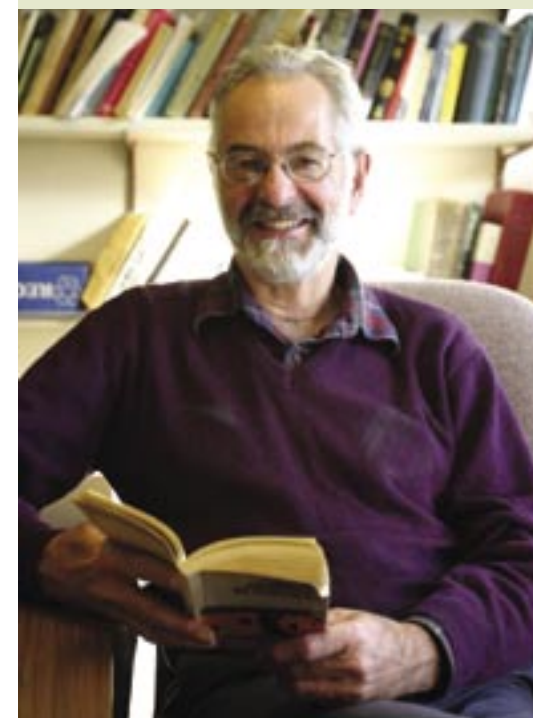
Experimental Medicine, 1865

**Professor Ginger Withers,
Biology**

One of my favorite books in science is *The Double Helix*, by James Watson, because it captures the exciting inside story of modern scientific discovery. But even before the discovery of DNA came a book that has been instrumental in shaping my scholarship and teaching, Claude Bernard's *An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine* (1865). It is a beautiful and sometimes poetic discussion of how to conduct experiments with living cells. I found it inspiring because it taught me how to structure my curiosity.

Bernard was visionary in introducing and defining a new field in experimental biology. In this book, he gives a personal account of his investigations into the workings of the human body, but combines this account with practical advice on how an intuition can be developed to yield an interpretable experimental result using hypothesis testing.

He illustrates that often in science initial discoveries can be made by chance, but full appreciation of those discoveries requires a disciplined and systematic analysis. Bernard said "chance favors the prepared mind." It is this quote, combined with his lessons on the art of experimentation, that I refer to time and time again as I plan my own experiments, and as I consider how best to prepare my students for a new age of discovery in the life sciences.



Clark Colahan, professor of foreign languages and literatures, left, Nina Lerman, associate professor of history, and Ginger Withers, assistant professor of biology.

Personae

Professor Dana Burgess, Classics

The book which has been most influential in my life is surely Ezra Pound's collection *Personae*, read when I was a first-year college student. Pound's poetry is consistently challenging. At first, I hated his arrogance, but the poems kept needling me to penetrate their obscurity. My prior encounters with poetry had not prepared me for Pound's diversity of voice. One poem may be spoken by a Troubadour Poet, another by a Bank Clerk; Pound's authorial voice is especially hard to pin down. Even within a single poem different poetic registers and systems of imagery define regions of expression which may be in tension with one another.

The poem cycle from *Personae* which had the greatest influence upon me was "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley." In important ways these poems set me on the career path I still follow, for Pound presents the aesthetic problems of his immediate time and place, London just before the Great War, as reflective of aesthetic values and conflicts stretching back seamlessly into antiquity,

The age demanded an image
Of its accelerated grimace,
Something for the modern stage,
Not, at any rate, an Attic grace.

Not, not certainly, the obscure reveries
Of the inward gaze;
Better mendacities
Than the classics in paraphrase!

Dana Burgess, associate professor of classics.



The word "Attic" refers to the region of Athens. For Pound the art of his own time was missing out on aesthetic values from the Athenian drama, values which may recommend "the obscure reveries of the inward gaze." Ancient literature was immediately present for Pound, haunting his understanding of his modern world.

This is why I am a Classicist. My dirty secret is that I don't really care about the ancient world itself. But I do care very deeply about what we inherit from that world. Like Pound, I believe that this inheritance remains active in our lives and that we ignore it at our peril.

Flannery O'Connor

Professor Marie Clifford, Art History

Stories set in the pre-Civil Rights Deep South, populated with an array of ill, disfigured characters, and miscreants encompassing the whole range of pathological states, do not seem likely sources of thoughtful meditations on moral philosophy and theological quandaries. Yet Flannery O'Connor's work consistently uses rural folk and their codes of moral conduct as a backdrop for larger, truth-seeking, dramas. Her characters face familiar questions, attempting to come to terms with the consequences of daily moral decisions, the meaning of human suffering, and the paradox of imperfect beings striving to understand the Divine.

When I first pulled this collection off my parents' bookshelf as a teenager, certain images burned themselves on my imagination, and I have yet to exorcise them. In "Good Country People" a traveling Bible salesman steals the wooden leg from a young female Ph.D. to add to his other trophies, including a glass eye. "Parker's Back" recounts the tale of a man who tattoos the visage of Christ on his back, which bruises and bleeds when his wife beats him for his idolatry. An unpleasant old woman's heart swells with love for a psychopathic killer in the instant before he shoots her in "A Good Man is Hard to Find."

I vividly recall how I tried to disentangle meaning from these evocative allegories. Forced to abandon literal meaning, I had discovered the thrill of critical reading and the rewards of interpretative labor. I realized that symbols, metaphors, and provocative images were the fuel that energized all kinds of books and

artwork. To the surprise (and distress) of my high school teachers, I developed the self-confidence to think independently.

Over the years, during my college and graduate career, and in my professional life, I have returned to O'Connor's stories. Most recently, I recalled O'Connor's work when I taught the first-year Core. Her tales provided a repertoire of images that helped animate, for example, Job's bitter trials or Saint Augustine's battle to grasp the nature of salvation and redemption. The lasting power of O'Connor's writing is evidenced by the fact that, as a young female Ph.D., I remain on guard for travelling Bible salesmen — until I remember that I don't have a wooden leg.

A Thousand Plateaus

Professor Bill Bogard, Sociology

I know of no other book like this one (*A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari). A mixture of philosophy, art, politics, science and history, Deleuze and Guattari's work is absolutely unique in the history of ideas and aims at nothing less than the demolition of the entire Western metaphysical tradition, to substitute a "philosophy of difference" for the "philosophy of identity" that has dominated Western thinking for 2,500 years. It is required reading for anyone who wants to experience firsthand the phenomenon known as post-structuralism.

A seismic event of the first order when published in France more than 20 years ago, it continues to produce tremors in the humanities and social sciences today, and is distinguished by its novel appropriation of new modes of thinking in the physical sciences and mathematics, from chaos theory to fractal geometry.

Both Deleuze and Guattari were key intellectual figures in the May '68 events in France that nearly brought down the government of Charles de Gaulle. The book moves from reflections on the history of morality, to theories of language, to the analysis of "war machines" and musical systems, and in Deleuze's words, aims at "the critique of negativity, the cultivation of joy, the exteriority of forces and relations, and the denunciation of power."

Any reader who has the sheer stamina to work through this rich and complex text will never be able to think the same way about philosophy again.



Marie Clifford, assistant professor of art history, and Bill Bogard, professor of sociology.

Mimesis

Professor Mary Anne O'Neil, French

I received the request to name a seminal book just after a class discussion of Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir* (*The Red and the Black*). During class, I had mentioned that Stendhal's novel was incomprehensible without an understanding of the political and social history of France in the post-Napoleonic years — an idea I had taken from Eric Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* of 1946.

The German-born Auerbach was a Romance philologist who considered literature the highest expression of language. He knew all of the Romance languages and literatures, as well as those of Classical Greece, Rome, England, and Germany. His literary criticism was inspired by his belief in the fundamental unity of European culture, whose masterpieces provided views of reality unique to the ages in which they were written.

Through detailed explications of his favorite pages, beginning with Homer's *Odyssey* and ending with Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Auerbach sets individual words and images, as well as characters and elements of plots, within their historical contexts. His book is all the more impressive given that he wrote it in Istanbul after his expulsion from Nazi Germany without the benefit of a library equipped for European studies. My dissertation director, who was Auerbach's last dissertation student at Yale, once offered a more impressive version of *Mimesis's* genesis: Auerbach

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INFLUENTIAL BOOKS

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knew the texts he explained so thoroughly that he could quote them from memory.

I have learned from Auerbach's *Mimesis* the necessity of paying close attention to the text. He has convinced me that great writers of fiction are invariably astute critics of their societies and that the study of history is indispensable to the study of literature.

And That Has Made All the Difference

Professor Edward Foster, English

One book can change your mind, but a passel of books can change your life. At least that's been my experience. I'd like to be able to say that reading some profound book, say *War and Peace* or *Crime and Punishment* or *The Canterbury Tales*, at age four hooked me on literature. Or that some noble author, Shakespeare or Milton or Joyce, made my little soul burn with a hard, gemlike flame. The truth is altogether more pedestrian. It was rather the multitude of books that I read because they're there that made me what I am today. I hope they're satisfied.

It started like this. When I was in the sixth grade, as soon as school was out for the summer, I went to the local library in West New York, New Jersey, and took out a couple of books. I don't remember what they were or why I did it in the first place. But I read those books and went back for more — and more, and more, and more until September brought back the odious distractions of school. What happened to me that summer I find hard to explain. I liked the smell of the library, the feel of the books as I carried them home, the tension as I wondered whether I was going to understand the next one. More than anything else though, devouring those books generated a visceral joy, a mind and body joy, that has never gone away.

In fact, it only got worse. Each spring thereafter I would wait impatiently for my school life to suspend and my library life to resume. I was not selective or discriminating about what I read. Maybe I was lucky that I came from an uneducated but generous family that gave me no prescriptions and no restrictions. I had no plan; I read whatever came to hand, sometimes whatever was next on the shelf: history, biography, novels, plays; classics, potboilers, rubbish. If there was any guiding compulsion it was that once I read a book I'd try to read everything by that author I could get. One summer I read all of Hemingway, Mary Roberts Rinehart, and the



Mary Anne O'Neil, professor of foreign languages and literatures.



Edward Foster, professor of English.

plays of Lord Acton. Another summer I read all of G. B. Shaw (including the prefaces), Scott Fitzgerald, and most of Agatha Christie, leavened with biographies of Lincoln and Teddy Roosevelt. I didn't always understand what I read; the Dostoevsky summer was especially hard, but I didn't care; I had to go on.

The libraries changed and my schools changed, but my summer compulsion has never stopped, though it has become a bit more orderly. Somewhere along the way I developed some taste (not to excess, of course), became more selective (probably not enough). Always it has been the sheer joy of entering the world of the book that has kept me at it. How could I have become anything but an English teacher? How else could I get paid for indulging myself, and talking to smart people about those tempting, quirky books? Walking into a library is still the happiest moment I can imagine.