Welcome to the 67th annual University Seminars Dinner meeting. I’m Bob Pollack, Seminars Director since January. In the 67 years of the Seminars there have been four previous directors: Frank Tannenbaum, James Gutmann, Aaron Warner and Bob Belknap. We’re spending this evening honoring them all in one or more ways, and I am delighted to be host for the event.

Some of you are Chairs of Seminars, and most of you have at least been to a Seminar or two. If so, you know that the secret of our success has always been our good fortune in finding colleagues to run the Seminars office with grace and effectiveness. First things first then: let’s all give a hand to Alice Newton, Gese Alvarez, Pamela Guardia, Jonathan Boudett, and Summer Hart.

Here are some dates in March worth noting.

In his foreword to the 1974 book “Frank Tannenbaum, a biographical Essay,” James Gutman writes that the University Seminars were begun on March 8, 1944. Frank Tannenbaum, then a fifty-year old professor of Latin American history and politics, had proposed a series of seminars to the University administration in a note that defined the novelty of the enterprise this way:

[They would each be] “devoted to the continuous study of one of the basic human institutions … these seminars [are] conceived as being, in effect, permanent independent organisms [!] within the Faculty cutting across all departments and calling for cooperative participation from scholars in various fields.”

Three 1945 seminars still meet today: “The Problem of Peace,” Studies in Religion,” and “The Renaissance.” Tannenbaum was right: a conversation about a basic human institutions – conflict, faith or art – will yield continuous fruit, even after 67 years.

Frank Tannenbaum was born in 1893 in Brod, then part of Austrian Galicia, now Poland. In 1904, when he was 11, his family emigrated to the United States and settled on a small farm in Massachusetts. He left the farm at 13, and came to New York, where he worked at whatever jobs a boy without any schooling or training could find.

To leave behind not only the traditions of his family but also whatever he might have learned as a farmhand, and to begin his chosen life of engagement with ideas and the facts of injustice, he enrolled in the Anarchist Ferrer School on 107th street off Columbus avenue, and joined the IWW, the “wobblies,” a socialist-anarchist movement ancestral to the modern labor union. His teachers included Emma Goldman and Lincoln Steffens.

A few dates in another March:
On March 1, 1914, when he was 21, Tannenbaum led a group of 300 jobless men into the first Presbyterian Church and demanded that they be fed and given jobs that paid a minimum of $3/day. He was arrested and sent to Blackwell’s Island prison. On March 5, 1914 the New York Times headline was “IWW Invaders Seized in Church – Tannenbaum is Held in $5000 Bail,” and its lead editorial was “The Hobo Riots Quelled.”

He liked to read, and he could write. His essays from jail were reprinted and reached a certain Grace Hatch Childs of the Charity Organization Society. She sent him an invitation to meet her at the completion of his sentence. She introduced him then to friends who knew Frederick Keppel, the Dean of Columbia College. Dean Keppel in turn interviewed Tannenbaum who, remember, lacked a high school diploma and had gotten an otherwise odd education but who loved books and argument.

Everything went smoothly and after it was over, “Keppel was heard to remark that it would be easier to get Tannenbaum in than it would to get him out.” With the Great War intervening, he did not graduate until 1921, so we are in the spring of his ninetieth reunion. (It is as well, I feel obligated to say, my fiftieth reunion this June.)

In 1965, at age 72, still at Columbia and just before the seismic events of the late ‘60s, Tannenbaum edited a summation of the Seminars on their twentieth anniversary, “A community of Scholars.” Contributors – all of them chairs or members of Seminars – included Daniel Bell, Leslie Dunn, Paul Goodman, Albert Hofstadter, Philip Jessup, Paul Lazarsfeld, Margaret Mead, John Herman Randall and Gilbert Seldes. Nobel laureate physicist I. I. Rabi wrote the introduction, and President Grayson Kirk wrote the foreword. Imagine.

That brings us to this year.

While three seminars that began in 1945 are with us today, every year also sees the birth of some new Seminars and some years see the passing of others. This Spring the Seminars Advisory Board approved three new Seminars. Let their titles speak to the continuity and importance of Tannenbaum’s initial creation - and later endowment - of our unique venue for conversation to better understand basic human institutions:

University Seminar on Catholicism, Culture and Modernity; Pierre Force, chair.
University Seminar on Complexity Science, Modeling and sustainability; Peter Coleman and Peter Schlosser, co-chairs
University Seminar on Interdisciplinary Curricula; Rachel Chung, Chair.

And what of future days in March?

We have begun to plan for a seventieth anniversary, second edition, of “A community of Scholars.” It would be very elegant if we could have copies available for March 2014.

Toward that end, our Advisory Board has begun discussions on what the Seminars need to do to remain as functional, and as personal, as we have been since 1945. We know what our aim is: to remain the means of exchanging, recording, validating and responding to new ideas, no matter that our tools may change from a book in the hand to an archive in the cloud.
One aspect of our Seminars will not change. So long as the members of each Seminar continue to trust in each other’s sincerity enough to accept criticism as well-meant, the Seminars as a whole will continue to be self-insured against the temptations of rhetoric and false precision. In this sense, I suppose, we might take as our motto a variant of the Reagan-era chestnut: Verify through trust.

In his decade as director, Bob Belknap did an amazing job of organizing the digitalization and archiving of the vast body of minutes kept by our Seminar rapporteurs since 1944. Taking our cue from his success, we have begun intense discussions with current Chairs on their wishes concerning how open to the web and to the visiting researcher, we should be with their past and current minutes.

We intend in the next few years to have the University Seminars produce for the world a full and annotated catalog – in hand and on line - of all books published with the help of the Seminars Publications Funds, and of all scholarly articles published by Seminar members whose creative work on those papers emerged in all or part within one of our Seminars.

When as I hope a book in the tradition of “A community of Scholars” begins to emerge from these discussions in coming years, it will be – like the Seminars themselves – a shared enterprise. To begin right now, I invite you to send the seminars an email with your thoughts on how best to proceed: univ.seminars@columbia.edu.

One last day in March: today.

Tonight we give the Tannenbaum Warner award to Bob Belknap.

Robert L. Belknap is Professor of Russian Emeritus at Columbia University. He was educated at Princeton University, The University of Paris, Columbia University, and Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) State University. He is author of The Structure of The Brothers Karamazov (1989), The Genesis of The Brothers Karamazov (1990), and other studies of Russian literature and of university education. He has taught courses in Russian and Comparative literature and literary theory. He has taught the Humanities course in major texts of the Western tradition for fifty years, and recently a sequel to it that involves major Asian classics. He has chaired the Humanities course and the Slavic Department, been Director of the Russian (now Harriman) Institute as well as of these Seminars, and served as Dean of Students and Dean of the College. In 2010 he won the university’s Great Teacher award.

I first met Bob in 1957-8 as my teacher in Humanities A, the first and to my mind the most disturbing and therefore important of the courses that make up the College’s Core Curriculum. As I follow him in taking up this great experiment of the Directorship of the University Seminars, I am aware of how rare and precious is the safety and stability provided to us all by this great university.

Professor Belknap, please come up for your Award.