Celebrating Conversation: The University Seminars at 75

Introduction by Robert Pollack, Director

Bad company is as instructive as debauchery: one is indemnified for the loss of innocence by the loss of prejudice.

Diderot

This short quote from Diderot catches the central role of the University Seminars. Since their inception in 1944, the Seminars have always provided a place for faculty at Columbia and other nearby academic centers to experience the simultaneous loss of innocence and prejudice, neither by debauchery nor – for the most part – by bad company, but rather through extended, private conversation.

The noun "conversation" means the informal exchange of ideas by spoken words." (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conversation) The word comes from a Middle English word that carried the meanings of 'living among, familiarity, intimacy,' via Old French from Latin *conversatio(n),* from the verb *conversari*. In short, conversation is more than an exchange of words, it is a safe exchange among people familiar with each other and capable of intimate confidences.

Well, so what? On the face of it, this is fairly banal. After all, don't we all converse, all the time? I am afraid not. We do talk to each other, and we do listen. But talking and listening are only necessary, though not sufficient components of conversation. Conversation can occur only among equals, two or more people who respect the others sufficiently to assure that differences will be tolerated and explored, rather than being the tinder for an explosion of condescension, insult or worse.

There is a good reason why conversation enwraps its participants. Conversation with another emerges from a prior activity of each of our brains, which begins in infancy and, if we are lucky, never leaves us. As adults we experience this gift of conversation as a chat with

oneself (2017 Charles Fernyhough, "*Talking to Ourselves*," Scientific American, August, p. 74.) It seems reasonable to suggest that the very fact of our social lives, our ability and need to know and be known by others, begins with this ability of the human brain to converse with itself. From this early conversation we learn how to hear and to be heard, through learning how to bring our internal conversation to a listener, and by our ability to hear another person's inner voice in turn.

Therefore, free speech is not saying whatever you want. It emerges from the freedom to hear the changes within oneself, as well as from having the safety to change another person's inner conversation in turn. This freedom and safety are available only in a conversation among equals. Authority is the most common justification for a one-way truncation of free speech: the parent, the boss, the Professor, are all free to share their inner conversations, but the employee, the student, the child are not. Real conversations require first, equality and mutual respect.

In 2014 my wife Amy and published "*The Course of Nature: a book of Drawings on Natural Selection and its Consequences*," Stony Creek Press, ISBN 9 781499 122. This book consists of forty-four of her drawings on Natural Selection, with my short summaries opposite each drawing. In Chapter 9, "Becoming Human," Amy presented the attached drawing (Figure 1) and I wrote this in response:

> "Darwin called the human mind "an excrescence of the brain" and counted our unique mental capacities among the rewards of natural selection for us as a species. So, on a foundation of neural circuitry we have built temples in our mind, often with a personification, like Athena, of a wisdom we hope we may attain. What a great success natural selection has found in us!
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> "Or, perhaps not. Our mental worlds are no longer subject to natural selection. In fact, they never were; that's the reason for our spectacularly disproportionate success at proliferating. We have broken out of natural selection's slow sieve of mutation; we can simply have an idea, and choose to act on it. No need to wait for natural selection's positive feedback loop to select for a DNA variation that permits that new idea.

> "Any brain can have any idea, any time. So, the joke of our imagination is on nature, but as a consequence it is on us as well. Our minds can encompass nature, but they can also go beyond nature, and imagine things that need not be possible in nature. When we do that, we may escape nature for a while, but in the end, these excrescences of the brain will be brought back into alignment with the facts of nature by the fact of species mortality. If there is one place for imagination to generate wisdom, that would be the place."

That brings us right back to a life of conversation. Conversation allows us to travel away from nature together, and to return safely. That is why conversations have been so important to the Seminars; they range as widely as our imaginations can carry us, but never at the cost of leaving one of us behind.

The University Seminars at 75 is an ongoing experiment safe conversation among groups of people of all ages and backgrounds, brought together by common interests but never by common conclusions. The Seminars are for that reason also an experiment in the politics of democracy. We cannot take for granted our freedom to disagree without punishment. It is increasingly rare on a global scale, and has become more challenged even in our own country. So long as endowments are to be spent according to the wishes of their donors, true conversations are what we will continue to celebrate with Frank Tannenbaum's creation and Jane Belo's gift.

I wish to share a back-story to my opening quote from Diderot that has helped me to do my job as the fifth and current Director of University Seminars. More than a half-century ago, I had been confronted as a senior in Columbia College with a social snub of the most painful sort, a true example of bad company. It became a moment of loss of innocence and prejudice, and it prepared me well for the moment when Robert Belknap, Professor Emeritus of Slavic and the fourth Director of University Seminars, asked me to consider becoming his successor.

One evening in our senior year my roommate came back from a meeting somewhere, wearing a golden pinky ring with a green, jagged line all around it. For many decades Columbia

College has had two self-elected senior societies, the Sachems and the Nacoms, He had been elected to the Society of Sachems, and this ring signified that to one and all. Was I jealous? I suppose. But mostly I was annoyed: who gets to pick who gets a ring? Who do they think they are?

So, I took myself to the Radiation Lab on the eighth floor of Pupin where I worked for a graduate student in the laboratory of Charles Townes, named Arno Penzias. Arno later won the Nobel Prize for his discovery of the background radiation left from the initial Big Bang that began both space and time for us in this Universe. I took a length of copper tubing of ring-diameter and turned a full dozen shiny brass rings. I then carefully marked up each with a green jagged line all around, using the lab's enamel paints. I gave one to my roommate.

Then I went around the dorms giving the other rings to other ten guys who, like me, had not been picked to be Sachems but who, like me, did not think it was anyone's business to judge us or anyone else that way. I decided we had to be called by a fancy name, so I named us the Corinthians. In the 1961 edition of *Columbian*, the College's yearbook, there we are, taking a full page in the section on activities. And on that page, you find not only our names, but that very quote from Diderot.

The captain of the football team ultimately came to our door, wearing the real ring. "Pollack," he said, "get those crappy fake rings back and destroy them, or you will never get a job in America!" And he was right. I never got them back, and I never did get a "job" in America. Instead, I became a Professor. I have spent my life back here, still a student, still learning, enjoying my students, my colleagues, my tenure, and my time as the fifth Director of University Seminars.

Since I have been around for so long, I am pleased to be able to share a memory of each of my four predecessors; each of us in our own very different manners has managed so far to preserve the Seminars' core value of protecting difficult conversations. Professor Frank Tannenbaum, Columbia College 1921, was the founder and first Director of University Seminars, serving from its inception in 1944 until his death in 1969. Though I never met him in person I am sure if I had we would have found a lot to talk about, as we had quite similar backgrounds. We both went to Columbia College soon after devastating wars – World War I in

his case and World War II in mine – and we both were the first in our families to graduate from High School.

I did see him once at a distance. It was from my window of my dorm room on the ninth floor of Hartley Hall, in 1959. As Director of University Seminars and also as the chair of the Seminar on Latin American Studies that he had founded, Frank had invited Cuba's new President, Fidel Castro, to visit campus during his first trip to our country. This was well before the Bay of Pigs fiasco and the subsequent stand-down between our country and the Soviet Union, and Castro was quite a draw. The steps of Low were packed; one photo from the time captures a smiling Frank, a serious President Castro, and a rather unhappy University President Grayson Kirk, surrounded by a dense crowd of students. As I recall, Castro had offered a trip to Cuba for any students who were willing to help with the sugarcane harvest.

Professor of Philosophy James Gutmann, Columbia College 1918 became the second Director on Frank's death in 1969, and so was the first Director to enjoy the task of managing the yield on an endowment left to the University Seminars a year earlier by Frank's wife, the anthropologist Jane Belo, just before her own death in 1968. I returned to Columbia in 1978, getting my PhD and carrying out the research that led Columbia's Biological Sciences Department to offer me a professorship. Amy, our daughter and I were given an apartment in a small Columbia building that also was home to Professor Gutmann. I did not know anything of the Seminars then, but I knew him to be a quiet, somewhat intimidating, always polite neighbor.

Professor Aaron Warner, protégé of Frank Tannenbaum and Isidore I. Rabi, was the third Director of Seminars, from 1976 to 2000. Professor Rabi, Nobel Laureate in Physics and founder of the Radiation Laboratory where I had my time as an undergraduate, inculcated in many people, including Professor Warner and me, a deep respect for the social obligation of scientists to do their best to assure that our work was in the interests of society as a whole. Professor Warner had had a distinguished career working for President Roosevelt during the era of the New Deal, and he brought the Seminars to a new commitment to social consciousness. To his credit, he did not bring his own opinions into the Seminars' own choices of topics. And so, under his direction even as distant a fellow as myself could come to him with a radical notion and find that it would be quite acceptable as a new University Seminar.

So, it was that in 1996 I proposed a University Seminar I called "The Two Cultures Revisited: Current Representations of Human Diversity." It was an experiment I had long wished to carry out on myself, seeking to experience human diversity without the need to maintain the academic Critical Distance. I wished to set aside this distance that academics are trained to cultivate, in order to experience the marginalization, I knew my colleagues suffered from for being black, or gay, or female, or any combination of these.

To make this Seminar work, I made sure that its initial membership would place me in the minority by these criteria. Then, to give us a scaffolding on which to hang our initially awkward conversations, I arranged that members would take turns choosing a book for us all to discuss. Through these books, we all came to know each other as real people, not representatives of any group at all. The Seminar served its purpose almost immediately, as we all came to see each other through these books we all had read. I remain friends with many of the members of this Seminar, which lasted only a few years, an example of the freedom Seminars has always had to persist, mutate or go senescent as their members may wish.

Columbia College has had a set of seminars for first and second-year undergraduates for more than a century; in aggregate these interdisciplinary seminars are called the Core Curriculum. The Core course most committed to a canon of foundational texts in the Western Tradition is called Literature Humanities. My Humanities teacher in 1957-58, Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures Robert Belknap (1929-2014) became the fourth Director of University Seminars, from 2001 to 2011. I have no better way to introduce him here than to tell two stories about him that I had originally told at his 2014 memorial service in St. Paul's Chapel.

The first story: Belknap's Humanities A section seemed to me filled with guys who had actually read the books assigned, not over the weekend, but in a prep school somewhere. Not me. My parents had not finished high school; they worked throughout the Depression, and the Coney Island Library did not bring me to the Classics.

In those days you got your final grade after the close of the semester on a postcard. You gave the blank card to the instructor, addressed it to yourself, and watched the mail for a week or so. The postcard from Bob Belknap said I had gotten a 78 on the final essay, and a B in the course. He also wrote in pencil below, "The exact middle of the class."

This was a gift to me. It meant I could get past the fear of being so far behind that I would necessarily be in the bottom half of the class. No matter that neither was I in the top half; I was ok. That postcard had changed my life. I did not see that until I found it, only a few months before giving this memorial talk.

The second story: Belknap and I had a conversation just before Thanksgiving 2013. He had invited me to succeed him as Director of University Seminars in 2010-11, and we would often enjoy each other's company in our offices in Faculty House. "Bob," I asked him, "how many years have your family celebrated Thanksgiving?"

Knowing that Belknaps were on the Mayflower, I expected a big number, in the hundreds of years; I waited to bask in the reflected light of his ancestry. "Oh," he said, "about five thousand, or ten thousand years." "How?" I asked. "Well" he said, "you don't think I am going to remember my Mayflower ancestors and not my Native ancestors too, do you?"

In that, he taught me how much of our country's history is built on the forgotten cultures of Native peoples. He also taught me to think again before valuing any of my ancestors over any others, and in the largest sense to remember that as a person, my thoughts, my life, my decisions, my and actions define me; not my ancestry, and certainly not my DNA.

Let me close this review of my predecessors with a reflection on the remarkable variety of lifetimes that Seminars have had. Three of the first University Seminars to be formed, in the mid 1940s, are still thriving: "Peace," "Renaissance," and "Religion." As I write this I have been Director for eight years. In that time more than a dozen new Seminars have been proposed, discussed by our Advisory Board, approved and gotten underway. In the same period, almost the same number of seminars have voluntarily taken a year off; those that do not come back after a year are formally decommissioned.

Here is perhaps the best example of the difference between University Seminars and any hypothetical "Seminars University." Consistent with our founder's intentions, each Seminar may have its own arc of experience and its own lifetime as well; there is no Tenure, no obligation to be permanent, nor even an obligation to be important, only an obligation to be clear and to be willing to listen.

I will close with the final stanzas of a poem by W. H. Auden, who was the speaker on January 15, 1970 at a meeting of the University Seminar on the Nature of Man, chaired by Professor Margaret Mead. Auden's *September 1, 1939* set the music and the words for our lives. Even if it has taken until now for some of us to hear it, we should let it speak last because its truth does not age.

All I have is a voice
To undo the folded lie,
The romantic lie in the brain
Of the sensual man-in-the-street
And the lie of Authority
Whose buildings grope the sky:
There is no such thing as the State
And no one exists alone;
Hunger allows no choice
To the citizen or the police;
We must love one another or die.

Defenceless under the night
Our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light
Flash out wherever the Just
Exchange their messages:
May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.

The University Seminars have never been the product of any Director, nor even of their own membership. They have always been served by a cadre of dedicated colleagues who have administered funds, reservations, an archive, meals and wine, so that each Seminar might have its own life. Let me close by thanking our colleagues who maintain the Faculty House, and those who make our Faculty House Office a welcoming and serious place: Alice Newton, Summer Hart, Pamela Guardia, Gesenia Alvarez, and John Jayo. I know they join me is hoping that you will enjoy these essays by our Seminars colleagues, showing us all the many ways that our many University Seminars have found to preserve and protect true conversation for the long term.

Figure 1, Athena arising from a neural network

In Greek mythology Athena, goddess of wisdom, was born from the forehead of Zeus her father. The Romans then gave this history to their goddess of wisdom, Minerva. It is not a great stretch of imagination to bring that myth into the present, by acknowledging that networks of

neurons in our heads create ideas, some of them as powerful and unnatural as this story of the emergence of the personification of wisdom from the mind of a God.