



December 11, 2009

Dear Honors College students, faculty, and alumni:

My first contact with Honors was in 1978. I was teaching at Washington University in St. Louis, when, in late April of that year, I was invited to campus by Dr. Estess, then Director of the Program, for the usual round of interviews and academic presentations. (I can still recall the visceral shock as I walked around the humid campus in my "spring" suit, wondering if it felt like this in April, what would August be like?) After a day of such meetings I spent the evening and most of the night in a free-wheeling conversation with Dr. Estess, his Associate Director Steve Langfur, and the only other Honors faculty member at the time, Tony Sirignano. It would be many years before the College initiated its "Great Conversation" series, but for me the conversation began that night in Dr. Estess' living room and ended only when I retired.

What did we talk about? Not the great metropolis of Houston, its budding public University, superb Honors Program, and amazingly diverse students. No, we talked about books! About the Greeks first of all—I had studied ancient Greek one summer in Middlebury, Vermont, "paying" for the lessons by helping the prof polish up his collection of classic cars, and ended up doing a graduate minor in Classics--though eventually we slipped from Homer and Sophocles to Machiavelli and Flaubert, from Antiquity to Modernity. (Only later

would I discover that "modernity" was a dirty word to some of my colleagues, epitomized by the hapless Emma Bovary, a privileging of antiquity that I, as a modern man, felt obliged to resist.)

Naturally, I was used to talking about books. But most of these conversations happened in the classroom not the faculty lounge. If you wanted to talk with colleagues about books, you went to conferences, where you'd exchange papers with fellow specialists on esoteric topics. But discussing Madame Bovary with colleagues who specialized in 20th-century religion or ancient philosophy, and who were genuinely interested in what a specialist in Renaissance poetry had to say about it, was something new to me. And it prepared me for the quintessential Honors experience: standing up before several hundred very bright freshmen and sophomores and talking about texts well outside the narrow arena of my "expertise."

Following that all-nighter, I was sold on UH. The battle between the Texas climate and my fragile Northern body would have to take care of itself. Although it would be another eight months before I joined the faculty, my desire to continue that "great conversation" was eventually gratified. From January 1979 to June 2005 I taught Honors and English at UH. I still cherish the friendships I established with many of the UH faculty and with several of the distinguished visitors to UH and the College, among them Allen Mandelbaum and the late Elizabeth Sewell and Allan Bloom. I look forward to checking back with you from time to time. Maybe in a future letter I'll reminisce about some of these acquaintances.

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