

## An Intellectual Safari Spanning Sixty-Five Years

I've been asked to respond in writing to my recent retirement from the University of Michigan with two statements: an "official bio" of my academic studies and degrees which, in turn, eventually led to -- and , in fact, made possible -- the creation of various courses I have taught at the Residential College; and second, some comments on my thoughts about retiring specifically from the Residential College after teaching here for nearly 40 years.

To describe my academic training is a somewhat protracted affair since where I finally ended in the Residential College is 180 degrees from where my studies began, a convoluted path and which led through a sequence of universities that involved studies in and degrees from more than a dozen universities, mostly in Europe.

I began as a pre-med student at the University of Pennsylvania. But by my sophomore year, I was starting to realize that I was finding Goethe, Thomas Mann and Kafka to be more gripping to the imagination than organic chemistry, calculus and fetal pig anatomy.

The resulting radical division of my interests became particularly extreme one summer while I was still a pre-med student at the University of Pennsylvania, when I took a biology course in the morning with a laboratory section and - in the afternoon - a course on painting and sculpture at the Temple University School of the Arts. It turned out that I had very little artistic talent; nevertheless, even today I still recall and treasure the creative experience of working in a studio setting creating -- as opposed to sitting and listening in a lecture hall. This creative experience that every RC student is privileged to have, must have, as a degree requirement for a degree from the Residential College. But although I had little interest in the substance of the laboratory work in the morning, I strongly believe today that a science course with laboratory component based on the Experimental method should be a vital part of an undergraduate's educational experience. (Unfortunately, this requirement is no longer necessary for a student graduating from L S & A., of which The Residential College is a part.)

I eventually graduated as a German major. But because my interests began to range beyond German literature, I decided to take a Master's Degree in Comparative Literature at Columbia University.

This decision was then followed by a somewhat retrograde shift in subject back to German Studies but a forward move to living in various European countries for the next ten years. First, I spent six months at the Goethe Institute in Salzburg, Austria, followed by a semester each at the Universities of Munich and Heidelberg. Then -- after a two-year return to the U. S. A. for a Master's Degree in German Literature and Culture at Columbia University -- I returned to Germany to spend a very claustrophobic semester at the University of Free Berlin, arriving one year after The Wall was built. My final studies in Europe concluded with a semester at the Sorbonne (The University of Paris) devoted to the study of French language and culture.

Leaving continental Europe, I continued my cultural Wanderlust by moving to England, where I became a graduate student at Magdalen College, Oxford University, taking a B.Litt. degree in two years. This period was then followed by five years devoted to a Ph.D in Philosophy at Kings' College, Cambridge University. (My dissertation was revised and published by Columbia University Press: **Robert Musil: Master of the Hovering Life.**) This may well be a somewhat dizzying list of universities and shifts in subjects studied but it is the key to the various unorthodox courses that I have been giving at the Residential College, a seemingly odd assortment of interdisciplinary -- or rather multidisciplinary -- courses. My intellectual curiosity has ever generated new questions that I then always pursued in ever new courses. As my personal investigations proceeded step by

step, I took my students along the same path upon which I was moving. Thus we moved together as an exploratory group gaining simultaneous illumination.

Such a varied intellectual combination of disparate subjects was able to find a single home under the general rubric of a section termed “Humanities” in the Residential College catalogue, a rubric so broad that it could include the courses of the most disparate subjects as listed below. In L S & A, my courses would have had to be spread over a number of Departments, a complicated – if not impossible -- administrative task, as the following list of courses will make clear:

### **1) Atheism: a History of Skepticism and Unbelief from the Greco-Roman to the Modern Period**

### **2) Death in the Western Imagination: Concepts of Death in Five Cultures: Egyptian, Homeric, Platonic, Medieval and Modern World Views**

This course was offered with eleven visiting professors, each from a different discipline:

Andre (music), Beauchamp (German literature), Choberka (Museum of Art), H. Cohen (film), Genne (dance), Goodenough (children’s literature), Sloat (biology/Buddhism), Greenspan (the Holocaust), Mendeloff (theater), Sowers (art), Sulewski (classics).

What did I learn as a student from these visiting professors? Each class session was so very different from every other one. Each professor had his or her own very unique way of approaching the material, of presenting their own insights and of encouraging student discussion. Each session was a unique work of art, a piece of theater, from which I gained a number of productive additions to my own teaching techniques. (The Residential College should encourage more team teaching and faculty single drop-in sessions.)

### **3) Biblical, Greek and Medieval Texts and Modern Film Counterparts** (team taught with Hugh Cohen)

What did I learn as a student? From Hugh I learned how to “see” a movie, how the smallest detail can convey an immense amount of information, in short, how to experience a movie on a more profound level than I had been accustomed to. But even more impressive: when Hugh engaged with a member of the class, it was not simply with just another student but always with a unique individual having a valuable perspective that Hugh managed to tease out in an atmosphere of touching and probing paternal warmth.

### **4) The Western Mind in Revolution: Six Reinterpretations of the Human Condition from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries**

This course was comprised by revolutions in **astronomy** (Copernicus, the heliocentric universe), **theology** (Luther, the Reformation), **biology** (Darwin, the evolution of the species), **sociology** (Marx , Communism), **psychology** (Freud, psychoanalysis) and **physics** (Einstein, the Special and General Theory of Relativity).

A side-note: I also gave this course on Western intellectual history for five straight summer semesters in China at the University of Shanghai. Below are some observations on teaching Western ideas to students living in an authoritarian dictatorship:

First, my students were very aware that this would be their only chance of being exposed to Western thinking – and so my classes filled way beyond the set limit of 35 students to always over 100 students, which greatly annoyed the front office and the Party (as my Chinese interns told me) that strictly attempted to control all aspects of the educational system.

Second, my lectures were recorded by over-head cameras. I must have passed the ideological test in that first summer because I was invited back four more times. A troubling question for the Party: what would this American have to say in his three lectures on Karl Marx? Very conscious, however, of being a representative of the University of Michigan, I always exercised great discretion by sticking to textual explication.

Third, periodically a middle-aged gentleman would arrive in class and sit for 15 minutes with a very sour look on his face -- as if to say, this is all very boring, and that he was here only because it was his duty as a Party member to keep a watch on what the students were hearing and saying. (Wisely they said very little, until I broke them into small discussion groups and then had a student scribe voice their collective and hence anonymous opinions, which I often found rather surprising.) Then, in the middle of class, he would walk out in the most ostentatious way possible, as if to signal to every student that the Party was well aware of what was happening in this class.

Fourth, a Chinese faculty member on the Curriculum Committee told me later that my course was only accepted because it was proposed as part of an exchange program with the University of Michigan. Finally, however, in my fifth summer (2017), the President of China declared that "Western Ideas must not be taught in any Chinese University because such ideas are not in the interest of the Communist Party." (Probably a correct conclusion!) Even the Chinese Faculty knew not to fraternize with me. Never in the five summers did I ever meet with any faculty member outside of official controlled functions.

Fifth, in the final session, I always asked: if we could read one more text by one of the six writers in the course, who would it be? No one wanted to read more Marx. Everyone wanted to read more Freud, who for them seemed to validate the existence of an inner private self. (I had to bring to China the Freud texts on a flash drive.)

Sixth, I cannot resist mentioning a final conclusion I reached after five summers at Shanghai University that rather surprised me. Meeting with students privately in my office as well as in the city restaurants with my teaching interns, I became aware of how little the Communist catechism had impressed itself in their early schooling. The more I met these students, the more their values and their hopes reminded me of my students at the University of Michigan.

### **5) Existentialism: Literature and Philosophy**

#### **6) Dante and Galileo: from (the Heights of) Medieval Christianity to (the Beginnings of) Modern Science.**

Given in the University of Michigan Study Abroad Program in Florence, Italy.

#### **7) Nietzsche and Italian Fascism.** Given in the University of Michigan Study Abroad Program in Florence, Italy.)

Another delicate political situation: at this point in time (I was informed), there was strong opposition in Italian culture to making any reference to Italy's Fascist past and that, consequently, perhaps I should propose a less explosive topic. I did not.

**8) Psychoanalysis and the Modern Novel.** (I also gave this course -- a required course in Applied Psychoanalysis -- at the **Michigan Psychoanalytic Institute, in Southfield** -- for psychiatrists working for certification. (Given jointly with the President of the Michigan Psychoanalytic Institute, Dr. E. Spindler.)

As a Harvard Mellon Faculty Fellow at Harvard University -- the year before I arrived at the University of Michigan -- I also gave this course in the Harvard College's First Year Seminar Program.

**9) Four Interdisciplinary Studies in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Intellectual History: Psychology and Literature** (Freud and Kafka); **Theology and Literature** (Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky); **Philosophy and Literature** (Nietzsche and Sartre); **Political Science and Literature** (Marx, Lenin, and Brecht)

**10) First Year Seminar: Nietzsche and Fascism**

**11) First Year Seminar: The Literature of War: Literary, Psychoanalytic and Philosophical Approaches**

**12) Senior Seminar: Nietzsche's last Year: Philosophical Culmination and Psychological Collapse**

In celebration of the Residential College's 50th Anniversary Festivities, I was asked to give a public lecture on any topic. I choose: Nietzsche: The Bad Boy of Western Philosophy?, a lecture now also available on YouTube.

### Teaching Methods

While at Oxford and Cambridge, I also taught in the college tutorial system. This experience of highly personal intense intellectual interaction between student and teacher was an experience that has strongly influenced my teaching of small classes at the Residential College.

For the Residential College, I have used a variety of teaching methods to intensify and to personalize the students' learning experience:

**Worksheets** with questions on the texts were distributed in advance of the class session and had to be completed and handed-in the day of the session devoted to that particular text. Thus, students had to think and write about the texts even before they came to class and arrived in class very ready – even energized -- to engage in active class participation, comparing and contrasting their own ideas to that of their fellow students. These worksheet questions often also served as a general intellectual road map that the class session would follow.

**Bullet-point intellectual summaries** of the concepts, ideas, perspectives, ideas of the particular writer or thinkers, which I placed on Canvas in advance of class.

Employing **various media** in class: film, paintings, music, slides, power point presentations

Employing **student teaching interns** to run some class discussions and to meet with students outside of class. The student interns (two interns in every class) always enlivened the sessions, not so much by presenting new information, which was my job as teacher, but by discussing and reinforcing ideas already presented. But, more importantly, they demonstrated to students that their three teachers could have differing perspectives, thus validating the students' search for their own independent opinions, opinions possibly even in direct opposition to that of teacher and student interns.

I also made a point of inviting **visiting professors** into many of my classes to present their specialties thus enriching the depth of the subject of the course while also admitting that I did not know everything.

### Administrative work

At various times, I served on the Executive Committee and the Curriculum Committee and was also the director of the First Year Seminar Program. I also spear-headed the development of the Student Internship Course (**Core 307: College Teaching**). Along with Cindy Sowers and Tom Weisskopf, I wrote sections of the Residential College's External Review Report.

Most important however, was my revision and expansion of the Residential College's Comparative Literature Program as its Director. The requirements for this RC Concentration reached into and united a number of different programs and courses listed under the very broad rubric of The Humanities, i.e., the Creative Writing Program, the Foreign Language Programs, Art and Ideas Program, The Studio Art Program and several Departments in L S & A.

Thus, the Literature Program provided an interdisciplinary structure and coherence to the study of the **Literary humanities** in the Residential College. Eventually, however, the Literature Program was closed and the courses folded into the much narrower humanities category of the single interdisciplinary comparative relationship of the Arts and Ideas, in which every course had to contain a visual component. (Most of my course, however, operated totally in the realm of Ideas alone.

### **On Retiring from the Residential College**

Rather than concluding with a focus on my life in retirement, I'd like to offer some observations on the Residential College faculty, most particularly on the three faculty members: Cindy Sowers and Hank Greenspan, who retired along with me 2019, and Kate Mendeloff of the Theater Program: we four have been colleagues for nearly 40 years, a group of educators preserving and conveying our cultural heritage to the younger generation.

I choose these three because their work has had the greatest influence **upon me as a student!**

Not long ago on the way to San Francisco, I stopped for a few days in Las Vegas. I passed up the gambling but did go to three performances of Cirque Du Soleil. If you have ever experienced this show, you will never forget the music, the dancing, the breathtaking acrobatics and death-defying leaps, particularly of a few of the high-flying star athlete/artists. The thought came to me that Residential College – intellectually and emotionally – is a lot like Cirque Du Soleil. We, too, have our breath-taking high-fliers, particularly two faculty members whose contributions to the Residential College display a unique and courageous heroic resolve, each in her and his own way. I have personally experienced their teaching as visiting professors in some of my classes and have felt vastly enriched by their teaching.

**Cindy Sowers** has ever supported the great traditional values of Western culture, values which today may often seem in conflict with contemporary intellectual trends. Her counter perspective has provided a salutary balance to the left leaning values of many Residential College faculty. Her presentations and arguments have been anchored in deep scholarship that has ranged from Classical Antiquity through the Medieval and Renaissance worlds to classical modernism and postmodernism.

Sowers has introduced students to often now alien perspectives from earlier historical periods, valuable perspectives either forgotten or not taken seriously today, which she elaborated with the greatest precision and scholarly knowledge. Her perspectives are fully conversant with the most radical modern and postmodern views, which she has taught in stand-alone courses.

For the enrichment of the Residential College's curriculum, she founded and structured with the greatest precision a new Residential College Concentration entitled Arts and Ideas, a unique program in American higher education devoted to the comparative study of art and philosophy.

**Hank Greenspan** has devoted his intellectual and emotional energies to the study and preservation of the experiences of Holocaust survivors both in his written scholarship and in his play **Remnants**, which has been presented around the world. His work has provided a salutary balance to those who would rather forget this period in Western history as well as to students in The Residential College who were largely ignorant of the specifics of this event.

My admiration knows no bounds, for I could not even get through Elie Wiesel's short work **Night**. My "inner German" refused the weight of these events. But Hank has shouldered them and, furthermore, -- living with this terrible knowledge day and night -- searched for ways to express the inexpressible in his teaching and in the theater, perhaps finding ways of transforming the totally negative events that paralyze the mind and spirit into something positive for the future of mankind.

Beyond the expert presentation of empirical information, which mark the teaching of the **excellent teacher**, there exists the **great teacher** -- and every student knows when he or she is in the presence of such a person, one whose motivation to teach arises more out of a moral commitment than out of a merely didactic one for the preservation and transferal of empirical information, however vital that may also be.

**Their motivation is fundamentally moral:**

**Cindy Sowers: a voice crying out in the (modern) wilderness**

**Hank Greenspan: a modern-day Atlas taking upon his shoulders the weight of this world of human suffering in order to display it to all.**

Although my retirement statement is now reaching Wagnerian length, I must add a final and longer testimony on the amazing multiplicity of Kate Mendeloff's activity in and for the Residential College.

She is the Residential College faculty member who is the most hard-working, the most stressed, the most multi-talented. I have seen all of this only because I -- unlike most other faculty members -- had the opportunity to step upon the stage and look out to the audience from the other side. So, I feel an obligation as a faculty member to tell you about Kate and her on-going astonishing achievement.

I made my stage debut rather late in life at the age of 72. With the Residential College Theater Company, I went to Moscow to present a production of Chekhov's **The Sea Gull** and Tennessee Williams' **The Notebook of Trigorin** as part of the International Chekhov Festival.

Kate Mendeloff took a chance on me, although it must be admitted that the role I received did require someone of a rather advanced age to play the owner of the Russian country estate. (There is a limit to how old one can make an undergraduate actor appear without it looking ludicrous.)

Returning from Russia, I acted as "the silly professor," in the Drama Programs' production of Wedekind's **Spring's Awakening** and subsequently acted in Brecht's **Galileo** (as a cardinal of the Inquisition) and in Badgley's **The Struggle for Existence: Darwin's Dreams** (as Bishop Wilberforce of the City of Oxford). In both the Galileo and Badgley plays, Kate felt it a natural fit to assign me to two highly unsympathetic roles of powerful clerics who opposed modern science in the name of Christianity. By a further irony, I recall playing this role in Badgley's play - as Bishop Wilberforce in the evening performances in the Residential College's theater production while -- during the day -- teaching Darwin's **Origin of the Species** as well as Galileo's **The Starry Messenger** and **Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems**. Where else but in the Residential College would such an experience be possible for a faculty member?

Kate's function in the Residential College is difficult to fully comprehend in its complexity and multiplicity. The stresses begin anew every semester and are filled with the same uncertainties and the final results will always eventually be on view in the Keene Theater to the faculty and the public. Most faculty -- functioning within the confines of classroom, office conferences, and possibly language lunch tables -- evade such a public exposure and public scrutiny.

Always searching for students to act, always auditioning new students, always scheduling rehearsals, always coaching acting, always dealing with public relations, always collaring faculty and friends and strangers to come to the plays, always dealing with the budget, often playing a role somewhere between that of psychologist and a maternal comforting presence, for some of the very best actors were also a little psychologically brittle.

Plays given outside the Residential College in Shakespeare in the Arb every Summer as well as elsewhere in the United States and in Europe bring their own difficulties, which were not at all connected with teaching acting, since these were works and labors that reached out into a public venue, quite unlike my classes that always remained safely within the boundaries of the minds of my students.

I now finally realize -- very late in life and after many years of sitting passively in the front row and waiting for the play to begin -- that when the metaphoric or real curtain rises in the theater and everything seems to have magically coalesced, this magic moment is anchored in exhaustive effort.

Some examples of stresses arising outside teaching acting in the classroom:

In Russia, Kate was in constant anxiety having to shepherd these often too lively and unpredictable undergraduates in this police state, particularly as they went out clubbing in the evenings. We had a robbery in which a large amount of money was stolen and so Kate had to cable to the Provost in Ann Arbor for an immediate money transfer to get us on the night train to Petersburg. The afternoon of our opening in the Hermitage Theater in Moscow, Martin Walsh and I were threatened with arrest on the front steps of the theater, which would have rather messed up our opening that night. I mention these events to reveal a never-ending series of assaults not directly connected with teaching acting that Kate has to face.

**Kate Mendeloff: She should be awarded a purple heart** for endless battles fought to present to us the transforming moral power of the theater.

All this I saw for the first time in my life because I decided to step to the other side of the curtain.

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The growth of my intellectual and emotional life has constantly required my stepping from one area into another. Diana Peters, my wife now deceased, also had professional interests and experiences that spanned several fields. After a Ph.D in German Literature from Cambridge University, she returned to the United States and earned a law degree from Fordham University specializing in Labor Law. She eventually presented two cases before the United States Supreme Court, both of which she won. Diana was also a classical pianist and a very accomplished landscape painter.

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Although I am able to recognize and to value the high-flying teachers among us when I see them, I am not such a teacher. I have always considered myself more as a student among students. This is why I found

listening to the visiting professors in my classes to be such an exciting experience. This is also why my experience in the theater seemed so right. There I was an equal part of the student experience, a citizen in a community exploring new ways to experience art -- and doing so collectively.

I have never sought to dazzle students with intellectual calisthenics -- attempting to gain their admiration for my intellectual leaps -- but have instead attempted quietly to encourage their own emotional and intellectual calisthenics by demonstrating to them new unimagined possibilities.

I was simply another student, although much older (and therefore more experienced in life) and also exceptionally very well read. The Germans have a term for me: Der ewige Student (the eternal student).

As Nietzsche's Zarathustra says to his students as he departs from them: "This is my way, now you go your way."

The glory of the Residential College is that it possesses and encompasses so comfortably and productively so many different kinds of teachers and programs and is able to attract so many different kinds of students.

Frederick Peters  
June 23, 2020