

**“Where We Live:  
Good Dogs and Nagging Counselors in the House of Education”**

**Professor John Ernest**

Thank you for coming today. I’m grateful to Michael Lee for doing so much to organize this event; I’m grateful to Bruce Mallory and Lee Seidel for their ongoing promotion of and devotion to excellence in teaching; I’m grateful to Sarah for her humbling introduction today and for her inspiration in the classroom; I’m grateful to all of my students for always doing more than is expected of them, and for doing so with intelligence, conscience, and commitment; and I’m grateful to you all for gathering here today as we recommit ourselves--as we must do regularly--to the challenges and possibilities of education. I want to savor this moment with this congregation of devoted educators and think about what draws us together, and what inspires us to congregate with others each year to hold to that central but somehow always frail conviction that what we do in our classrooms is essential to the intellectual and spiritual health of our world.

Those who have given the Brierley Lecture in the past have often focused on important mentors, and I’d like to begin by acknowledging my most important mentor, the poet William Bronk. Bronk makes for an unusual mentor for someone who teaches literature, for he wasn’t much interested in literature as a field of academic study. In fact, he dropped out of Harvard graduate school in large part because he was so frustrated by the way the scholars there talked about literature, something I’ve thought about time and again as I’ve developed my own approach to teaching. In one of his letters, discussing how people approach literature, Bronk had this to say:

Insofar as there can be anything about me worth writing about it would have to be the work and the importance of the work can only be to the reader who has entered into a relation with it. This is at variance with the generally—not only academically—held idea that works of art can be examined, described and assessed as though they were precious stones. Or houses. But the importance of houses is lost in their selling price. We live in them. Or we don't.

With the spirit of William Bronk guiding me, what I want to think about today before this congregation of educators is what it means to live in the house of education, and what it means to draw our students into that house. Since I teach literature, I’ll focus on the literary wing of the house--though in another lecture, I might argue that without literature there is no house.

Often, of course, our students can prove to be very demanding and frustrating houseguests. They don’t wipe their feet; they’re careless with the furniture; and they show little appreciation for the rich meals we’ve prepared. Sometimes they just get restless, as if they were prisoners at a gathering of their parents’ friends and they just want to know where we keep the television. And when we take them on the grand tour of the house and show them the great and complex life one can discover there, the literary and scholarly communities that inhabit the house, our students will sometimes complain that we are analyzing the literary text to death.

Fortunately, not all of our students are like this, and, thanks to our best efforts, many of our students find themselves feeling very much at home after a while, almost in spite of themselves. Still, I’m drawn to the students who don’t settle in either quickly or completely, the ones who feel that we are analyzing literature to death--because I think that there’s a chance that they might be right. *Anybody* can ignore a work of literature, and some people can do literature

some serious damage, but it takes a well-trained professional to actually kill a work of literature, to analyze it to death and ensure that no one will be interested in coming back to view the corpse.

I use the term “professional” advisedly, for something happens when we turn the reading of literature--or really, any true educational pursuit--from a vocation into a profession, complete with disciplinary alliances and career-driven priorities. At the very least, it has to be acknowledged, I think, that the institution of education does not provide the ideal space for building and living in the house of literature. Novels capable of changing one’s life are often simply read on schedule, with an eye looking forward to the examination or the paper. Poems that call for intimacy and exploration can be reduced to elements and themes that can be represented in a standardized test. Authors who seem to call upon us to go forth with wonder might well find themselves representing a system that asks us to stay put and remember the information on the board. Too often, the challenge of a comprehensive analysis is reduced to a set of methods, a privileged realm of knowledge, and a kind of mystical puzzle used to distinguish the truly cultured from everyone else. Students who resist the confinement and regularization of institutional education are not viewed as potential Henry David Thoreaus determined to explore or Charlotte Perkins Gilmanes resisting the yellow wallpaper of the classroom; and even the most sympathetic teacher, sensing the lost opportunity, can offer them little beyond heartfelt encouragement before the T-Hall bell rings. I’m inclined to agree with the educator Richard Mitchell, who has said that “education is exceedingly rare in schooling, and when it breaks out, it is as the result of some happy accident, an accident that might have befallen a prepared mind, or maybe any mind at all, just as readily in the streets as in the schools” (26).

I’m emphasizing the institutional constraints we face not to devalue our work but instead to suggest that we often find ourselves positioned as institutional representatives in ways that we wouldn’t care to endorse and usually are not required to even recognize. In a sometimes glorious rant against the way that literature is taught in the American educational system, Richard Ohmann has asserted that

society has other uses for us than those we have generally chosen. It uses schools and colleges to sort out young people for various kinds of work. English teachers must do that and use literature to help in the sorting. Society needs help from the schools to justify its present divisions, including much inequality. There is pressure--indirect but heavy--on teachers of literature to join in this effort. The ruling classes want a culture, including a literature and a criticism, that supports the social order and discourages rebellion, while it sanctions all kinds of nonthreatening nonconformity. (24)

I’m drawn to this statement because for so long I’ve held to an admittedly idealistic and romantic faith in the power of literature to change the world, while increasingly I’ve been forced to recognize the power of the world to change literature. And I’m drawn to this statement as well because I think that too often we close our eyes to the underlying principles of selection that govern our approach to teaching and evaluation. Often, indeed, we run the risk of transforming education into a kind of pedagogical Survivor’s show. Each week one more person is voted off the island of opportunity, and what is left is someone who has mastered the cultural game leading us all in a celebration of the self-aggrandizing cynicism of the show.

It might be the case, in fact, that it is difficult to draw students into the house of not just literature but education itself not because they don’t care about reading or education but because they do care, or at least want to. It’s possible that they at least feel the demands of education and

do not know how to meet those demands in the context of institutional life. Some years ago, when I expressed my own frustrations in this regard to my good friend Clyde Allen, owner of Baldface Books, he recommended that I read something by the educational reformer and activist Jonathan Kozol--and since then I've not been able to think about my courses without thinking of Kozol's opening warning in his justly angry educational manifesto *The Night Is Dark and I Am Far from Home*. "People who are looking for 'a lot of interesting ideas,'" Kozol states, "and hope to dabble here for little more, offend the author and degrade themselves. They would do well to stop right now" (32). Kozol insists that readers bring themselves to his book completely and act on their ideas concretely.

What students--and what teachers--can afford to approach books or ideas in this way with the demands of an educational system pressing in upon them? But I wonder, too, whether we can afford *not* to read and think in this way--whether we can afford to tear down Bronk's house of education so as to build one more set of confining desks for the same old classroom.

My sense of urgency comes from my own experience as a reader and as a product of a triple education: the educational institution my teachers consciously represented, the educational imperatives that Richard Ohmann talks about, and the educational quest I had to embark on myself once I realized what I had--and had not--been through in all my years of schooling. In some ways, I feel that I didn't really learn to read until *after* I completed my formal education. After all, I received a Ph.D. in American literature without ever being asked to read more than a handful of African American writers. As is often the case, my students proved to be the best teachers, and the teaching I did as a graduate student convinced me that my education was woefully incomplete. And so I began to read on my own. My teachers were writers from the nineteenth century: Frederick Douglass, Frances Harper, David Walker, Harriet Jacobs, William Wells Brown, Anna Julia Cooper. And as I learned to read the many books, poems, essays, speeches, and newspaper articles these writers produced--and as I discovered that I had much to learn in this regard--I came to appreciate my self-conscious ignorance as a much better guide than my earlier appreciation for the security of knowledge. Eventually, I came to appreciate the guidance, the demands, of ignorance in the way that Barbara Johnson presents it in her book *A World of Difference*. "If I perceive my ignorance," Johnson explains, "as a gap in knowledge instead of an imperative that changes the very nature of what I think I know, then I do not truly experience my ignorance" (16).

Teaching from this perspective cannot be just a matter of filling in the gaps in what is recognized as essential knowledge; it must instead be a matter of recognizing one's ignorance as "an imperative that changes the very nature of what [we] think [we] know." My education in the house of African American literature has led me to question almost everything that I have been taught; it has led me to distrust much of what we call knowledge; and it has led me to stray from the well marked map of American literary history that I had been given as my prize for being a good student for so many years. For I do not believe that we basically had the story right and that now we simply need to add to the mix white women writers, African American writers, Asian American writers, or any of the wide world of writers so long omitted and neglected. I do not believe that the interpretive tools I've acquired over the years are always useful for or even appropriate to the task at hand; I do not believe that my well-marked map of the literary landscape will serve me well, and I find myself trying to piece together a map without knowing quite either where I am or where I want to go.

The map I'm using might seem strange, for increasingly my approach to the classroom and to scholarship is informed by my reading of Black liberation theology. Black liberation

theology is the body of work that developed in the 1970s and that looked to join the Black Power movement with a theological method. This method involves identifying the priorities of Biblical interpretation by looking to the situation, both spiritual and material, of the community that is the subject of one's ministry. How one approaches the divine text is shaped by the changing needs and condition of the community one serves. This school of thought is associated most prominently with theologian James H. Cone, who has said that "it is in the community that values are chosen, because the community provides the structure in which our being as persons is realized. It is not possible to transcend the community; it frames our being because being is always *being in relation to others*" (97). Accordingly, Cone argues, theology must be attentive to the values of the community, even as it works to refine, revitalize, or reform those values. Ultimately, Black liberation theology is a mode of theology strongly focused on the concerns of the world. Its primary concern is to respond to the conditions of the world that keep people--as a community and as individuals--from realizing their potential, from connecting to the divine, from connecting to themselves and one another.

I've studied Black liberation theology because it is quite specifically appropriate to the literature I teach, much of which deals explicitly and complexly with Christian theory and practice in the nineteenth century. But I've studied it also because I believe that one can draw a pedagogical framework from this body of thought and use it to understand the challenges one faces in the classroom. For the educational system and the society that shapes that system are themselves communities of values that shape our students in particular ways. Our students live in that system and embody truths that we often fail to read. We need to attend to these students, learn from them.

We must avoid the temptation to think that teaching is something that can be done in an empty room, or that if learning is not taking place, it must be our students' fault. A purely content-driven approach to education, one focused on simply delivering an imagined body of information that an educated person should possess, is one destined to fail, if only by sorting out students according to the needs of cultural imperatives that have little to do with the education of individuals and the ongoing health of the community. I have in mind Richard Mitchell's distinction between education and training in his book *The Gift of Fire*. "Here is a truth that most teachers will not tell you," Mitchell declares, "even if they know it: Good training is a continual friend and a solace; it helps you now, and assures you of help in the future. Good education is a continual pain in the neck, and assures you always of more of the same." "Training," Mitchell continues, "is a good dog, a constant companion and an utterly loyal and devoted friend," whereas "education is a nagging counselor" (153). One might say also that approaches to teaching that focus only on training can be quite comforting, while approaches that focus on both training and education can be a continual pain in the neck. But that's a pain that we sorely need.

We need an approach to pedagogical practice that attends to the complexity of the culture and history that have shaped our approach to education; we need to read the multiple texts before us--that of history, that of the academic subjects over which we claim authority, *and that of the community we serve*. In other words, the community in the classroom, the students themselves, in all of their complexity, should be recognized as the guiding lights of education. In important ways, they define the context that we must explore if we are to arrive at an understanding of a literary text, or of history--or, indeed, of any subject that we present as preparation for life in the world today. At the very least, our students can help us determine where we must start, where we should try to go, and why we need to go there.

To say this, though, is to say that the community we gather together to meet the challenge of education is itself something to which we must attend at least as carefully as we attend to the need to cover the range of disciplines that we believe an educational institution should cover. And in this respect, one can only observe, UNH is sorely lacking--for behind the slogans of diversity are real educational needs, needs that UNH is not in a position to satisfy.

Diversity covers a wide range of concerns, but those who know me know that my great concern has to do with race--for I believe strongly that if we are to think purposefully about where we are going then we will need to come to a just understanding of where we have been, and accordingly we will need to think carefully about the central presence of race in American history and culture.

This is a subject often simplified or misunderstood, so I want to try to be clear about what I mean by race. I am not talking about discredited notions of biological entities or a politically convenient, pop-culture set of social affiliations. Rather, I am talking about race as a systemic, historical construction--legal, political, economic, religious, and educational. What race is in the United States (for it is different in different places and at different times) is what has been created throughout U.S. history. Race is the complex product of legal, economic, social, scientific, and even theological practices--a complex effect of the various subjects we teach at the university. As Toni Morrison has written,

for three hundred years black Americans insisted that “race” was no usefully distinguishing factor in human relationships. During those same three centuries every academic discipline, including theology, history, and natural science, insisted “race” was *the* determining factor in human development. When blacks discovered they had shaped or become a culturally formed race, and that it had specific and revered difference, suddenly they were told there is no such thing as “race,” biological or cultural, that matters and that genuinely intellectual exchange cannot accommodate it. (370)

We are still confronting (or, more often, avoiding) the complex and challenging effects of this history, including a nation that often tries to deny or revise its history. As Morrison suggests, those whose lives have been most consciously and violently shaped by the past are told either that the past doesn't matter or that the past isn't what it used to be.

And this situation, for me, defines a significant part of the university's responsibility to both address and benefit from diversity--for we need a community that demands from us a suitably complex approach to education, a community that can guarantee that education remains “a nagging counselor.” We need, on campus, people who have been variously and differently shaped by our history; we need courses that address racial history and the dynamics of the U.S. social order; we need a community of intellectual and social exchange in which we realize the presence of history in our lives, in our institutions, and in our approaches to our disciplines.

What does this mean in practice? As many teachers know, moving from a teaching centered approach to a learning centered approach--from teaching subjects to teaching students--is not a simple matter. What might Black liberation theology, or the imperatives of education over training, or the realities of a discomfiting past have to do with teaching students to read carefully and well? What does this have to do with living in the house of literature?

Let's take as an example the teaching of Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Working inevitably within the context of a white supremacist history and culture, which I think is an inescapable fact of life for teachers in the United States, when I think about teaching Douglass's *Narrative*, I think first about what I'll call

the problem of easy knowledge. Too often, it seems to me, both teachers and students are all too ready to believe that they can understand both the *Narrative* and its world. Often, that is, teachers and students bring to the classroom a set framework for understanding and responding to slave narratives, and a small and very general body of knowledge about slavery that they apply directly to individual narratives. Douglass stands in for all slaves, and the *Narrative* is reduced to a list of horrors, a generalized tale of struggle, something that can be transformed into the story of a hero for our age by distancing the story *from* our age. We're horrified that such things took place, we're glad it's over, and we're proud to say so. Too often, it seems to me, teachers and students alike, troubled by Douglass's powerful introduction to the nineteenth-century U.S. culture of slavery, don't read the text so much as take an opportunity to reaffirm their ethical self-images. We don't analyze the text to death; we admire it to death.

In teaching Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*, then, we need to teach ourselves not to hear what we expect to hear but rather to listen to what Douglass has to say--and this requires that we study Douglass's careful crafting of the *Narrative*, and that we consider the historical and cultural context of Douglass's life and work. And this requires the teacher to assert her or his authority in guiding students through the maze of history and the multilayered intricacies of literary craft. In other words, this requires a considerable degree of knowledge and expertise, and a great deal of training.

But if this is all we do, then we haven't done enough, and we've barely begun to honor Douglass's *Narrative* as a living text, something more than simply an artifact from the past. We are still presenting a new version of easy knowledge. For we have yet to attend to that other source of interpretation, that other context for understanding this text--the students in the room. This should be a difficult read for them, for the more one understands Douglass's *Narrative*, the more one is likely to recognize the extent to which one does not understand one's own world--and it isn't long before one is led to question even the security or truth of one's own sense of identity. It's only natural, then, that students born and raised in the United States can feel that they have been grossly misinformed about their past, and that they are living a lie. They naturally can feel defensive. They might complain about all of this race talk. They might complain about dwelling in the past, particularly if they begin to recognize the extent to which the past dwells in us all.

And so if we are to avoid dishonoring Douglass by admiring him to death, then classroom discussion needs to be a messy process, one in which we are free to stray from and return to the text, following the demands of a discussion that engages students where they live. The instructor must read *both* texts in the classroom--the assigned texts, and the individual students themselves--thinking about how this particular group reshapes the context within which the text can be understood, and how the text can speak to the particular needs of this group. Douglass's concerns must become our concerns, and our concerns must lead us to ask specific questions of Douglass's *Narrative*. Sometimes these questions will take us beyond what we know, and so will identify for us an approach to education that puts into practice Barbara Johnson's notion of self-conscious ignorance--in which we embark on a search not for the security of knowledge but rather for an open and fluid understanding of the worlds we live in and the ways in which we have been shaped by those worlds. I do not mean by this that we should devalue knowledge, but rather that we should recognize the provisionality of knowledge--and always with the goal of understanding what this work of literature has to say to us.

But if we read these dual texts carefully, the text in the classroom and the text *of* the classroom, then the history lessons facilitated by Douglass, or Frances Harper, or Toni Morrison,

might lead us into the rather discomfoting house of education. Education, I believe, must be difficult at times if we are to teach the truth. But the pain of education is transitory; the life it offers is liberating. We need to let books live so that our students can live--and we must watch for the danger that the life created in the classroom might become a kind of puppet show, one more performance orchestrated by a culture that has developed intricate ways of avoiding self-recognition.

And so I am arguing that we need what might be called liberation pedagogy--the work of a community, the work of ongoing inquiry, discovery and rediscovery--and I think that those of us who deal with books and writing, including but not limited to literary texts, are particularly well positioned to find our way into this challenging realm of education. Or, at least, we can do so whenever we learn how to avoid treating reading and writing as so many texts to "be examined, described and assessed as though they were precious stones. Or houses." "The importance of houses" is indeed "lost in their selling price." Learning to live in those houses, each semester with each new group of students, can be difficult, but the rewards are great, and the need is greater still. When my students and I read literature in the classroom, a group performance that follows the quiet intimacy of individual encounters with the text, we are reading history in all of its complex messiness. More importantly, I think, we are *making* history. We are bringing together individual impressions and fears, exposing and exploring misinformation, shaping community values, searching for common ideals, and always identifying the nature and terms of our ignorance about who we are and how we got this way. We cannot trust this history to conventional wisdom or to the seductions of easy knowledge. We need to enter into the process of life, someplace between the world defined by the curriculum and the worlds inhabited by our students. Between those worlds is someplace that looks like home, where we live, and where we need to work.