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January 17, 2004

The Heart of the Program

Welcome, January freshmen. On Thursday night, your life in this college began with a seminar, the first of about 250 such occasions that you will take part in over the next few years. What you do in those seminars is going to get into your blood, and you will never willingly put it aside. Graduates of St. John's gather together occasionally in all the cities where more than a handful of them cluster, usually for a meal, but before or after they eat they have seminars. They come back to Santa Fe in the summers or Annapolis in the fall once in a while, and they fill their old classrooms to hold seminars. You have begun to develop a power and an inclination to use it that will always be with you; you will never be unseminared.

That last word is not my invention but Shakespeare's. I will return to his use of it in a little while, but first we need to explore some other and more common ways the word seminar is used, that are not what you will come to mean by the word. I once got in the mail a written text of twenty or so pages, with a note from the sender saying "this is a seminar I gave at Wisdom College." (I've changed the name of the college to protect the innocent.) I took the writer to mean that it was a lecture he had given to a small group of advanced students sitting around a table, who were eventually allowed to speak, when he, the professor, was good and ready. That is more or less what the word means in the world of colleges and universities; it has in common with our seminars only the arrangement of the furniture. When we hold what he was calling a seminar, as we are this afternoon, we call it a lecture.

Outside the academic world, there is yet another sense of the word seminar. Someone I know once said to me something like "you won't be working very hard this summer; you'll only have a seminar." He had in mind the sessions sometimes attended by doctors to talk about new techniques or pills, or by insurance agents to share the mysteries of their trade. This is probably the sort of thing most people think of as a seminar, and it has more in common with ours than do those of the usual academic variety; it is a group of peers assembled with their common experience and knowledge to speak in an unscripted way about matters of professional concern to them all. We lack the knowledge of these professionals, but at least we have more than furniture in common with them.

No one lectures in our seminars, or delivers a paper, but what are we doing there? Some of you may think we're debating. It is probably true that everything said in a seminar is in some way set against something else opposed to it, and that some arguing goes back and forth, but that alone does not constitute a debate. In fact, if one of our seminars ever does degenerate into mere debate, that opposing and arguing is wasted, and fails to achieve the effect that makes it worthwhile. Debaters try to win, not to understand more. They make arguments that tend to support what they've already claimed, and not the arguments that seem best to them at the moment. They grab hold of the weakest things said by those they're debating against, which may be things of minor importance, and deflect the discussion away from bigger and better things that would undercut their own chosen positions. In a seminar that goes well, every new thing that is said adds content or depth or a new perspective to what has gone before, but if a stretch of a seminar has become a debate, the things spoken about are likely to become more narrow, more vague, and more antagonistic to any possibility of learning.

Why should that be so? Why shouldn't debate, more than any other kind of discussion, clarify alternatives? One piece of evidence I can offer you to the contrary is any televised program you've ever seen on any current political issue. It is customary on these shows to seek balance by bringing in advocates of opposite extreme positions, who trade their best arguments. For the sake of seeing what's wrong with this, let's assume that neither side stoops to name-calling, ridicule, or quoting poll results. Let two thoughtful people, committed to opposite beliefs, defend those beliefs articulately. Let each have a strong incentive to win converts, which should in turn assure that all the

arguments tending to support either side will eventually be discovered and presented. But what if the large spectrum of possible opinions between the two extremes has more in it worth serious consideration than either of the original sides? Neither debater has any desire to allow such positions to stand. They must either discredit these moderate positions, or try to reformulate them as belonging to their own sides. Debates exert a centrifugal force that leaves the central region vacant.

But they have a worse effect even than that. Debates start with definite positions to which the debaters are committed. Both sides depend upon the formulations from which they began. When real thinking is going on, one of the most valuable things that can happen is that someone steps back and sees a pair of alternatives as a limited way of taking hold of some thought that has wider boundaries and deeper roots. When debate is going on the debaters are like boxers in a ring, forever setting out from and returning to the same corners. Is there a wider world in which to explore and learn? They will never find it, if they have once committed themselves to debating.

For us, the question about the seminar is not merely whether it is or is not a debate, but what it is. We are not debating about debate, so we are free to move on to a new perspective altogether. Let us try another suggestion that I have heard, that the seminar is an exchange of ideas. This is at least a wider possibility than the previous one. The whole global economy is an exchange of goods and services, and an exchange of ideas would similarly admit as many participants as have anything to bring to it, so we are not stuck with the ping-pong-like batting back and forth of debate. The exchange admits more than two sides, and each participant might be receiving something instead of batting it away. What's more, the parties to an exchange need to put something in to get something else out, and this too accords with the nature of the seminar. A receptive openness is the first condition for learning, but little can be learned by those who don't try out their own thoughts and their own opinions about what they've gotten out of the book or the conversation. In a true exchange, the back-and-forth of the debaters is replaced by a give-and-take that does not repel an opponent but joins in a many-sided effort to gain an adequate understanding of something.

So the commercial metaphor of an exchange has served us better than the athletic or pugilistic model of a debate. We might declare victory to the former and defeat to the latter, but this would mean that we were still stuck in the debater's way of thinking. If we suit our own speech to the second model, we could say that we have exchanged a worse opinion for a better one. And that formulation does give us an adequate understanding of why the seminar is not a debate. The debater never moves from his chosen corner; he may fortify it, but he will never be free of it. But one who has left a starting place can look out on new vistas from a new place, and continue the motion to new opinions that might be worth visiting at least, and perhaps worth dwelling with. Similarly, just by thinking about commercial exchange, we may be able to see the seminar in a new way that is still better than either of those we've considered.

What is involved in the act of exchange? You have to bring something of your own into the marketplace, and you have to be willing to give it up to gain something of value. These things are both reflected in the seminar, but they may both be misleading. First, you may think that what you have to bring to the table is a finished product, an articulate and impressive interpretation of something. But the seminar takes place much nearer the origins of the production chain. Any sort of raw material of an understanding is needed and welcome. You might have only a question, and not even be sure how to ask it. You might think a certain passage is important, and not know how to say why. You might think two passages are connected, but not be sure what the connection is. You might have none of those things, but only a willingness to work, and you can always go right to work in the seminar, because you have with you the only set of tools you need, your memory of what you have read and your desire to understand it. These possibilities already suggest a division of labor and an opportunity for cooperation. Any such cooperative effort has the advantage that what it builds belongs to those who build it, because they watch every step of its development. That makes it far superior to any exchange that began with a finished product, even one delivered for our instruction by

the most famous and learned professor. We are better off in solid huts of our own making than trying to take up residence in such mansions, if, for all we know, their foundations may be full of holes.

But what if you don't feel the need even for a new hut? Suppose you do like the place you are already, not with the fierceness or arbitrariness of a debater but with a reasonable sense that it is a good place to be. The fact that you have opinions you don't want to give up doesn't disqualify you from participating in the exchange. The currency of the seminar is opinions, and giving an opinion doesn't mean giving it away. Giving an opinion in a seminar, though, does mean giving it up for examination. If you are really participating in the seminar, nothing you say will have the belligerent or defensive tone of a debater; all of your opinions will be offered up to be worked at in common, even when you are strongly committed to those opinions. An opinion worth holding on to can never suffer by being examined, and you can never suffer by opening your beliefs to respectful examination among friends. If you do not move on to new opinions, the seminar at least will bring your old ones back to you enhanced, seen from more sides, and deepened. No opinion that enters a seminar discussion can remain merely what it was before. Even a tutor who has asked the same questions about the same books many times can never foresee what will be done with those questions by a new group of students. A tutor can direct the seminar to passages, to questions, to connections, to arguments, and to interpretations, but only the seminar as a whole can do anything at the places to which it is directed. One spontaneous response can open a door no one has ever been through, and a series of honest responses will construct a new world for the understanding and imagination to explore.

The exchange that takes place in a seminar is of a kind that commercial traders can only dream about, in which everything you give up can come back to you appreciated in value, and supplemented by new and other riches produced on the spot. How is such a thing possible? If the seminar is an exchange, it is not one of the commercial sort, but a dialectical exchange. Dialectic is something that the greatest of philosophers have all talked about and practiced. You may have heard a schematic description of dialectic as a formal process in which a thesis and antithesis yield a synthesis, which in turn becomes a new thesis with which to repeat the process. This is a superficial account of the thinking of one particular philosopher, and even he would by no means consider it accurate. In any case, genuine thinking rarely takes place in such a mechanical way. There may or may not have been an occasion in your last seminar on which you or someone else replied to a claim by saying "I think it's exactly the opposite," but something different happens hundreds of times in every seminar. And even if a statement is succeeded by its complete antithesis, the seminar may take a long road to finding a synthesis, or discover that some other line of thinking altogether is more fruitful.

What does happen typically when something is asserted in seminar is that someone else responds in a way that takes it as partly right and partly wrong, or as capturing something correct, but with some crucial word that doesn't feel as though it captures it best. This sort of thing is not just disagreement dressed up in polite terms. It is the natural way thinking works. When someone articulates a thought, the rest of us try to understand it, but each of us is different. We bring different experiences and opinions to the conversation. In the mere act of construing what someone else has said, each of us is likely to bump up against a way of grasping it that seems to cohere better, or fit the text better, or lead more directly to some further insight. And now we're off and running, because that two-sided view of one overlapping thought is now twice as likely to strike off sparks in the thinking of a third person. It is perhaps here that you can see best what's wrong with debating in a seminar. If the first speaker wants to defend the original assertion, the potential third speaker is cut out of the discussion, and a seminar that might have moved on gets bogged down. A follow-up point or two can help clarify things, but only if they are offered up and let go. A seminar is a living thing that needs freedom to move, and no one knows where it is headed, because a third contribution may overlap something in the second that was not present in the first, and the whole series of interrelated observations will be something no one on earth has ever considered before

in just that way.

The dialectic of the seminar has the power to generate thought. An opening question may be asked about which you think you have nothing to say, but as soon as someone else responds to it, you might begin to discover opinions that are altogether yours, but weren't present for you until the conversation nudged you into conceiving them. Everything said in the seminar is seminal in that way. I mentioned earlier that Shakespeare invented the word unseminared; he uses it, in *Antony and Cleopatra* (Act I, scene v), in just the sense we are now considering, to describe a eunuch. Exchange no longer seems an adequate metaphor for an activity in which the giving and receiving are always generative and fertile. The seminar is not the market into which you take the products of prior learning, but a place to which you go to engage in the act of learning. That is the power you are acquiring, the power to conceive thoughts you could never come up with alone, but that no one else could ever conceive for you. The seminar is always a process of appropriation, of expanding your thinking by taking more and more possibilities into yourself.

One way this process of appropriation works is by getting rid of the fancy and unfamiliar language in which thoughts might first seem most impressive, and moving ever forward into the straightforward and ordinary words that are richest in meaning. We are now at a point in this discussion at which we can enrich our own language about the seminar. When we last formulated what the seminar is, we called it a dialectical exchange, and we have just abandoned the noun. We should now be ready to abandon the adjective too. The word *dialectical* has served a purpose for us, but it has no magic in it, and if we rely too much on it, our thinking will be blocked from going forward. What dialectical means is "suited to conversation," or working the way conversation works. Our elaborate discussion of this remarkable instrument of learning was all along just a matter of looking closely at a certain kind of conversation.

But now I have to specify the kind of conversation the seminar is. You take part in conversations all the time that generate no learning in anyone, conversations about nothing in particular, or about something in the newspaper, or even about serious topics like war or poverty. The seminar conversation is the second phase of an activity that begins with reading something, and it is not a matter of indifference what that something is. For example, there are good books available about Homer's *Iliad*; why shouldn't the first seminar reading be designed to give you some background and help you read the *Iliad* itself? An introduction of that sort might help you feel comfortable, but it would squash the very activity you need to engage in if you're going to learn anything. Books about other books are called secondary literature, and whatever else they may do, they stand between you and your own encounter with the primary text. If a book tells you what Homer's gods are, and you believe it, you will not wonder what Homer's gods are, and without such wondering, you will not call on your own resources to think about what a god might be. And the less thinking you do in your life about what a god might be, the less you will have thought about what a human being is. The *Iliad* is not going to fit neatly into any of the categories of thought you already have available. If you want to gain any understanding of it at all, there are two ways you can go: you can read some secondary literature, or get even that prepackaged by listening to lectures given by a professor, or you can begin to expand your own ways of thinking. You can suspend some of the assumptions you already make about things, try to see through the eyes of the poet and his characters, take the risk of making mistakes, and stretch your powers to imagine and think. An appropriate seminar reading is one that launches you into the seminar conversation with a need to stretch yourself to understand it.

This stretching toward understanding is the central activity of the most important kind of learning. It cannot be done by taking over an explanation, or a theory, or a way of thinking from anyone else. We sometimes say that the teachers at St. John's are not the tutors but the program authors, but this does not mean that Homer knows something which you need to come to know. It means that Homer invites you to imagine things you've never seen and think thoughts you've never had. If you accept that invitation, you will not be replacing some twenty-first-century knowledge with some other, old-

fashioned set of opinions. You will be expanding your own capacity to evaluate and choose among the true array of possible opinions and ways of knowing. You need not begin by assuming that Homer has the truth about anything. But if you are going to learn anything by reading Homer, you do need to begin by assuming that he has something worth your effort to grasp.

It happens that the second book of the *Iliad* contains an example of someone who is unwilling or unable to make an assumption of that kind. He is not interpreting a written work, but he is engaging in interpretation, and he is a bad reader of the things around him. His name is Thersites, and he is the first of the Achaeans to speak when the army has been reassembled after its wild rush to its ships (II, 211-278). If you remember Thersites at all, it is probably for Homer's description of him as the ugliest man who went to Troy. But his malformed body is an image of his words, which are described by Homer as lacking balance and wholeness (*ametroepês, epea akosma*), and by Odysseus as lacking judgment or the power to make distinctions (*akritomuthos*). What he says is that the only reason the army is fighting is to get gold and women for Agamemnon. Now it is a fact that thousands of men fight and die at Troy, and Agamemnon gets the pick of captured treasure and women, and it may, after all, be true that there is no purpose to the war beyond that. As someone who challenges authority and debunks any high-sounding justifications of war, Thersites may seem like an image of ourselves, and someone speaking the plain truth. But what if there is some higher reason for the fighting? Thersites does not try to understand what that reason would be, show what is wrong with it, and conclude that it is false or hollow; he is simply incapable of conceiving any motive other than greed, lust, and glorying in having more than others do. His argument is not based on Agamemnon's defects or on human nature; he just assumes everyone is like himself and argues from his own limitations.

As soon as one entertains the question whether there is some better reason for the war, it becomes clear that Thersites has no insight to offer on that question one way or the other. Since he can't even conceive a good reason, he can't compare it to a bad one. Thersites has no place in a council of the Achaeans because he has no argument to make that takes in view the choices before such a council. So Odysseus replies both to the man and to the things he has said. He replies to the man by beating him, with Agamemnon's golden scepter, the sign of the king's authority, much to the delight of the men, incidentally. But Odysseus also takes up the other scepter, the staff the speakers hold in council, and replies to Thersites' speech, and in his first seven lines (284-290) he already gives three reasons for fighting that were invisible to Thersites. Agamemnon's honor is at stake, the soldiers are bound by a promise they have made to him, and their own honor is at stake if they willingly abandon that promise. He urges the men to stay, and they roar their approval. Please understand: none of this means that Odysseus is right and Thersites is wrong. Honor is one of the great themes of the *Iliad* and is subjected to the most challenging scrutiny, and the exact fulfillment of a promise becomes one of the most devastating events in the poem. The important thing is that such invisible motives as honor and promises come to sight, and be thought about as claims on human beings that may or may not be worth respecting. Those who read the poem and do not allow themselves to feel the claims of those motives have not even entered into the world of discourse the poet has made.

But the reader who has listened attentively to Odysseus's appeal to the soldiers' honor will hear a shade of difference shortly afterward when Nestor makes the same appeal (II, 337-368). Where Odysseus had addressed them as human beings who had freely given their word, Nestor locates their honor in their courage and competence at fighting. In the *Iliad*, then, a soldier's honor may be at least two different things. And there may be serious reasons for subordinating one's own honor to that of the king. When Agamemnon reviews his men before battle in Book IV, he sees Diomedes and a companion at ease away from the battlefield, and tells them they are not the men their fathers were. The companion takes him literally, and recites the accomplishments by which he and Diomedes have excelled their fathers. But this companion, like Thersites, is someone who can see the facts but not the point. Diomedes replies to him (IV, 412-

418): "Dear old friend, shut up," and then says that Agamemnon is the one who has everything to gain and everything to lose. They owe it to *him*, not to themselves, to risk everything they might lose in battle, out of respect for one who is entitled to their respect (402). The characters in the poem who articulate their reasons for fighting are like the members of a seminar, as they take hold of the same motive from different angles, and the seminar that wants to understand the poem needs to be at least as versatile as they are.

Now if you're beginning to catch on to the way the motion of the seminar works, you won't be surprised to hear that the poem might point to a good reason for the war that is other than, and perhaps higher than, honor of any sort. In Book III, the word friendship starts to be used over and over. The Trojans join the Achaeans in swearing by it (323), and among the Trojans, Paris has lost it (453), but most important (354), Menelaus attributes the war to Paris's violation of his friendship. He is referring to the special bond of friendship between host and guest. Before the Greeks crossed the sea in war, Paris had crossed it in the other direction, in friendship, but ran off with Menelaus's wife. Just as Thersites cannot see any claim on himself stemming from honor, Paris saw no claim on himself stemming from the friendship of his host. But is such a claim worth the lives of thousands? How should we go about comparing things that are beyond all measurement? By now I am sure you will not be surprised to hear that Homer offers us an image in which these very things, guest-friendship and war, confront one another.

In Book VI, when Diomedes encounters an enemy he doesn't recognize, and demands to know his lineage, Glaucus responds with one of the most powerful similes in literature (145-149): "Son of Tydeus, great heart, why do you ask my genesis? Like the generations of leaves are those of men. The leaves, the wind scatters on the ground, and the sprouting wood grows others, as the time of spring comes over it. So one generation of men grows and the other is no more." Many years ago, Jonathan Tuck gave a lecture called "Dead Leaves," and showed how this passage has been imitated by every major epic poet in the thousands of years of the tradition since Homer's time, and the sophomores will have discovered an almost identical image in the 40th chapter of the book of Isaiah (verses 6-8). But great as the image is, and full of the truth of human mortality, the speech of Glaucus that the image introduces refutes it. Glaucus tells the stories of three generations of his ancestors, and attests that many men know those stories. He ends by telling the reason he has joined the war: so that he might bring no shame to the memory of his ancestors. They have not become anonymous leaf-mold, rotting away as the march of generations covers them up; they still retain their distinctness, and still act to cause effects in the world.

And the telling of their stories brings about another effect, and probably saves Glaucus's life, because Diomedes recognizes that Glaucus's grandfather was the guest-friend of his own grandfather, and drives his spear into the ground. He exclaims (215): "Why then you, now, are my friend, by way of our fathers, from the old times!" Instead of fighting they shake hands, and pledge hospitality to one another if they survive the war, and they exchange armor. The whole amazing interlude then closes with the lines everyone remembers best from this scene. "Zeus stole Glaucus's wits," Homer tells us, and he made an exchange of gold for bronze, of one-eleventh the value (234-236). But if you take that comment at face value, Homer has stolen your wits. That would mean that you had exchanged the opportunity to think about a beautiful and complex scene of 115 lines for a dim-witted three-line summary that might have come from Thersites. Homer's closing lines are like the leaves that sprout in the spring, and Homer has already let us see, if we were willing to think about it, that the latest sprouts do not necessarily annihilate what was generated before them. The poet let us watch human friendship span the dead generations and supercede the deadly enmities of the war. But how stupid we were to take that seriously; friendship might cost a man the price of 91 cattle.

I hope you can see how many-sided an apparently simple remark can be, and how an adequate understanding of a text may call for great flexibility. Our imaginations

have been drawn into a moment when the noise and dust and death of the battlefield have cleared away, and friendship has been sighted or at least declared. If we are swept up in the feeling of this moment, Homer suddenly pulls the rug out from under our feet, and makes us feel like gullible fools. Didn't we see that the only things that matter here are greed and anger, swindling and killing? If someone speaks to you of hereditary friendship, watch your wallet. The result is that it is up to us to restore any balance to the scene. Any defense of friendship over war will have to come from our own thinking and courage. If someone in the seminar has been *very* observant, though, it might appear that Homer has given us a tiny bit of help. In the long catalogue of ships and fighters at the end of Book II, Glaucus, who gave up gold armor for bronze, is the last person named, and he is called blameless, or not to be scorned. But if we look to the lines directly preceding this mention, we find someone named Nastes, whom Homer does blame and scorn, and calls silly. Why? Because this fool came to war wearing gold armor which was of no use in protecting him from death.

I offer these examples not as an interpretation of the first six books of the *Iliad*--I have, for instance, not even mentioned Achilles, who is clearly the central figure in this poem, even when he is absent from the action. Nor am I claiming that the bits and pieces I have taken up from those first six books are necessary parts of an interpretation of them. Other passages could serve equally well to bring out the same or similar questions and possibilities about what is in front of us and how it might be understood. I have focused on some places that suggest that the meaning any passage has at face value may need to be pushed and challenged, and that the author of the poem may provide help in doing that. Thersites' argument needs to be heard, and Glaucus' bargain needs to be questioned, if either of them is ever to come back to sight within any larger vision. The more pairs of eyes there are looking for evidence, and the more imaginations there are trying out interpretations, the likelier any of us is to find something that lifts us closer to the thing we have read. Since so many parts have to be balanced and combined, it makes little difference which ones are the starting points for any particular discussion, or even which ones come to be the focus of it.

I am suggesting a model of the act of interpretation that might be compared to learning how to swim. I had many weeks one summer, long ago, to think about why I couldn't even manage to float, until one day when I suddenly could do so easily, and then rapidly progressed through the sequence of skills that led from there to swimming. What I concluded is that every muscle in my body had to be involved in trying out countless combinations of tension and relaxation until they all produced one coherent performance that fit the needs of the situation. Similarly, I think, in reading a book one holds its unfolding parts in a loose grasp in which each of them might have to change many times before they begin fitting together in any convincing way. The same sort of process can be involved in writing a paper; instead of starting with an outline and a topic sentence, one might accomplish more by starting with some incomplete, not yet fully connected thoughts, and press onward through possibilities that might turn them into a coherent way of thinking about something. Reading or writing that builds up an interpretation gradually can produce a flexible solidity of understanding that is worth incomparably more than a bottom-line opinion adopted at the outset and defended like a fortress. The cost associated with the more adequate way of learning is a more-or-less constant feeling of incompleteness. The understanding sought may seem always out of reach, on a shore that may seem never to draw any nearer. But to be in the midst of genuine learning can also be exhilarating, as you realize that the solid ground you've left behind was never able in the first place to support the weight of a fully developed understanding.

Now if it sounds as though I'm saying that to be learning is to be at sea, our metaphor has gone beyond its usefulness. It is not easy in practice to draw a line between learning and knowing. The one who has embarked upon learning already has a grasp of many things, but is focused on extending and improving that grasp, and the kind of knowing that is at stake is not a fixed possession but is itself a living activity. With the multiplication tables, or the capitals of the states, though they might grow fuzzy in

your memory, you either know them or you don't, but with an understanding of the *Iliad*, or an assessment of the place of honor in human life, learning never ends. The better you understand such things, the more they draw you on to look further and see more. To be learning is not to be at sea, and to jump to a conclusion is not to have arrived anywhere at all.

There is a natural tendency, whenever a question has been raised, to want it disposed of. An unanswered question may be felt as pain, or at least annoyance, that craves relief in any plausible answer, and an impressive-sounding answer has the added allure of sophistication. Why is Achilles angry? He has low self-esteem, or a bipolar disorder. Thank you. Now we can find a new question and dispose of it. Thinking is troublesome, and thinking beyond the presuppositions one is accustomed to relying on is hard work. The forward motion of a discussion that opens up a question is always fighting a counter-tendency that seeks to close it. This is most evident in a seminar when people fight the question itself. Is Achilles right to withdraw from the war? What do you mean by "right"? This sort of counter-question is asked in good faith by someone who sees that there is more than one direction in which a good answer might be found, but who has not yet grasped that a wide-ranging question is bound to generate a better seminar than a question that can be answered conclusively by reading a line from page 24.

A question in seminar presses thinking forward toward a goal, but that goal is not like a soccer net. Answers do not count as victories. Thinking needs to approach such a goal by finding a place to start from, and that is no easy thing to accomplish. The real victories are won in the exploration that leads to the finding of a beginning. The seminar is the place where you will secure the starting-points for the thinking you will do for the rest of your life. It follows, then, that the seminar is the place where you will find the starting-points for thinking about the other parts of the program. The College catalogue has long recognized this function of the seminar by calling it the heart of the program. Some people have taken this to mean only that the seminar is the place where the focus on language or mathematics or musical analysis or laboratory observation is broadened, so that all these arts of understanding may be brought together and connections may be made with and among them. Like the heart, where blood from all the peripheral parts is united, purified, and sent back to re-invigorate those parts, the seminar does serve as a center of circulation. But the catalogue's metaphor resonates more deeply than that with us.

The tutorials and laboratories do not belong to departments, and questions that arise in them may be pursued without limits, as far as those present can take them. Every class at St. John's is finally a group of people sitting around a table, reflecting on something they have all done, and trying to make as much sense of it as possible. But the seminar is the place where that activity is the sole, direct, and sustained concern of those present, all the time it's going on, every time it happens. The seminar is the heart of the program in the primary sense that it is the place where you go directly, and intensely, to the heart of the learning activity, and put all your effort into it. A text is in front of you that has brought the best out of the intellects and imaginations of many people in the past, but no presuppositions about it are required, and no questions about it are off-limits. This open approach means that you can't take refuge in translating or demonstrating, can't insist on alleged facts you've found in an introduction, can't rely on anything but your own power to grasp and put into words something that seems to you to make sense, to have evidence, to be worth believing. What should be the standards for making sense, for having evidence, and for being worth believing? Those primary questions are always up for discussion in the seminar as much as are any other topics, and you are responsible for choosing among them and defending your choices. That responsibility is shared by everyone at the table, but it is not lessened by that sharing. The learning activity, at its heart, keeps all presuppositions open to question, and all points of view open to sight. Every kind of learning is worthwhile and needed, but unseminared learning can never achieve the highest possibilities of what it means to learn.