Talking, Reading, Writing, Listening

Eva Brann

I imagine that on Parents' Weekend there might be some parents attending this once weekly occasion when the college assembles to hear a lecture. By its very name, a lecture is read—but read out loud, delivered in the writer's voice. Thus, the sequence goes: I thought, I wrote, I read, I speak. Although this is the principal way of teaching at institutions of higher education, it is a curious one. Here at St. John's, *we* show our respect for the possible profit we might derive from it by requiring our students to come to a lecture every Friday night—*just when*, elsewhere, it is prelude-time to party night. And we express our suspicion of lecture-hearing by asking students to listen to a lecture—but *only once a week*. So this one weekly hour of just sitting and listening is mandatory, and about as enforceable as a mandatory evacuation before a storm. (This simile appears here because this lecture was written in the dark during Hurricane Irene.)

The attendance that we do take utterly seriously is presence in class—seminar above all. In seminar, no speeches are delivered. Instead we talk, in turn, to one another. So rather than call my lecture "Speaking, Writing, Reading, Listening," I have substituted "Talking" for "Speaking." Talk seems to denote a more conversational, almost social mode of speech, less formal, more spontaneous, more participatory. And yet our seminar is a mandatory, scheduled class, with prescribed texts. Is that a setting for talk?

So I would like to think in public about our modes of being together, about the how and what of this college as a community of learning. Since we, the tutors, collude

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with our students in making them a little impatient with being talked *at*, I'll sneak around that resistance, which I share. I'll snaffle their good will (old books on rhetoric called this formal beginning of a speech the *captatio benevolentiae*, "the capture of benevolence") by speaking about talking itself and what it entails.

Your children, our students, will probably have told you now and then that parents don't know anything. Freshmen, on the other hand, know everything. They are fresh, unimpaired in spirit—and also, perhaps, somewhat fresh in a now obsolete meaning of the term: cheeky. Sophomores know a little less; their class name means "wise fools," as their knowledge of Greek will tell them; it is a combination of Greek *sophon*, "wise" and *moron*, "foolish." Juniors and the college elders, the seniors, have reapproached their parents and become almost perfect in ignorance.

I am, in fact, being serious. The members of this community of learning are not ashamed to own up to their own ignorance; indeed we think better of this thoughtful confession than of a profession of expertise. It's why the teachers here call themselves "tutors," guardians of learning, rather than "professors," authorities of knowledge, and it is why our students are to some degree our fellow-learners. Thus we are apt to think of even the most positive, content-replete learning as a specification of our ignorance. It's a fancy way of saying that all our learning starts and ends in questions— a point to which I will return as we go along. So this acknowledged ignorance is not false humility, but a confident, even competent, way to conduct a college. Yet, of course, *sub specie aeternitatis*, "under the aspect of eternity," as the philosophers say, we are, as limited beings, all equal—equally diminutive before the infinitely distant ultimacies we long for. This is cause enough for some personal modesty and even occasional dejection.

I've been saying "we," meaning the college of students and tutors. Now I'll mean mainly the tutors when I say that, although there's probably nothing we all agree must be *true*, there is something we all agree must be *done*. Some of us, perhaps even most, think that the Appearances before our senses bespeak a Being behind them; some of us suppose there is a Ground in which all nature is rooted; and some of us believe there is a realm of Divinity above us. Others see no reason to agree to any of these. But we all agree that, in regard to our ignorance about matters of most persistent importance to human beings, we are close to our students, and that we are therefore guardians of learning rather than transmitters of doctrine.

We have a model for this unteacherly mode of teaching, presented to us in the writings of Plato: Socrates. Not all of us, particularly freshmen, take to him. He describes himself now as a gadfly, stinging a sluggish horse into wakefulness, now as a demon mediating between earth and heaven (*Apology* 30e, *Symposium* 202d, ff.). So he is both irritating and elusive. One moment he argues like a sophist, that is to say, a trickster of the intellect; another moment he intimates his most genuine relation to truth. He is both bully and benefactor. So when he declares, often and insistently, that he is ignorant, we must suspect irony. "Irony," *eironeia*, is the Greek word for dissembling, pretending to be what one is not. What then *is* this Socratic ignorance, which in some of us engenders trust precisely by causing dis-ease?

We've all come across genuine inarticulate cluelessness, truly dumb ignorance—though I think it is fairly rare in human beings. Socratic ignorance, on the other hand, is anything but dumb; it talks, and that makes all the difference. For example, in the first philosophical work our students read together, Plato's dialogue *Meno*, Socrates blames

himself for knowing "nothing at all" about human excellence (71b). That is why he can genuinely ask: What is it? But look what this question involves. First of all it is an admission, actually an assertion, of *self-knowledge*. People who ask, know what they lack. They *know* what they don't know. Acknowledged ignorance is important knowledge *about ourselves*.

And second, it is a very precise negative knowledge of what we are *asking after*. The word "comprehend" comes to mind; it means "to get, to enclose, in one's grasp." Human thinking is wonderfully prehensile. It can get at, wrap itself around, something it does not yet really "get" in the sense of "understand." In this dialogue, Meno is Socrates' "interlocutor," which is learned Latin for "conversational partner." I use the term here because Meno—who, as we know from other sources, was as bad a man as you'll never want to meet—can't really be a partner, and certainly not a participant, in the sort of searching conversation Socrates cares about. In fact he tries to forestall such talk by producing a clever argument. He has the clever ignorance that defines human badness for Socrates. This obstructionist argument turns that very wonder of question-asking, which I've described as our ability to wrap our thought around what we haven't yet got, into an obstacle: If you know something why would you ask about it? If you're ignorant of it, how would you recognize it if you did get it?

Socrates has a reply that has resonated down through the ages; it bears on the essential character of talking, and I'll come to it soon.

Meanwhile, there's a third aspect to questions, shown in their very asking. We ask *ourselves* in inner speech, but in the world, and in that little world, the seminar, we ask *each other*. This asking presupposes a sort of trust: the trust that we will be

comprehended and met halfway by our fellow learners. For a question is a sort of appeal: "Share my perplexity; help me."

A fourth trait of asking is one that Socrates, who claims to know so little, claims to know for sure: To inquire, to seek by questions, to search for what one does not know—that makes us better, braver, less lazy than giving in to Meno's clever sophism (86b-c).

And finally a fifth feature, which sounds odd but is central. I know of only one subject in which Socrates claims outright to be an expert: He says of himself that he "knows nothing else than matters of love" (*Symposium* 177d). There are in the dialogues several examples of a wonderfully illuminating word-play: love, *eros*, and questioning, *erotesis*, sound very much alike (*Symposium* 199d, *Phaedrus* 234c); they are almost homonyms. The love in which Socrates is an expert is the longing for knowledge, the "love of wisdom" which is the English translation of the Greek word *philosophia*. But this longing, this pressure of desire is exactly what you might call the question-feeling. It transfigures apparently insoluble problems into beckoning mysteries, where by a mystery I mean an ultimate problem that attracts energizing reverence rather than dispirited resignation. Our students' much misused word "awesome" applies here, for once.

Thus genuine asking is the expression of a desire. For Socrates—and for all of us—such question-desire is always close to real human love. In fact Socratic love has a great penumbra of intermingling loves, among them the affectionate delight that elders feel for the young, the fond respect that colleagues—at their best—feel for one another, and, best of all, that lifelong care which develops between students who have spent many a night talking together. It's a tutor's delight to hear the selfless admiration in the voice of

a student who tells of having found such a partner—admiration together with a very proper and surely life-long pride in having accomplished such a friendship. Here is half a line from Schiller's "Ode to Joy," which, in Beethoven's setting, our Freshman Chorus often sings:

Wem der grosse Wurf gelungen

Eines Freundes Freund zu sein. . .

One who's managed the great fortune

To become a true friend's friend. . .

such a one is entitled to join in this ode to joy.

Schiller has it just right: Friendship is an effortful accomplishment resting on great good luck. This school is its propitious setting: In the talk that is a questioning, friends are found.

Aristotle, Plato's true—that is to say resistant—pupil says brusquely: "[Socrates] asked, but didn't answer, for he claimed not to know" (*On Sophistic Refutations*, 183b7).

Now ironic Socrates is surely unsettling, but no-nonsense Aristotle is often more so. Does he mean it? If I take him at face value, then he is certainly wrong. Socrates does answer, probably always, though often not in explicit words. His questioning doesn't lead to the levity of easy skepticism.

He does often begin by "questioning." Light-minded talk about higher education tends to fall into two camps. One camp thinks that this education happens when authorities pour expertise into mostly recalcitrant pupils. The other camp thinks this

education occurs when academics incite all too willing students to "question," that is to test, with the implicit intention of refuting, received wisdoms. Socrates often does begin by showing that people's opinions are wrong-headed or incoherent, and, above all, not their own thought but some received doctrine confidently proclaimed to the world but negligently adopted within the soul. That is questioning in the somewhat hostile sense; it is "interrogation." But it is only done in order to clear the decks for a second, more gracious question-asking, by which what ordinary people are really after is confirmed. Socrates is a horsefly to the lazy, to wake them up, but a winged love-god to those ready to be impassioned.

I said Socrates gives answers. About present human life he proposes himself as a model that says to us, "Live to learn, and learn to leave life, to be dead" (*Phaedo* 61c ff.). What he means, I think, is this: Devote some of your time every day to reaching for what is behind, beneath, above the world we live in. Here many thoughtful people part company with him—and our students often do, understandably. About ultimate things he offers only working conjectures and hypotheses, which he leaves to his companions to take up. And indeed that is what happened; the thinking generations took him up. Alfred North Whitehead—it figures here that an emigrant to America is speaking to you—says that "the European philosophical tradition . . . consists of a series of footnotes to Plato" (*Process and Reality*, Ch.1, Sec.1)—and that means largely Socrates as Plato pictured him speaking. I am about to leap into that two and a half millennia-long footnote for help in thinking more precisely about our kind of talking.

Each seminar starts with a question, asked by a tutor. Framing seminar questions is the one expertise a tutor might be said to develop. Such a question might well have

much thought behind it, but it shouldn't be an invitation to guess the tutor's pet theory. It could be a wide-open admission of puzzlement, but it shouldn't be mushily vague. It might take off from an inconspicuous but significant detail of the text but it shouldn't run the conversation up the creek of a side issue.

Why start with a question rather than, say, a tutorial interpretation? A question is, of course, the very embodiment of a teaching mode devoted to eliciting thought rather than delivering thought-products. The reason lies in the five features of question asking I've mentioned, the most pertinent of these being that questions solicit responses by evincing trust in the willingness and ability to respond in those addressed in the question mode.

What then is responsive talk? Here I'll go into the footnote mode. In the Middle Ages, certain thinkers developed the notion of "intentionality." In fact it had come to Europe through the Arabic philosopher Avicenna (c. 1000 C.E.). Most good ideas have their comeback time, and intentionality has been brought back in modern times. It's probably not wrong to say that its beginning is in Socrates' passion for this question: *What* is it that is knowable in our ever-changing, illusion-rife world, and *how* is it that words can convey what things are?

Intention is both a characteristic of thinking and a capability of speaking (where it is called "imposition")—one that we can ascribe to nothing else in the world or out of it. Its meaning is the action of "stretching towards," of reaching for something. Its descriptive name is "aboutness," the action and the result of something laying itself about, of "comprehending" something. Perhaps words show more of the stretching, reaching-toward motion, while thoughts are more like embracing, enclosing structures.

Take an example of what intentional aboutness *isn't*: a wrapped gift. The gift paper is distinguishable from the box of nougats—and so you can unwrap the candy—but it's also of the same kind, material stuff. What you can't do is put the gift-wrap about your affectionate wishes, as you can't wrap your sentiments around the nougat—except poetically. Now think a thought. Let's not be particular about its exact nature—whatever we mean when we say that we have something in mind—an object, a relation, an idea, an interpretation—any thought-thing. ~~Now~~ Then ask yourself, Can I unwrap my thinking from the thought? When I say that I am thinking a thought, is my thinking separable from the thought? Or it is rather that thinking (that is, a form of the verb for which *thought* is the noun), is the same as the thought, so that when I think of something, intend it, *attend* to it, my mind becomes that thing? Do thinking and thought become one? If that's what happens, then which element wins out—the mine-ness of my thinking or the object-ness of the content? Do I taint it with my prejudices, do I rectify it to my standards, or do I let it be what it is? When I think, it is often about a material object in a worldly environment. What aspect of things comes to or into my mind—a mental, quasi-visual image, some ideal essence, or just their use? In what way, as I attend to the world of objects, do they tend toward me? When my talk is for real—that is, when it is about something—how do I begin? How do I get my thoughts to collect themselves in words? Or does my acquired language in fact produce the mental state that feels like thinking, and by its very grammar give me the sense that there are mental objects? How are my words about objects? Do these offer labels that present themselves for me to read off insofar as I know the vocabulary of the world, or do my words tend out from me to the objects, throwing from

my mind an ideal sort of lasso, a thinking-noose, that will cast itself about them and snaffle them in a mental shape suitable for my mind?

This long litany touches the Socratic mysteries, which, I have said, he started on their way along with some conjectured elucidations. Not that, after all, it matters much who began. These questions, at least, are now ours.

Questions about thinking and speaking must surely be central to the education of human beings, who, as even animal ethnologists are willing to admit, are the only animal that can ask questions rather than solicit reactions. But my main point here was to establish one sure thing about talking—that it has the capacity of aboutness, which turns out to make a piece of life like the seminar possible to begin with.

Now in the world at large there is much talk that has the aspect of serious, even sophisticated, meaning but that, like many a hard-to-crack nut, has no kernel. So too, in the seminar, there is twaddle—quite a lot of it.

Twaddle has in fact a sort of squatter's right in the seminar. Concern for spontaneity and respect for potential make us leery of suppressing it too soon. I can think of three kinds of seminar twaddle. Some among us are so eager to capture attention that they utter words before they have collected a thought. Others are so abashed by the insufficiency of their speaking that they go on for quite a while after they have finished; in the hope of amending their fault they make it worse. This happens to us all and is easily fixed. We just have to become aware of it, as we do of any minor habit.

The third kind of twaddle goes much deeper. All worthwhile activities have their specific nullifications, and twaddle is the negation of intentional talk. It is the consequence of a curious negative ability that human beings have: the ability to fashion

well-formed sentences that express none of their own thinking, but that sound comfortably explanatory. Here is an inevitable example from the first freshman seminar: Why is Achilles so unassuagably angry when Agamemnon takes his woman away? Student answer: Because he feels dishonored, and "in the culture of that time honor was important." Tutor's overt follow-up question: What do you know more about, the culture of the time of Homer's epics (this time happen to be a fictional composite of times) or about Achilles? Tutor's suppressed internal question: How did this most murky of notions—culture—come to seem like a handy explanatory principle to generations of students? Equally silent answer: Because Socrates' notion of opinion is so right. We all share in the remarkable inclination to find satisfaction in surrendering our minds to enticing terms of thought without reaching for the intended thought itself. "Culture" is the most perfect cover-all, the universal wet-blanket for glimmers of penetrating thought.

A somewhat impatient tutorial response to twaddle is thus, What *are* you talking about? And generally, what *are* we talking about in seminar?

Books. We prepare for seminar by reading assignments, and then we bring our readings to class. For my part, I don't care how the readings are delivered. If students find graven stone tablets their medium of choice, let them bring those, or if e-books, let them bring those, provided they don't get diverted and distracted by appended applications, and provided they can find their place. After all, one reason we center seminar on books is so that we may all be on the same page.

Let me interrupt myself here for an observation. Our faculty recently had a long discussion about the question: Should e-books be permitted in seminar? We sensibly decided to leave it up to the tutors. In last year's freshman seminar I was expecting an

invasion of electronic tablets. Not a one of them appeared. Word was that upperclass members were discouraging them as not in our spirit. The world's opinion is that the young thrive on novelty; the truth as I've experienced it is that, having found a place to cherish, they become its radical conservatives. I have much sympathy. The material book—be it of papyrus, parchment, paper—has, besides its sensory pleasures, one great advantage: it's all there at once in real space. This is a handy representation of one important characteristic of a text: it's an all-present whole; it exists simultaneously with itself.

And now that I've used the word "text" let me explain this slightly pretentious term. I use it, first, because it is broader than "book," which is usually composed of words. But we read, in a broad sense, also compositions of notes (musical scores) and books containing more diagrams and symbols than words (mathematical texts).

Moreover, "text" reminds us of two etymologically related words: "textile," a woven fabric, and Greek *techne*, "skill, craft." Books are artfully crafted, carefully coherent artifacts.

Well, not all books. The tutors of this college are pretty much at one in thinking themselves not so much entitled as obligated to discriminate between great books and lesser books. St. John's College is, unpopular though that term may be with terminally egalitarian souls, a great books school. Let me say right away that the not-so-great but good books, as well as the mediocre ones, and even the outright shoddy stuff—all these have their saving graces. The best policy is to read some of everything. (When I was a little girl I developed for a while a passion for reading product labels, especially the fractured instructions written by people for whom English was a second language.)

But together we read *great* books, because, to use a gross metaphor, these are the ones you can sink your teeth into, the ones that stick to your ribs. There are statable criteria for them, of which I'll mention the ones most pertinent to the life of the seminar: Great books are usually self-sufficient, so that no background information or annotation is absolutely necessary to getting absorbed in the text; the best context for them is another great book—perhaps, but not necessarily, its chronological predecessor.

Second, a great book, approachable as it is on one level the first time around, is inexhaustibly new, so that on opening it a fifth time you ask yourself, "Could I have read this before? Where was I, to miss so much?"

Third, such books are endlessly artful—sometimes beautiful from shapely depth and something ugly with significant contrivance.

And fourth, great truth-seeking texts of reflection are full of imagination and great imaginative works of fiction are full of reflection. The former present universals corroborated by particular instances, the latter represent particulars coruscating with universal application. Thus philosophy and fiction go hand in hand. Take, for example that famous first sentence of *Anna Karenina*: "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." What is it but an applied version of Aristotle's dictum in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: "There are many ways of going wrong but only one way which is right" (1106b28)?

So such texts are what seminar talk appears to be about. To prepare for seminar we all read the same book—students for the first, tutors for the umptieth time. Reading is, for us, a silent, solitary activity. I say "for us"; Augustine in his *Confessions* (c.400 C.E.) tells with amazement how his beloved bishop, Ambrose, read. As his eyes moved down

the page, "his heart sought out the meaning but his tongue remained silent" (VI, 3). It was an inestimably great revolution, this inward relocation of the written word, which, among other things, made possible summary reading both divorced from and unconcerned about precise wording. We are the heirs of this revolution.

This preparatory reading we do is a curious business, then. New readers actually mouth the words; more mature ones read silently but subvocalize the text laryngeally; others let the writing glide directly into the mind. They get the thought, but see rather than hear the words. They register whole sentences through the eyes and turn language, the business of the tongue, into sight-seeing, the work of the eyes. However they do it, they now have in their minds and hearts the words and thoughts of someone else.

Our texts, then, are writings, for the most part. And surprise, surprise! Books are written before they are read. How does writing come about? Here is how I do it myself and imagine it for others: Writing comes after talking, in two ways. First, in my own personal history I learned to speak way back, effortlessly, but to write later, with difficulty. I also know that in the larger history of human beings, writing, especially the kind that records the sound of speech, alphabetical writing, did not, in fact, come to Greece until the late eighth century B.C.E. (where in my early years as an archaeologist I had a chance to publish some of the earliest graffiti—that is, scratched letter-words). Second, before and as I write, I talk to myself, because speech is the concretion of thought; it collects its misty pressure into concise sentences and utters them in sensory shape. It's often said that the primary purpose of speech is "communication." The evidence seems to me otherwise. I imagine that most of us say to ourselves in the course of our day hundreds of words for every word we say to others. Speech certainly begins

that way. Listen to what students of child development call "jargoning," that sweetest, most melodious gibberish of late infancy, which issues from a lonely crib. Whether it is the antecedent of adult twaddle or carries mental meaning no one knows.

This internal speech is what we write down. In "paper conferences" with students tutors can't do better than to persuade them that it is this talk with themselves that they ought to record, without dulling rectification in the interest of a risklessly pompous formality. An author—the word means an originating "augmentor"—is a recorder of an inner speech that improves upon the banal ordinariness of a relaxed inner life by saying something original, either in the sense of "never-said-before" or in the sense of going to the origin of things—or both. This is practically a definition of what the authors of our great books accomplish. They are the masters of pouring thought into the mold of inner speech and of turning that mold out onto the expectant paper.

I must add here that, although you'd scarcely believe it, both claims—that books have authors and that speaking comes before writing—have been disputed in the later part of the last century. The former claim, that there is no originating authorship, is disputed because whatever is said has been pre-shaped by predecessors and will be re-shaped by readers. The latter claim, that writing precedes speaking, is disputed on the ground (too sophisticated for presentation here) that writing has a character more original than speech and in fact subsumes it.[1]

Reading presupposes writing, and writing poses at least two dangers. The one I've just touched on is that in the interest of liberating our students from being possessed by the opinion of others we in fact subject them to four years of others' very powerful

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[1] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967), Chapter 2. Derrida, the author of both claims, at one point instituted a suit for plagiarism. Imagine!)

opinions. Another way to put this is that even—or especially—the devoted study of books is not direct thinking, immediate aboutness. It runs the danger of producing a commentator's soul. I mean that to study books is not quite the same as to think about things; it is to be attending to a secondary sort of aboutness. By thinking in a primary way I mean appropriating the cry of early modern scientists: "To the things themselves!"—without mediating texts.

The other danger, really the complement of the first, is set down in Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus.* Socrates tells approvingly of an Egyptian king who refused the gift of writing because, he said, those who put trust in writing will learn to forget how to go into themselves to recollect the truths within. Writing will then turn out to be no medicine for memory, but merely a reminder (272c ff.). Writing is external memory; we call on it to remind us now and then of baggage we do not care to keep always with us. Whatever is readily accessible as a filed record becomes storable stuff, a bit of fractured fact, related to living thought as a cellophane-wrapped fish filet is to a frisky live fish. It becomes information, which is as apt to wreck as to rectify judgment. I think this is an up-to-date version of Socrates' misgivings about writing. However—you might call this Platonic irony—this condemnation of writing is delivered to us in the most ravishing piece of philosophical writing I know of, the work that drew me into philosophy as a graduate student. Evidently Plato thought of a way to overcome the rigidification of writing—by incorporating conversation into the text. We extend this trick by incorporating books into a living dialogue, the seminar.

How do we then mitigate these drawbacks? Well, we get together, come out of studious privacy, to talk with each other. In universities, "seminar" means an advanced

study group under the leadership of a professor. Papers are written, read, and discussed. It is a place of earnest, highly disciplined speech. Our seminars are serious, but perhaps not earnest, or at least not *dead* earnest, but *live* earnest—lively. Walk through our corridors on seminar nights, and if you don't hear hilarity issuing from behind this or that door, you may conclude that we've turned into the sitting dead, like the ancestral mummies the Incas brought out to sit at their feasts. For laughter is the explosive expulsion of breath that follows from having one's equanimity pleasantly pinpricked by an acute incongruity—the result, in other words, of a startling insight.

Laughter is the grace note of our seriousness. To be sure, the books lie before us, well used, even marked up (which is why we should buy, not borrow, seminar books), and they are the first focus of our attention. But that is also a misapprehension. Books, texts, are occasions, not ends. We don't live *in* but *through* books. That formulation would be mere verbiage, were there not a way of study that stays strictly with the text and in it. For instance, in graduate study, say, in English or philosophy, all the student's effort is really invested in the text. The goal is to know the text accurately, to be acquainted with scholarly opinions about it, to work out its arguments in detail, all the while setting aside questions of truth-telling and personal illumination.

We encourage a different kind of reading—more direct, and if you like, somewhat naïve. Because the author wrote about or expressed something, we feel entitled to pass through the text to that something. We find it plausible sometimes to ask "What did the author have in mind?" and sometimes "Does this representation agree with our experience of life?" and sometimes "Can I corroborate this claim in my own thinking?"

Not that we ignore the literal words in their artfulness—not at all—but we regard them as a sort of come-on to catch and hold us to the text until it gives up its meaning.

Let me give an example from the freshman seminar that was going on while I was writing this lecture —a wonderfully lively seminar. We asked: "Do the Homeric gods, in all their irresponsible levity, look the same to Homer as to his heroes, does he have access to a view of Olympus, transmitted to him by the Muses, that none of his humans have?" We asked: "Is it in accord with our experience that gentle, thoughtful Patroclus is transformed into a wildly impetuous warrior just by wearing Achilles' armor?" We asked: "Can we follow Socrates in his claim that truth already lies in us and can be retrieved, 'recollected,' as he says, by the right questions?"

So to sum up our sort of reading: We pay careful attention to details for the sake of the text's—the author's—intentions, and we pay attention to these for the sake of world and life. That effort requires skills, namely, the arts of reading in the broad sense, the liberal arts. We have the corresponding tutorials, where we practice dealing with thought-laden words in the language class and with thought-structured symbols in the mathematics class. We add to these the latest of the liberal arts to appear on the scene, the art of making nature speak in numbers; for that we have the laboratory class.

I've now talked in turn about talking, reading, writing. Now comes the high point: listening. Among the boons of living within a study program like ours—one that is stable and changes, though steadily, yet slowly—is that truly new experiences can come to us tutors. For our students, it's all new anyhow. By contrast, when so-called innovation, that is, deliberate variation, is the universal background, we may indeed be stimulated by novelty—the ever-diminishing frisson accompanying continual variety—but we can

scarcely experience newness, which is the poignant sensation of a substantial accession—a real expansion of our psychic holdings. Under the influence of continual novelty our mind, as Shakespeare so tellingly puts it, "Like to a vagabond flag upon the stream, / Goes to, and back, lackeying the varying tide, / To rot itself with motion" (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 1.4.45-47).

Thus it was that through our way of acquiring truly new insights, I belatedly discovered a philosopher—as it happens the very first one whose writings we have. He was born around 540 B.C.E. I had often glanced over, but had never made my way into, his sayings. He thinks in aphorisms, that is, terse revelations. The most enticing one of these begins in this way:

> Listen not to me but to the *logos* . . . (Heraclitus, D50).

Logos is one Greek work all our students are apt to have something to say about. It had dozens of uses and more than one central meaning: word, speech, saying, thinking, reason, ratio. Heraclitus's saying goes on to tell us what we must, in turn, *say* when we listen to *the* Logos, the Logos with a capital L. This Logos is the principle that governs everything, and it has something to say to us. I won't go into the entirety of the world-informing thought that the Logos utters to Heraclitus, but I'll attend ~~only~~ to the first part of it. I think it has, and is meant to have, several meanings—a fact that governs many of Heraclitus's sayings and makes reading him so pleasurably difficult. One of these sayings, the one just quoted, is, as it were, made to be the principle of our seminar. I'll retranslate it:

> Listen not to me but to my intention.

The civility of the seminar, expressed in our addressing one another by last names together with the honorific *Ms.* or *Mr.*, goes much deeper than a mere form of address. It makes for respectful distance. It means *listening past* personalities to the thought-gist of our speaking. It enjoins us to try to hear what our fellow speakers intend us to hear, even if we have to *hear past* the words they are actually, and perhaps ineptly, saying. Of course, we take in each other's looks, mannerisms, gestures. It is, after all, through these that the human being to whose intention we are to listen appears to us. Of course, the "me" Heraclitus wants us to listen past is unavoidably up front. We all, particularly tutors, whose business it is to form impressions of the candor, seriousness, and preparation of speakers, observe the physical façade. Any student who imagines that tutors don't know, by such observations, whether they've done their seminar reading or are improvising—be it brilliantly, be it twaddingly—is living in cloud-cuckoo-land. The tutors' version of Heraclitus's injunction is the prospective principle of hopeful pretense: Listen for the intention, for what the speech is about, listen to all the speeches extendedly and intently, until they *are* about something; help students frame what they mean or find out what they intended to say by evincing a staunch faith (even against all evidence) that they did mean or intend something. What is for Heraclitus a call to hear the speech of Thought—capital T—itself, is for us a pedagogic principle: Give respect even before it is due, so that it may become due. Advise students with tacit benevolence as Hamlet does his mother with demonstrative bitterness: "Assume a virtue if you have it not" (*Hamlet,* 2.4.162). For Aristotle teaches that virtues are acquired by being practiced before they are truly possessed (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1103a-b).

So also should students listen to each other in the Heraclitean mode: Suppress animosities and aversions, go for the significant gist in one another's talk. The question "Did you mean . . . ?" is helpful respect made audible.

After all, the seminar was intended to bring us out of the isolation of studious reading and the rigidity of recorded, written speech, and to introduce responsiveness into the life of learning. The underlying hypothesis here, which we hold to through thick and thin, is that to be human is, ~~to be,~~ given a chance, intelligent. Now intelligence has this feature, one that has been the millennial preoccupation of thoughtful people: ~~that~~ what we each think with is our very own intelligence—which makes us interesting to one another—*and* that what the intellect is about is common to us all—which makes it possible for us to hear one another to begin with.

In my hurried summary of the liberal arts and the tutorials devoted to them I left out the music tutorial and the chorus. Among the Greeks, music stands near the apex of the liberal arts; it is the prime mode of praising God for the Hebrews; and it stands close to theology for certain Christians. (See, e.g., Plato, *Republic* 530d ff.; ~~Aristotle, *Poetics* VIII 3 4f,~~ Psalm 33:3; Luther, "On Noble Music"). Our president recently put music at the center of his convocation address, and then, to confirm his words, the college sang. For as we are rightly called a talking college so we are surely a music-making community. As words are to our thoughts, so is music to our feelings. Without music our program would be radically incomplete; we would be neglecting the affective root of our nature, our sensibility, and our passions. We have been called a severely intellectual college, and this could be an accusation rather than a compliment, if we did not also have a place in the program for cultivating the very sense, hearing, that *both* takes in linguistic

utterances addressed to the intellect *and* also hears tonal structures calling to our passions. In the music tutorial we learn how passions are informed by number, not by the merely quantitative but by the wonderfully qualitative mathematics of tones in a scale. Moreover, we consider how sounds and words respond to each other, and we attend to a relation of sensation and thinking which we expect to carry over into all our learning—that tenacious thinking is replete with feeling, that steady passion is contoured by thought, and that the sensory surface itself, be it conduit or last stop, is deeply questionable.

And finally, in Chorus, we are the *singing* college. In talking we face toward each other and speak to each other, turn and turnabout, vice versa—that is the very meaning of con-*versa*-tion. But we sing *with* rather than *to* each other, and we do it mostly not in turn but simultaneously. We are together in the presence of something we are at once hearing and doing, receiving and producing; we are absorptive and responsive, listening to ourselves and to our fellow choristers. It's like hearing a heavenly lecture, for that's how I imagine the angels listen.

And that is the end of this merely earthly lecture, addressed to the parents over our student's heads, so to speak, but really meant for them. So thank you all for listening.