

## The Trouble with Scholarship

By Mark C. Long

“We know that the secret of the world is profound, but who or what shall be our interpreter, we know not. A mountain ramble, a new style of face, a new person, may put the key into our hands.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Poet”

“Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised or a little mistaken”

—Jane Austen, *Emma*

“we ask luminous images of excellence, while the center is betrayed”

—Wayne C. Booth, *The Vocation of a Teacher*, 24

From the moment I was notified that I had received this award for distinction in research and scholarship I have been thinking about questions: where they come from, why we take them up, how they move us from where we are to someplace new. Whatever the academic field, most research and scholarship can be traced back to a question; indeed the intellectual work of every professor and student gathered here—whether working individually, or in collaboration—is motivated by a question. However our intellectual work is motivated by questions that transcend academic fields, professional identities, the very idea of academic excellence. As a humanist, I am interested in these deeper questions—where they come from, why we pursue the questions we pursue.

Any certainty I might have had about where questions come from has been unraveling since late February. I was skiing across a frozen lake with my five-year-old

friend Ben and his dad Bob. Six inches of new snow had fallen the night before. It was sunny and cold. And then Ben asked a question. “What is more important, living or being loved?” Ben’s question humbles me. Invoking it here saves me from trying to say something about origins. And it helps me begin thinking about why scholars choose the questions they choose.

What is it that we need to know? What is it that we don’t know that we need to know? What knowledge is worth having? Questions like these, and the uncertainties from which they arise, are at the root of the scholarly enterprise. Scholars learn through scholarly habits—through curiosity, consideration, and persistence—that genuine questions lead to a simple truth: you can’t know everything about anything. The poet and scholar Mary Oliver has, for more than half a century, been reminding us of this simple truth. Here is one of her poems, “*Some Questions You Might Ask*”:

Is the soul solid, like iron?

Or is it tender and breakable, like

the wings of a moth in the beak of an owl?

Who has it, and who doesn't?

I keep looking around me.

The face of the moose is as sad

as the face of Jesus.

The swan opens her white wings slowly.

In the fall, the black bear carries leaves into the darkness.

One question leads to another.

Does it have a shape? Like an iceberg?

Like the eye of a hummingbird?

Does it have one lung, like the snake and the scallop?

Why should I have it, and not the anteater

who loves her children?

Why should I have it, and not the camel?

Come to think of it, what about maple trees?

What about the blue iris?

What about all the little stones, sitting alone in the moonlight?

What about roses, and lemons, and their shining leaves?

What about the grass?

Oliver begins with a characteristically gentle invitation—some questions you *might* ask, she says. Her poem then unfolds through a proliferation of questions—the poem’s particular way of reasoning through a metaphysical concept, her language undermining familiar categories of thought, such as animate and inanimate. Oliver’s poem is an etymological digression, too. It traces the roots of a word back through languages and cultural traditions to ideas of life force and animating spirit.

But there is something else: the speaker of the poem is enacting a process, a way of engaging with the world. Listen again: *We keep looking. One question leads to another. We think again.*

## One Question Leads to Another

It is a little more than twenty-eight years ago and I am picking my way along an airy granite arête in California's Sierra Nevada. I left the trailhead about a week ago and, because I am alone, I am trying to be cautious. But the 13,000 summit—and not really knowing whether or not I can descend the 2000' North face of this peak before dusk—keeps me moving. Then the warm and dry early July alpine air is redolent and sticky sweet.

Why *this* flower *here*? (so high!) Why *this* smell? (so strong!). Why this creature of the sky with its five-petal pale-blue lavender blossoms in compact heads high on a Sierra peak between 11-13'000 feet? What followed this encounter with *polemonium eximium* led to a decade of summers botanizing, an amateur wandering the valleys and high alpine basins of the Sierra searching out the resident plants and flowers of a range of mountains I loved: fleshy red saprophytes on the forest floor, delicate meadow flowers of mid-summer, learning what I had not learned in school—family, genus, species; pistal, stamen, sepal—reciting the binomial music of latin names—*delphinium nuttallianum*, *aquilegia pubescens*, *sedum rosea*, *monardella odoratissima*.

And I kept looking around. Silver, whitebark, Jeffrey, lodgepole, foxtail, bristlecone pine; hemlock, fir, cedar, juniper; nuthatch, killdeer, *cinclus Americanus*; the stellar jay, *complaining*, the drumming grouse in *krumholtz* next to the trail. Feldspar, schist, glacial polish, moraine; cirque, tarn, outwash, basin and range. Mid-latitude, Pacific storm, snow cycle, crystal morphology, stellar dendrite, truncated triangle, rime

ice; radiational cooling, temperature gradient, sintering, vapor transfer, depth hoar; shear, ductile, tensile strength; avalanche, ordnance, explosives, shock waves. “Fire in the hole!”

Botany, forestry, ornithology; geology, meteorology, hydrology. Even pyrotechnics: *One question led to another*. Piute, Pine nuts; exploration, settlement, mapping; the Whitney survey, William Brewer, Clarence King. The Donner Party. The Gold Rush. Wild land; native people; Mary Austin. Native rights. Water rights. The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, William Mulholland. The snow survey, Orland Bartholomew. Mountaineering, Norman Clyde. Activists, preservation, conservation, environmentalism; John Muir. David Brower; the Forest Service; national park; wilderness and the American mind. Watercolor and woodblock print, Chiura Obata; photography, Ansel Adams; poetry, Gary Snyder. World War Two. Japanese detention. Manzanar. Memory. Brightly colored origami shapes hanging on rusted wire on the floor of the Owens Valley.

For me, perhaps, it began with a flower. What I do know is that *I kept looking*. *One question led to another*. *I kept thinking again*. A flower, a bird song, a person, a place; pain, suffering, violence, struggle; a story, a book, a photograph, an idea—our lives as scholars are built around our experiences with looking, asking questions, thinking again. The questions I chose, the questions I continue to pursue as a scholar, are deeply woven into the fabric of *this* life.

## The Trouble with Scholarship

But this is where the trouble starts. One of my intellectual heroes, the nineteenth-century scientist and philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, describes this trouble with a metaphor that gets better the more you think with it. We are all walking on a bog, he says. We can stand somewhere for only so long. For as soon as you think you have settled on a stable place, the ground begins to sink, and you must step from where you are to someplace new.

Most of us are motivated by questions that we have yet to find. And we are mostly successful in avoiding the difficulties that arise when we find them. In an essay he wrote for the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* in 1868, Peirce explains that “The object of reasoning is to find out, from consideration of what we already know, something which we do not know” (111). However merely transforming a proposition into the interrogatory form will not in any way guarantee an active mind. Rather there must be what Peirce calls a “real and living doubt,” what I will call here a motivation. For *if* we keep looking, one question *does* lead to another and, as we keep thinking we can no longer remain standing exactly where we are

The trouble, as Peirce goes on to describe in another essay, “The Fixation of Belief,” is how difficult it is to overcome the intellectual habits that work against scholarly inquiry. The first of these habits is *tenacity*, or believing what we think to be true—clinging, as Peirce puts it, “spasmodically” to the views we already hold; the second habit, *authority* is the familiar and tried-and-true method of accepting (or being

forced to assent to) the ideas of someone else, whether a ruling class, aristocracy or guild that enforces belief; the third intellectual habit Peirce describes is the *a priori* method, or the holding to an opinion that seems to us “agreeable to reason” (116). Peirce’s point is that these intellectual habits help us avoid the trouble of thinking again.

The trouble with scholarship, then, is that you find things out. The scholarly process inevitably leads to challenges, difficulties, upheavals, even anguish as we discover new things about ourselves and the world. Beyond the personal havoc that is created when we keep thinking, scholarship is trouble in another important sense. At Keene State College we are devoted to fostering lifelong learning, as one of my students once so elegantly put it, in graduates who learn to become “productive members of their own lives.” For precisely this reason the College is obligated to provide an environment for faculty to pursue scholarship. For anything worth knowing is inextricable from a collective process of inquiry and understanding. Knowledge is a social activity; and so we demand of ourselves, as well as our students, the critical scrutiny of our peers. To speak of teaching without scholarship is really to misspeak. To teach without scholarly habits diminishes the ongoing dialogue of learning that we are obligated to enact every day in our classrooms, labs and field studies.

For the student (and I am sorry to have to say this) scholarship is trouble as well. For as I have suggested in offering you a glimpse of my own path to becoming a scholar, once you start paying attention, asking questions, thinking again, your best laid plans and dreams have a way of slipping away. Sure, you have come to college for access to the kind of knowledge (and ways of knowing) that will grant you the authority that

presumably comes with having found something out. But if teaching and learning are to become forms of scholarship for you, then, you are all in for a heap of trouble.

I'd like to conclude by asking each of you to join me in thinking about the academic excellence conference as a yearly celebration of the trouble with scholarship. More than a showcase of what has been accomplished, then, this gathering is a much more significant occasion. We are gathered here to celebrate learning: to affirm the experience of learning together. Our work is learning together to pay close attention to ourselves and the world around us; our work is asking questions that really matter to us; and our work is seeking provisional answers as we work our way toward better questions. In short, our work is embracing our obligations as members of a community devoted to thinking again. If we are not willing to do this, we are not doing scholarship, we are not teaching, and we are not learning.