

# THE TRICORN

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LONG ISLAND • PHILADELPHIA GREAT BOARDS COUNCILS

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## The Question of Ultimate Meaning

The inquiry "What is the meaning of life?" mentioned in the February issue of *The Tricorn* stimulated not only my interest, but a strong reaction as well. That question has always seemed to me to imply a teleological assumption, and to anticipate an answer in teleological terms. As a Scientific Humanist, I would have to take issue with the assumption, rather than oblige with an answer to the question.

Shortly after reading *The Tricorn* I found the following observations in the volume *The Power of Myth*, by Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers. Readers of *The Tricorn* may find them highly relevant, as I did. In his introduction, Moyers says of Campbell, "He agreed that the 'guiding idea' of his work was to find 'the commonality of themes in world myths, pointing to a constant requirement in the human psyche for a centering in terms of deep principles.'"

"You're talking about a search for the meaning of life?" I asked.

"No, no, no," he said. "For the experience of being alive."

Later, in the dialogue on p. 5, Campbell is quoted as saying: "People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life on the purely physical plane will have some resonances within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive. That's what it's all finally about, and that's what these clues help us to find within ourselves."

Moyers: "Myths are clues?"

Campbell: "Myths are clues to the spiritual potentialities of the human life."

Campbell's "rapture of being alive" is surely inaccessible to the cognitive faculty. On p. 6:

Moyers: "You changed the definition of myth from a *search* for meaning to the *experience* of meaning."

Campbell: "Experience of *life*. The mind has to do with meaning. What's the meaning of a flower? . . . What's the meaning of the universe? . . . of a flea? . . . It's just there. That's it. And your meaning is that you're there. We're so engaged in doing things to achieve purposes of outer value that we forget that the inner value, the rapture that is associated with being alive, is what it's all about."

Moyers: "How do you get that experience?"

Campbell: "Read myths. They teach you that you can turn inward, and you begin to get the message of the symbols. Read other people's myths, not those of your own religion, because you tend to interpret your own religion in terms of facts — but if you read the other ones, you begin to get the message. Myths help to put your mind in touch with the experience of being alive."

Aaron Bechtel

## BOSTON NEWS

### A Great Spring Institute

The annual Spring Weekend Institute, held March 31 - April 2, at the University Campus Center Hotel, U. Mass - Amherst, attracted 120 participants, who found the accommodation comfortable and well-run. The Friday evening impromptu found good material for an opener in several Emily Dickinson poems, and the scheduled readings, *The Book of Exodus*, *The Road Less Travelled* (Scott Peck), and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* all proved fruitful, especially the Morrison. A highlight of one group's discussion of the Peck was the contribution of a participant who was (and is) a client of the author.

Gus Soderberg

### New Spring Growth

Coordinator Nancy Reifenstein reports that Boston is on the verge of a "Great Leap Forward." A group of twelve talented participants has just completed leader training under the skilled hand of Gus Soderberg. Their four session course took place at the public library in Harvard. Nancy hopes that several new groups will soon appear on the Boston Council roster. Also underway are plans for two junior groups in Harvard.

### From *Eros and Education*

Eros and education. This odd, though alliterative pair constitute the title (and thesis) of a book published in 1958 by Joseph J. Schwab, Faculty of General Studies, University of Puerto Rico. The following excerpted material presents interesting ideas on a truly liberal education:

. . . discussion in one form or another - with others or with oneself - is indispensable to a good liberal education. For in the past analysis, discussion is not merely a *device*, one of several possible means by which a mind may be brought to understanding of a worthy object. It is also the *experience* of moving toward and possessing understanding, and a liberal education is concerned with the arts and skills of moving toward understanding. In a liberal program, discussion serves not only as a means toward some particular end ulterior to discussion itself, such as grasp of a scientific theory or philosophical concept, but also as an instance of the employment, the development, and the *enjoyment* of the skills which constitute the central purpose of liberal education. . . .

In a curriculum. . . which aims to impart intellectual arts and skills, and habits and attitudes, as well as bodies of information, discussion is not simply efficient or powerful but indispensable. . . Discussion is an engagement in and a practice of the activities of thought and communication.

The idea of "intellectual skills" and the notion of the "liberal arts" are peculiarly dangerous in their liability to misinterpretation. "Intellectual" is likely to evoke an image of large eyes behind horn-rimmed glasses, or arms too thin and voice too rich. Or again, the eyes behind the glasses may be alertly malicious rather than innocent, and the mouth shaped to smile at the coarse antics of the human monkeys on the other side of the pale. There is truth in these fantasies. No greater injury has been done the intellectual than by some of its proponents. In the upper reaches of American education, some teachers have misconceived the intellectual as standing in contrariety to the physical and material and upon this misconception have built courses and coteries which encouraged in students already partially isolated from reality contempt for the concrete, the impulsive, and the earthy. In the face of these and similar consequences, it is no wonder that some of us have grown uncomprisingly suspicious, if not of the intellect, at least of people who talk about it apart from other aspects of human kind.

Our suspicions are well-founded. There are neither biological, psychological, nor philosophic grounds for isolation of the intellectual as a principle of education. It is indissolubly a *part* of the learning organism.

Another view sets the intellectual apart by treating it as excluding the aesthetic and practical, and, in this form, isolation of the intellectual is frequent enough in our literature and our schools to have produced an additional, regrettably mistaken notion of it. Relative to the practical, the intellectual is taken as a flight to a world of "pure" ideas and to speculation unresponsive to physical things and events. To be intellectual seems to mean in this context to know all about Constitutional Government, for instance, but nothing about log-rolling and compromise as inevitable parts of the democratic process; to be able to discuss Justice and The Judiciary at length, but not to know about bailiffs and their relationship to judges. There is talk about ideas, and about classes of ideas, without cognizance of the particulars for which they stand.

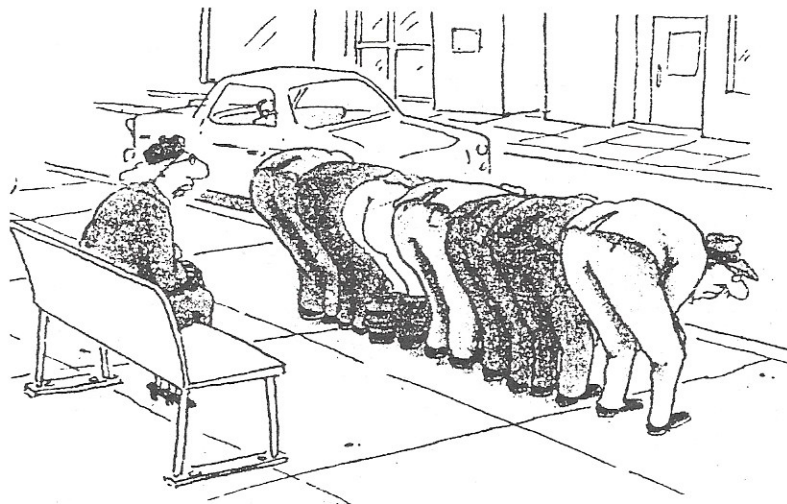
Relative to the aesthetic, intellectualization is often taken as displacement of artistic works and of their appreciation by substituting abstract constructions which become the subjects of conversation. A reading of *Lear* becomes only an occasion for discussion of Tragedy or The Tragic, on the one hand, and for the construction of an "analysis," a kind of detailed but abstract blue-print, on the other. The concrete, particular drama and its unique artistic effect are tossed aside.

These are, however, not the consequences of the employment of the intellect, but a corruption of it by education which arises when reason is conceived as opposed to other constituent functions of the human psyche. Differentiation of the intellective, active, and aesthetic has its place in philosophical analysis... but it is a dangerous doctrine for the liberal educator...

Appetite, emotion, and reason are, then, factors of the human psyche which can be abstracted from one another for purposes of thought but not in action. If we are to act upon and with another human person, as in his education, these factors must be understood and employed in their interaction and interpenetration. The fact of their interpenetration is one of the starting points, one of the principles, for consideration of education, whether in respect to ends or means.

Eros, which appears most obviously in the guise of the energy of wanting, the motive force of hankering-after, the drive which emerges from valuing, is as much the energy source if truth is to be pursued as it is the energy of motion toward bodily pleasure, friendship, fame, and power. Any means or method of education taps this energy source to the extent that the method is at all effective, and the best means of education will be one which taps it most effectively...

Not only the means, however, but also the ends of liberal education involve the Eros. For the end includes not only knowledge gained but knowledge desired and knowledge sought. The outcome of a successful liberal curriculum is *actively* intelligent people. They are people in



THE MOON AND SIX PANTS

whom a pipeline links energy to reason. They *like* good pictures, good books, good music, good movies. They *find pleasure* in planning their active lives and carrying out the planned action. They hanker to make, to create, whether the object is knowledge mastered, art appreciated, or actions patterned and directed...

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### Long Island Great Books — Spring '89

#### Reflections on the Institute's Theme

#### THE HUMAN DILEMMA

Something is happening on Long Island.  
Groups go leaderless and nobody seems to care.  
Most participants would prefer a leader  
But when there is none they carry on.  
Oh a few will lead! Would lead twice,  
If pressed, but that would be an imposition and  
Why shouldn't they be allowed to play  
Like the rest of us?  
So half our discussions went leaderless, and  
That's how I became leader of a leaderless group.  
I introduced myself, suggested the others do likewise  
Then we sat in silence and looked at each other.  
It was only for a moment and made me think  
That there is a place for silence  
In a discussion, for looking at each other  
when no one is talking.

I wish it would have lasted longer.  
It was a lovers' silence, a lovers' look  
(after all, we had read the same book)  
But I broke it  
— a china teacup shattered on a marble floor.  
"Someone has to have a question  
About this book!" I said. There was.  
She asked it. The cup was never whole again.  
I was reduced to saying.  
"One fragment at a time, please,"  
And to reading aloud appropriate excerpts  
Such as:  
... should he not pass through that door,  
should he not grapple with this moment,  
his moment, all the other moments of his  
life would unaccountably and suddenly  
lose their meaning.\*

Chuck Ferrara

\**The Long Night of Francisco Sanctis*, H. Costantini

## ZEN STORIES

A great official came to the master Takuan asking for help in passing his days more eventfully. All day long, he explained, he sat receiving supplications and reports, and he found it all very dull. Takuan took brush and paper, and write eight Chinese characters. Translated they said:

No one day comes back again:  
One inch of time is worth a foot of jade.

\*\*\*\*\*

A new monk came up to the master Joshu. "I have just entered the brotherhood and I am anxious to learn the first principle of Zen," he said. "Will you please teach it to me?"

Joshu said, "Have you eaten your supper?"  
The novice answered, "I have eaten."  
Joshu said, "Now wash your bowl."

# PHILADELPHIA NEWS

## Council Close-up

Her name follows the high-falutin title of "Financial Secretary" on the Philadelphia Great Books Council's roster of officers. She helps our treasurer keep track of income and outgo. She writes up financial reports from time to time, hands out copies at Council meetings, and then reads them out loud so that all present can hear what they are reading.

So much for Sylvia Kasser's routine tasks on behalf of Council. What has she done for us lately? Nothing less than start up a new discussion group in the most logical spot in town, long overlooked by the rest of us. Veteran booker Sylvia knows a good meeting room when she sees one. A classic movie series led to her find at the Central Branch of the Free Library.

"It's booked up every day of the year," said the library's coordinator. "Evenings, too?" asked Sylvia — the rest is history. The library's publicity push boosted early recruiting; Council volunteers led the first few discussions; the group's own newly trained leaders are now in full command, ready to charge into their second season. None recalls Sylvia, who sat in only at the start and staunchly disclaims all credit.

Emil Bix



## 19th Annual Fall Institute Weekend

### "Between Heaven and Hell"

Somewhere in there — that's you — that's me — that's the next guy — But where and how close — that's the question that troubles us. Which path are we treading? Which way is up and which way is down? And is the next step a false one? Perhaps our authors can help us chart the way:

William Blake: "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell"

John Steinbeck: *The Pearl*

Wm. Shakespeare: *Othello*

Come join us at lovely Pocono Manor on *November 10-12*. The cost is \$180 double occupancy and \$240 single occupancy, and as always that covers just about everything. Please send your deposit of \$80 per person double and \$110 single to Sylvia Perelman, 8214 Marion Road, Elkins Park, PA 19117. If you cancel before October 7, we'll refund your deposit, less the cost of the books and mailings.

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### Registration Form

Enclosed is a deposit of \$ \_\_\_\_\_, made payable to Fall Institute Committee.

Names (please give first and last name of each person)	non-smoking group	smoking group	no pref.
(first) _____ (last) _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(first) _____ (last) _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Address _____			
(city) _____ (state) _____ (zip) _____		(phone) (     ) _____	

Please tell us any special requests, and we'll try to accommodate you.

## Leader Training

Sibyl Cohen will conduct a two-session leader training course on successive Sundays this fall, October 29 and November 5, from 11:00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M. at her center city apartment. To register, call Barbara Duno at 527-1632. Those trained in Sibyl's many past courses attest to the value and pleasure to be gained.

## Thank You, Bob

After two years as president of the Philadelphia Great Books Council, Bob Blumenthal has finished his term of office. Bob led the board meetings with gentle firmness and humor. He even managed to end most of the meetings on time, quite an accomplishment. The Philadelphia Council, under Bob's guidance, has continued to form new groups, maintain old groups, and encourage and sponsor events such as the theatre party, spring institute, and leader training. Bob kept track of all that was going on - should have been going on - and was going to go on. He was always available when someone had a question, or needed help. He even managed to keep our finances in the black. For all this we thank Bob and wish him well. He will be a tough act to follow.

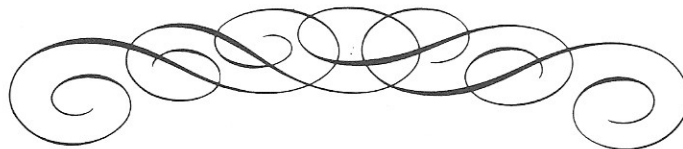
Fran Jacobs

## A Great Spring Institute

Against all expectations, we *didn't* drive off the edge of the map to reach Holy Family College in Northeast Philadelphia. Instead, those of us who came from other parts of the area to our Spring Institute found the trip pleasantly brief, and the destination attractive, air-conditioned, and altogether agreeable. Thanks to Ruth Allen and Henrietta Rogers for their perfect planning, and to gracious Institute Eve hosts, Leah and Bob Blumenthal.

## Honor and Memorial Cards

Barbara Isaacman waits, pen in hand, to send notes informing those you wish to honor or the families of those you wish to commemorate of contributions to Great Books made in their names. It's a simple matter to send your contribution, along with the necessary information to Barbara at 1122 Countryside Drive, Harrisburg, PA 17110. Please make checks payable to Philadelphia Great Books Council.



## Letters

To the Editor:

Would that I could be with you — at more than one institute. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, marvelous reading! *Major Barbara*, a classic and great fun, *The Book of Exodus*, *Beloved*. As of now, I don't know where I can be: my book (*The Meaning of Life*, opinions of 250 well-known contributors) is doing exceptionally well, apparently from some nine of ten radio interviews (major cities, by phone) a cable interview on tape to be shown in Chicago, a half dozen reviews, and an upcoming Book Fair where I'll be a special guest.

I do appreciate the piece on my book in your most attractive journal. If any Great Books members want the book and haven't been able to find it locally, I would be glad to discount \$3.00 from the advertised \$14.95, and there would be no \$2.00 mailing charge. If any of your members have gotten the book and want to send it to me for inscribing, I'd be glad to do so, paying the return postage myself. Please do place a GB on orders so that I can distinguish them from other personal orders I am receiving.

I'm swamped with correspondence, spending weekends on my old Royal at home, hearing from some Colby regulars, authors *in* the book, and perfect strangers from around the country, including one fundamentalist who wants to *praise* Toynbee's response, which of course everyone should know of!

I can be reached at The Department of Philosophy, Northeastern Illinois University, 5500 N. St. Louis Avenue, Chicago IL 60625-4699.

Hugh S. Moorhead

Ed. Note: Arnold J. Toynbee responded to Dr. Moorhead's query about the meaning of life, "What is the true end of Man? — To glorify God and enjoy Him for ever."

### ***LET'S FORM A COMPUTER GREAT BOOKS GROUP***

Surely there are enough Great Books enthusiasts with a computer background and/or computer enthusiasts with a Great Books background to support a Great Books Discussion Group via a computer bulletin board. Let's see if we can get them together, on line, and running.

As I envision the system, the leader would post a half dozen or so seed questions on the bulletin board. Participants could call the board at any time, read or copy the questions and any replies already there, post their own replies, comments, and questions either immediately or in a later call-back. What is needed is a computer with a word processing program, a modem, a terminal program, preferably with buffer capabilities, and a printer.

Discussion quality should improve. Merely putting the discussion in print encourages more thoughtful, carefully worded questions and replies. Having time to modify, sharpen, and point the questions, time to incubate a more considered answer, and time to research and cite supporting page references should heighten the quality of the discussion. Having a battery of several questions to consider at one time should lead to a broader perspective than is generated by the usual serial question-and-answer approach.

There are personal advantages, too. Participants could "listen" to the discussion at their own convenience, "speak" without interruption, and "hear" every word. They could "meet" with people an impossible distance away from them. The rigid two hour discussion format would be passé; one person might spend four hours participating, and another twenty minutes.

Many questions must be worked out. How long should a discussion be posted? Who will set up the board and maintain it? How will expenses be shared? Limits on time or space for replies? Size of group?

I do not have the expertise to set up such a system, nor the equipment to participate in it, but I volunteer to put the group in touch with one another. If you are interested in leading or participating in such a group, send me your name, address, phone number, type of computer (whether it is IBM-or-Macintosh compatible), and what baud rate you can transmit. Send this information to: William J. McConeghey, 938 Westdale Place, Springfield, PA 19064. Phone number (215) 543-7628. I will collate the data and send each of you a copy. From then on, you're on your own. Comments and suggestions are welcome.

Keep *The Tricorn* informed of your progress.

Bill McConeghey

### **Wilmington Summer Sessions**

Delaware Great Bookers are exploring the black experience in three discussion sessions this summer. Readings are Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, and Langston Hughes' poetry.

To the Editor:

This is in reply to your request for comments on the current national "battle of the books." I hope you've set off a lively debate on this issue, which is as essential to Great Books as the debate Dennis Scully started several years ago in *The Tricorn* about the ideal Great Books discussion.

On the whole, I agree with Allan Bloom that the traditional classics should form the heart of true liberal education. Choosing the best books isn't just an exercise in affirmative action (in which I passionately believe, by the way). The universality that is a key characteristic of all great books means that no one is excluded — even if he's not a dead white European male, to use the favorite phrase of Bloom's opponents. At Harvard last December I heard Bloom quote the great black writer W.E.B. DuBois on his experience of joyous liberation upon first reading some of those standard classics.

If assembling a list of the greatest books is chiefly an exercise in social equality, as is ending ethnic quotas for university admissions, or insuring that minorities are admitted to medical schools in greater numbers, then Bloom's opponents are correct. But the making of such a list should be primarily a judgement on quality, as is deciding whether someone should *graduate* from medical school or win the Nobel Prize for Physics. This is why the nation owes Bloom a debt of gratitude for his fight for standards — he is the Ralph Nader of American education. If choosing a doctor to deal with a life-threatening crisis, surely Bloom's opponents would follow his method of selection. And educational decisions are just as critical to the life of a nation.

Dead European male writers such as Plato and Shakespeare were chosen by the most democratic method of all — centuries of judgment by millions of readers — not by political pressure groups and college professors who are currently tossing books out of the accepted canon to make way for their ideological favorites.

Of course we Great Bookers should also read contemporary works and authors who might in actual life qualify for an affirmative action program — and we sure do. But the place for them is in our institutes and summer programs — not in the traditional canon until they get there by merit as did Dante and Rousseau. For example, Boston's Spring Institute, reported in your last issue, would have pleased Bloom's critics: a Tibetan essay, a book on a famous medieval myth, and a black woman's novel. And last summer the Brookline group read Indian and Chinese classics. But my favorite example of a group going beyond the traditional canon is the Newton, Massachusetts group I've attended for fifteen years. Our 1988 summer program was four meaty sessions on Bloom's book: *The Closing of the American Mind*.

Reg McKeen

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