

ARTS & SCIENCE PROGRAM 35th ANNIVERSARY TALK
DR. BOB HENDERSON, 15 OCT. 2016, MCMASTER UNIVERSITY

This morning, while thinking about what to say tonight, I read the following passage in a book with the title *Place • Being • Resonance: A Critical Ecohermeneutic Approach to Education*, by Michael W. Derby.

Quote: “What’s more, because objectivist approaches have relegated ‘imaginative’ experience to the realm of idle fantasy, artistic self-expression or trivial novelty, we are often made to feel strange in considering INTERPRETIVE PRACTICE as legitimate concerns.”

Two things come to mind:

1. I had thought that when I left McMaster after 29 years of teaching that I’d be finished with this sort of reading, having replaced it with the latest novel from the best sellers list. I was wrong. I suppose we might share something here: “Once an Art & Science prof / student, always an Arts & Science prof / student.”
2. This passage is at the centre of exploring and expressing ideas – an imaginative interpretation of the world for good: truth, beauty and adventure. Alfred North Whitehead’s civilized virtues. Working with ideas often put to practice was always the hallmark of Arts & Science for me.

A little story about exercising interpretive practices.

Story: Sometime in the late 1990s, I reckon, the Arts & Science curriculum committee was to replace the Dramatic Arts course with something new. We debated plenty of ideas, of course. In a fine collegial convivial spirit, another hallmark of Arts & Science, we became inspired by a “Creative Arts Course,” one that would include all the arts – music, drama, visual, but also domestic arts and traditional knowledge arts. This opened the door to ideas such as having an elaborate dinner together and the making of white ash baskets. We were all excited by the breadth of ideas for the course. **It didn’t get accepted.** But, what was truly remarkable was that amongst colleagues throughout the disciplines of the Arts & Science community, it was seriously considered and debated with friendly enthusiasm. Remarkable. Interpretive practices in play.

I have a wealth of such stories (I shared a few more in the oral version of these remarks on 15 Oct.). They collectively made me feel like I walked on campus with a “stranger vantage point” (Maxime Green). In short, I felt a home in Arts & Science and often felt as a stranger on campus. There was a degree of relevance and wildness [strange] in Arts & Science that was comforting to me as a prof and I assume likely to students as well.

Arts & Science has a creative space for students that helped blur teacher / student dynamics. There was always that sense that: “we can do education better. I can get better. We can all be more self-determined in the world and on campus” (Sylvia Bowerbank comes to mind). Arts & Science has a quality of acknowledging that education should be edgy / messy. For the student it shouldn’t be somber. It should be joyous.

I remember a student in first year chatting it up in C-105, commanding attention. I was shrinking in the background. He was saying, “I thought Arts & Science was going to be hard – extra hard. It isn’t.” I remember thinking he seemed to want an intellectual boot camp in military style of rigorous testing. What he seemed to be saying he was getting was an encounter group. Now I realize he missed the point. In Arts & Science it is his job to make it HARD; his job was to get engaged and connected to campus and

global initiative in the spirit of Paul Hawken's *Blessed Unrest*. The best way to make it HARD is to make it easy. I mean it (schooling / learning) is easy when you find a joy and adventure in learning. The learning is your job – our job together as co-investigators really! My job is to create an ambience where you can teach yourself with interpretative practices, a love of ideas and personally derived relevance.

All this is a way of saying, Arts & Science was good for me, then and still. I dare say, it was good for all of us then and now.

Borrowing a line from my good friend, Nils Vikander, I can look out in the crowd here and honestly say, "There is hope for humanity!"

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October 2016