

## Remarks by Founding Director Dr. Herb Jenkins, 30<sup>th</sup> Reunion, 24 Sept. 2011

*On receiving an award, a beautifully framed key in the shape of a backward question mark: I am overwhelmed by your generosity. My cup runneth over. If I had good sense I would just express my heartfelt thanks and stand down. Unfortunately, however, I am self-programmed to deliver this sermon.*

### What Are You Going Through As?

A sermon on the occasion of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Arts & Science Program, McMaster University, 24 September 2011

Dr. Herb Jenkins

I do want to say at the outset how much pleasure it gives me to be with you, to see former students once again, and to meet students who entered after I retired. From everyone I spoke to I got the sense that life is good. And, it's good for me as well. It has been 30 years since the very first group of 24 decided "to boldly go where no man has gone before." Or woman either. "Boldly," but not without doubts. One of those doubts was how to answer family and friends who ask: "What are you going through university as?"

My story is that I was being flippant when I said something like; "Just tell them, we are all going to be world leaders." But, I was hammered for this remark for years. Do you really think that I thought: If you don't make the world leader's club you have failed? If I did think that, I would have come here tonight grim-faced with disappointment. You Arts & Science alumni have had, on average, 13 years to make the world to a better place, and what's happened? More than ever we are beating up on the planet, and beating up on each other--especially on the non-rich. We have become a meaner society.

Did anyone listen to the recent debate among GOP presidential hopefuls? Remarkable! They seem to think that the extraordinarily high level of long-term unemployment in the US was caused by a tsunami of personal irresponsibility. Unaccountably this wave hit just at the time the financial system choked. But these would- be leaders believe that it's not a problem for all of us, not a social and economic problem, but just **their** problem--a problem for the unemployed.

Well, enough of being defensive. Now after 30 years I am really going to answer the question: What to say when asked: "What are you going through as?" You may think I'm too late; since you have already been through and you don't have to answer that question any longer. But that depends on how you take the question: narrowly, about your university years, or broadly, about life.

When Willie Sutton, the famous bank robber was asked by a reporter "Why do you rob banks?" his answer, almost certainly apocryphal, was said to be: "Because that's where the money is." A clever dodge of the bigger question: "Why do you do robberies at all?" When he wrote his autobiography he took on that broader question. He said that he did it for the sheer pleasure of it;

it made him come alive. Well, we have had a few drinks, it's the thirtieth--time to tackle the big one: What are you going through your life as?" And how does the Arts & Science program fit in with that?

Now, I have a problem. I have been fudging the pronoun in this question: sometimes "we," sometimes "you." But neither of these is right. I haven't actually been through the Program; I just believed in it and hung out with you folks who were actually doing it and with the extraordinary faculty who were teaching in it. So I don't presume to suggest how you might answer this question for yourself. I'm just going to say something about how I would answer the question for myself. This will be a new kind of inquiry--a solipsistic inquiry in which I think of possible answers and then settle on one that has the ring of truth for me. It's nice not to have to go to the library and look up stuff. I recommend it.

First possible answer: I saw the program as a way to help students solve the big problems like war and poverty. Actually one of you accused me of using students as my action figures, and there may be something to that. But I find this answer too grand. How about, "I wanted to help students build knowledge and intellectual capacity for reaching their own goals?" Better, but still too grand, and I am sceptical.

I need to tell a little back story here.

In Florida where we spend some time, Adair and I have fallen in with a Unitarian Fellowship. There I lead a study group on how to put a good ending on your life despite a medical establishment that too often seems to have forgotten its humanity. This is a setting that lends itself to the big question: What am I going through life as? One member of the group found his answer to that question in a dream. In it, he saw his own gravestone with its inscription. It read, "He tried to help other people--but he fucked up!"

I learned something from this. Maybe it's best not to hang everything on being a help to others, even if it's in relation to their own goals. For one thing, not everyone has one clear shining goal in life. Maybe even some of **you** do a bit of zig-zagging.. And then, as my friend observed, sometimes helping others doesn't work out so well.

Recently I read a thoughtful book, "Last Acts," by David Casarett, a doctor who practices and does research in palliative care. He explores the things his patients decide to do when they know their time is limited and why they make those choices. Since everyone's time is always limited, maybe there's something here for my inquiry.

Some choose to help loved ones, some are vengeful. Some want to leave a legacy, others want to live it up and go party. Some fight to the last, others accept their fate and use the time to reconnect and reconcile with others. The author doesn't tell us what's the best choice. This is not a how-to-do-it book, no formulas. No choice is right for everyone. So is there an upshot? Near the end he makes an observation which rings true for me. Maybe it's not so much a question of what you choose to **do** with the time that remains, but **who** you choose to spend it with.

My answer: **with friends and as a friend**. Final question: Who would I choose for friends? Well

I enjoy being with a motley set of folks, but they certainly include those who are zig-zagging their way, who have concerns as well as interests, who are connected and engaged with things beyond their own welfare. It also helps our conversation if they believe that the things we want and need to understand do not often come in neat packages addressed only to designated experts. That is how this Program fits in for me. I became part of a community of students and teachers who are like that. And I am grateful.