

Midsummer greetings.

I'm sorry to say that I will not be at the SENCER Summer Institute 2017. I will miss seeing old friends and meeting those of you who are new to our community.

I offer two reasons for being absent from SSI 2017.

My 70th birthday falls on August 4 and my family wants to celebrate this milestone with me at our place in Italy. The weekend of SSI and my birthday coincide with our little village's Medieval Festival, "Giostra di Simone" (this is a "fake" joust in that a dummy and not a person is at the receiving end of the lances). It is the highlight of the year and this will be the first time we have been here for it. And since my "SENCER family" gave me a great party for my 65th birthday, including a wonderful album of tributes and an original song, I have those kindnesses to remember with gratitude this year, as well.

My second reason is equally timely. Stepping back from the position of leadership that I had for so many years entails an obligation to step aside, as well. So while I regret that I won't have the pleasure of experiencing Eliza preside over her first SSI as our new executive director and I will miss hearing the live presentations from the great folks who will be participating this year, I look forward reading about your time at Stony Brook on our websites.

With my tongue planted firmly in my cheek, let me say that I know that some of you are going to be extremely disappointed, maybe even devastated, that my absence will mean that you will not get the usual update from me on the progress of our twin daughters, Caroline and Helena. So, in the tradition of servant leadership, I won't disappoint you:

Caroline began her summer singing the Mozart Great Mass with the Barnard Columbia Chorus, of which she is the student co-chair, with the University of Lausanne at Lausanne, Switzerland. She followed that with a trip to Vienna where she, along with three other students, assisted her German professor in preparing for a new course to be taught next spring. She's doing curricular development! (Sticking with the family business, you could say.) Caroline is minoring in German, while majoring in art history.

For her part, Helena assisted in organizing a conference on the philosopher Richard Rorty, an American pragmatist, last Fall where she was photographed being hugged by Cornell West! She is an RA, active on the team combatting sexual assault, and principal oboist in her orchestra. This summer, she has served an internship with the American Ballet Theatre. Helena is majoring in philosophy and has an interest in combining her management skills with her interest in the arts, so this Summer's internship was a perfect opportunity for her.

Both girls anticipate being graduated in spring of 2018.

It's quite something for me to think about the fact that the first time I wrote and spoke about the girls to the members of our community they were entering first grade. The cliché that “time flies” seems to be more true with each new year. The girls have appreciated your curiosity about them as they have grown up. I have appreciated your interest, your advice, and your reassurances to me along the way.

Let me say just a bit about what I've been doing in the year since I stepped down as Executive Director and invited Eliza to take my place. I spent a good deal of time working on a project that has been supported by the Helmsley Trust involving six wonderful partner schools in the New York area. We are working to combine several proven interventions to achieve a greater effect size. Our goal is to make it more likely that underrepresented students will persist in STEM major fields. This has been extremely challenging on a number of levels. But it is been also great opportunity to work with terrific colleagues: Brett Branco, Pam Brown, Dave Ferguson, Candice Foley, Duncan Quarless, and Anna Rosenboym, who have been the team leaders from the institutional partners. If you are attending SSI, you will have a chance to learn a bit more about our work in a panel that my associate, John Meyer, has organized with some of the participants. We also expect to have a presence in the SUNY's 4th Annual Applied Learning Conference this fall.

This year also found me assembling and curating the great mass (and variety) of my written work: chapters, books, talks, position papers, short essays, grant applications and reports, memorials of various types (eulogies, retirement talks, etc) so that they can be digitized (where they are not already). This has meant looking at all kinds of writing that I've done over my 45+ year “career” in higher education. I have been writing new introductory—and in some cases, explanatory—essays about many of these items. These writings sometimes have drifted into the category of “memoirs” often giving me the opportunity to acknowledge the influence and contributions of others to what I have thought, written, and done. The aim in digitizing and organizing these items is to make them available on a dedicated website. I hope that this will go live sometime in the later fall.

Lest you think that I may have slipped over into some alternate reality, I hasten to assure you that I have no illusions that people are holding their breath in anticipation of getting a chance to read my writings. (I am grateful to you if you have gotten this far in this note!) Given the range of the topics that have preoccupied me over the years, however, I think there may be pieces that some will find useful, when searched and accessed not by author but by subject.

I seem to have made a career out of working on things almost nobody else was excited about working on at the time. So, when the website is live, people searching will get to things I have written not just about science education for the so-called “non-major” and civic education and democracy, but also about such topics as women's athletics and sex equity, student alcohol use, HIV, student records and privacy, insurance and health care plans, bigotry and prejudice as epistemological

matters, homophobia, health education, date rape, and lots of other topics. And I might even include my first public thoughts about the college curriculum, a mildly embarrassing piece from 1969 arguing for greater freedom, written in my senior year as an undergraduate. I will ask Eliza and Danielle to let you know when we get this site live online and have properly braced ourselves for an avalanche of interest.

Speaking of interest, as some of you know, I tend to get interested in just about anything. When my attention is caught, I pursue the interest, sometimes exhaustively. I'd like to mention two such consuming interests from this year.

I am continuing my reading in that period of time in European history just before the now very sharp distinction between what we now call science and the humanities occurred. I have moved from Francesco Redi (poet and father of the controlled experiment) to the great painter (and mathematician) Piero della Francesca. Just recently, I had the good fortune to visit an exhibit marking the 400th anniversary of the death of Luca Pacioli, a monk and mathematician who, not without controversy, worked on problems in solid geometry. Pacioli is claimed to be the inventor of double entry bookkeeping! He, Piero and Leonardo da Vinci were all involved in trying to find "the golden proportion" that Platonists and the Neoplatonists were sure was out there to be found. This was happening just on the cusp of the time when other thinkers were seeing the human mind as "a blank slate" that possessed no innate ideas. To me, this is a most exciting moment in intellectual history where art, philosophy, religion, mathematics, and science are all in a jumble or perhaps in some kind of unperceivably (to me, at least) unified state. So it is the moment in Western time prior to the divisions that are now reified in our curricula and public life, as well. My next stop planned on this tour will be with Nicholas of Cusa's, On Learned Ignorance.

But the one thing I want to beg your indulgence to ask you to read about is the other little project that I have been pursuing in my leisure time. Just before last year's Summer Institute, I happened to be reading a bulletin from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. One of the reasons that I am particularly interested in the "informal education world" (both in science, as well as in art and history) is that I tend to regard my membership in public radio and museums as my having paid small amounts of "tuition" for access to a new faculty of teachers. So I think of the curators of these institutions as my freely-chosen teachers. I try to read what they offer, even if the subject matter is not immediately of interest to me. This time it was.

This particular bulletin focused on four whaling paintings done by Turner that the Met had assembled for an exhibit. In the bulletin (a monograph, really), there were compelling stories of whaling, in general, and mention of Moby Dick and Herman Melville, in particular. So, I resolved that right after the Summer Institute I was going to read Moby Dick again. I had read it when I was young. I didn't like it at all. I couldn't understand why anybody thought this was the great American novel.

I opened Moby Dick just before boarding the train home from Chicago. I was smitten and I couldn't put it down. I was no longer bothered in the least by the fact—as I had been as a young man—that you had read for >500 pages to get ~40 pages of action. I didn't want the remarkable unfolding of knowledge, wit, lore, and insight to ever end! I got “hooked” or harpooned into wanting to know more about this briefly-lived 19th century quest for “energy wealth and independence”!

After the Moby Dick experience (and then reading some of Melville's original sources), I decided that I should try to read everything that Melville wrote. So now, almost a year later, I'm about 85% of the way to my goal. Melville wrote prodigiously!

It's hard to say just what Melville was: writer and novelist, surely, but also poet, philosopher, comic, theologian, historian, geographer, geologist, ethnographer, anthropologist, oceanographer, astronomer, linguist, meteorologist, economist, political theorist, botanist, zoologist, proto-pragmatist, certainly a student of the whale and the world! (By now, I've spent enough time in Melville's South Pacific of the 1840's to think that I could almost carry on a credible conversation with Bob Franco!)

I am not writing this to brag, but to commend Melville's great work to you if you do not know it already. I just want to end this letter to you by recommending one of his novels, The Confidence Man—A Masquerade. Published in 1857 and set on a Mississippi riverboat with all the action occurring on April Fool's Day, this is a fantastic romp through all the elements of a particular time that depended, Melville might say, on confidence and confidence alone. Melville plays with barely disguised versions of Emerson, PT Barnum, religionists in variety, men trading in medicines and businesses with miraculous promises, land speculators, frauds, mountebanks, as well as the duped and the wary. It is a deeply insightful book, not only about America and not just about some other distant time.

If a 250 page novel seems a tad much given all that you have to do, may I recommend a much shorter piece, “Poor Man's Pudding and Rich Man's Crumbs” (in the “Uncollected Prose” section from the great “Library of America” Edition, published with support of the National Endowment for the Humanities)? Here is a taste from this 14-page piece that also seem to me to have something to say to us today:

Those peculiar social sensibilities nourished by our peculiar political principles, while they enhance the true dignity of a prosperous American, do but minister to the added wretchedness of the unfortunate; first, by prohibiting their acceptance of what little random relief charity may offer; and, second, by furnishing them with the keenest appreciation of the smarting distinctions between their ideal of universal equality and their grindstone experience of the practical misery and infamy of poverty... Of all the preposterous assumptions of humanity over humanity, nothing exceeds

most of the criticisms made on the habits of the poor by the well-housed, well-warmed, and well-fed. (1234-5)

Powerful, wouldn't you say, even if a bit "binary" by today's standards!

I don't know about you, but I'd like to know a lot more about an author who introduced his 1849 novel, Mardi, written, he says, in order "to see whether, the fiction might not, possibly, be received for a verity: in some degree the reverse of my previous experience." If you have thoughts on Melville you'd like to share, please write to me. Happy reading.

I wish you all a terrific Summer Institute and great success in the work you have chosen to do subsequent to being in Stony Brook together. I hope to see you next year.

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