



BORN AND BORN AGAIN

1969 and Its Discords

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I stood there, for my first-ever class at Oakland University, in the late **August of 1969**. My “Exploratory” was in “Politics and Literature.” (“Exploratories” were university-wide freshman seminars that took the place of conventional composition courses.) We were crammed into what is now the Bill Hammerle conference room on the second floor of Dodge Hall.

It was hot. I was wearing a suit. My students were most decidedly not.

It was 1969: they wore anything they felt like wearing. Some dressed like college students from the Fifties—skirts, blouses, button-down shirts and khakis. Some wore cutoffs or jeans or beads or—it seemed at first glance—pretty much nothing at all. Many wore no shoes.

It was startling. It was great. It also was the last time I wore a suit. (At present, I don’t even *own* a suit.)

The students seemed cosmopolitan and diverse (owing to the University’s recruiting students from the East Coast, especially New York). They were very political. The only “social mobility” one female student said that she saw was a black maid waiting for a bus on Woodward Avenue. Another talked about the need to reform, or even bring down altogether, the “entire system,” by which he meant the linkage among racism, imperialism, militarism, even capitalism. Another said the environ-

ment was the great issue. Still another, population: we must not wait until we have become “wall to wall people.”

So we discussed works by George Orwell and Aldous Huxley and Plato and Machiavelli, and I was a profoundly happy man: I was, I knew, born to be doing exactly this.

It was 1969. The Beatles broke up, the Kennedys and Martin Luther King were dead; and the Detroit I’d left in 1966 (to go to the University of London for my PhD) was now a completely different city. The country was coming apart. But except for a few vocal and short-haired William Buckley fans plus one or two incipient neocons, nearly all the students hated Lyndon Johnson’s war in Viet Nam and hated the Nixon administration even more. Yes, there was a lot of hatred and anger—in short, bad vibes.

The University almost came apart. *Almost*. Students protested and marched—but they didn’t riot. Indeed, the first demonstration I saw, in that Autumn of 1969, just outside Wilson Hall, was quite amazing: the students were demonstrating *in support* of Chancellor Woody Varner. They liked him. They didn’t want him to leave (as he did shortly thereafter). What a far cry from those Columbia University students who bounced Grayson Kirk from his presidential office!

No, Oakland University almost came apart because we, the faculty, unionized and then were responsible for (what I believe is) the first faculty strike in the history of American higher education. Joe DeMent was the spearhead of all this: he was the first AAUP President *and* chief negotiator during and after the week-long strike in 1971. Joe and I were both in the English Department. Joe’s office happened to be next to mine: I had a sort of radicalism (and a passion for the recordings of Arturo Toscanini) thrust upon me.

The University, after a rather bitter period of division, came to work, even to work quite well, with this bargaining system that continues to the present.

But there were other kinds of divisions. It was The Sixties: why (to take one important example) did we have a foreign language requirement? How was it relevant to current needs?

Violent arguments deeply divided the faculty. What did we *mean* by a college education? What were we doing? Who were we?

At Oakland University, we were, it turned out, very, very lucky. Ultimately, we did *not* come apart. We certainly reflected the larger divisions in higher education and in the country, but, somehow, that Woody Varner demonstration became highly emblematic.

Consider: one of the most significant of the responses to The Sixties at Oakland University was the creation of **The Honors College in 1977**. Oakland had by then something of a tradition of “inner” colleges—small semi-autonomous colleges within the University. Some saw these small colleges as offering innovative, distinctive, and individual educational experiences. To others, they were simply flaky. The Honors College was founded (with Shelley Appleton and Mel Chernob as principal parents) *in response* to all this Sixties madness.

This would be an inner-college with nary a hint of flakiness. *There would be a language requirement*. Brilliant students would be recruited and then offered brilliant professors who believed in high standards and who would offer demanding—and therefore truly rewarding—courses under circumstances as nearly ideal as we could devise.

That program remained in effect from Mel Chernob’s initial directorship through that of his successor, Bob Howes, who retired in 1985.

I personally knew about the Honors College because, as a young foggy (*en route* to becoming an elderly hippie *manqué*), I had served on the Search Committees that yielded both Mel and Bob. I was about to serve on the third such committee when the A&S Dean, Brian Copenhaver, suggested I might make a good candidate for the job. *Moi?! Recall my office’s proximity to Mr. AAUP, Joe DeMent: I never thought of myself as an administrator.* (The HC Director was then a half-time administrator, remaining on a half-load in his or her department.) However, I was intrigued. I was, well, flattered. I became a candidate.

OK, it was now **1985**. Things were different. I got the job. I was still a writer and English Professor, but this was something totally new for me. Quite unexpectedly, it proved to be what they call a “good fit.” I liked the job and seemed to be reasonably good at it. What a surprise! What a trip! I felt positively born again.

The Honors College had been successful in being a small beacon of educational excellence (while standing up against some bruising charges of elitism). By 1985, it had, if anything, become too exclusive, *too* small. It seemed to me that many people around the University (and I came to know the University in a wholly new way) never even heard of it. So my mission seemed clear: without losing the program of offering the best by the best to the best, I wanted to make the HC more representative of the whole University and make it more representative of the University to the larger community.

In the following 17 years, that, pretty much, is what I tried to accomplish. (I had periods of superb interim assistance from George Matthews and Barry Winkler.) The work was fun. I got to know my colleagues and their work, interests, and enthusiasms. I invited them to devise their dream courses. I recruited students who would respond to, and learn from, such dream courses. I involved the HC in minority recruitment and in many pre-college programs designed to help under-prepared but promising students do well. This was not only fun; this was positively thrilling.

The HC survived a “downsizing” mania in the College around 1990 and became a University-wide program. My own successor, Jude Nixon, has taken the HC to the next level—with many more scholarships, students, ancillary programs, and the beginning of a residential component.

What is most curious about “this strange eventful history,” is that the Honors College, founded in reaction to “The Sixties” has become a place where some of the best values of The Sixties are possible: here is a place for an individual student to find her or himself; here is a place for educational experimentation; here is a place where the connections between the

“ivory tower” and the “real world” are never forgotten. (HC students now have a community service requirement!)

Like that pro-Woody Varner demonstration from 1969, the HC has provided a site wherein the creative tensions and discords of the later Sixties and early Seventies often result in some interesting harmonies.