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What Do We Belong to If We Belong to NCHC?

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Honors in Practice

2016 PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

What Do We Belong to If We Belong to NCHC?

JERRY HERRON

Wayne State University

(What follows is a slightly revised version of the 2016 presidential address delivered at the annual NCHC conference in Seattle, Washington.)

I'd like to start with a question—one that seems appropriate, given the occasion and given the great conference that we have just been participating in. As president, looking back over the past few days and surveying the organization to which we all so proudly and so variously belong, I want to pose the following question: What do we belong to if we belong to NCHC?

Before getting to the answer, I want to tell you about a student who was a member of the first class I ever taught. She was present three times during that fledgling semester of mine: she was there on the first day and then again along toward the middle of the term, and she came on the last day, when we were to complete the anonymous student evaluation. Here's what she wrote on her evaluation, and it was all she wrote. I know she was the one doing the writing because she scrawled her name—first and last—diagonally across the evaluation sheet with a huge red Crayola just so I would be sure to know who was saying the following about me: “Not only did Mr. Herron not teach me anything this semester; he made me forget important stuff I already knew.”

I have been meditating on that student's comment for quite a few years now. At first, I was a little hurt by the implication that I had such a calamitous effect on tender young minds. But then I began to see things differently. That idle crack about making her forget stuff has become a kind of talisman to me, reminding me always to begin any pedagogical enterprise—such as a presidential address—with a little creative forgetting. So, I urge you to forget what you think you already know about the answer to the question of what we belong to if we belong to NCHC and instead to indulge along with me in some forgetfulness—forgetting the kind of school you come from, whether a large research university or a small faith-based institution, a traditional liberal arts school or a two-year college, or any one of the other types that make up NCHC. And I urge you to forget as well—for the time being—all the good ideas you have garnered here these past few days, talking together, hatching plots, developing strategies for getting what you need when you get back home, and how conspiratorially good it feels to conspire with others who confront the same kinds of challenges you face. I urge you to forget all the good work we do, that you and your students have been showcasing in the panels and papers and posters you have presented, and to forget how the honors gang were making those now so-called “best practices” a reality long before we even thought of them as best practices; you know what I mean: undergraduate research, capstone courses, learning communities, experiential learning, collaborative projects. We didn't do any of that good work because we wanted to brag about how many of the best-practices boxes we could check off; we just did what we knew was best. So forget about that stuff (for the moment). And I urge you to forget as well about your dinner plans tonight and the flight back home and who you might share a ride with to the airport.

You may, by now, have caught on to what I am urging here; it's a kind of mindfulness: being mindful of what's left when all the daily traffic of consciousness dies down. And no, I didn't come up with this idea at morning yoga; as for me, I slept in. I'll give credit where credit is due, which is why I brought up that long-ago student of mine—because I owe it all to her when it comes to the lesson of creative forgetting—forgetting so that we can see what is really before us.

Back to my question, then, about what it is we belong to if we belong to NCHC. In the name of creative forgetting, it's not the myriad practical and political and even poetic things that define honors education—all the busyness that necessarily has to go on at all the different kinds of places where we work and where our students go to school. It's the quiet at the center of all that

rackety good stuff. And what I find there is a sense of belonging—belonging to each other and to an idea—that makes this outfit of ours truly wonderful and unique. There are lots of other professional organizations, and I'm sure you all here are members of a number of them. But I would challenge you to ask if you feel you belong to those organizations the way we belong to NCHC.

The difference, I think, is the presence of an idea—an idea larger than any one of us, or of our institutions, an idea that can become as particular as a lesson plan or homework assignment, or as grand as the swelling in your breast when you sit there at commencement and watch a group of young (or perhaps not still young) scholars receive their diplomas. It's an idea—a calling, really—that calls out lifelong commitments to quality of the kind you see recollected in the awards we present each year—the Founders Award, the awards that bear the names of people who embody the calling I'm talking about, the Brandolini and Schuman and Hanigan awards. It's this calling we have set out to share strategically in the three initiatives that guide our organization: advocacy, research, and professional development. But calling to an idea of quality is more than a strategic plan, which is my point. The calling that summons us all together is best understood when it gets shared, through service to each other, and here I can point to no finer example than Hallie Savage, who has served honors so ably and well, for many years, and who will be stepping down next month from her position as executive director.

And I would point as well to Jim Ruebel, former president of NCHC, a good friend and wise colleague whose steady judgment and warm presence we will surely miss, as we will miss Dail Mullins, whose loss everyone who knew him will be feeling for a long time to come. I'm put in mind of what Dail said in a lead essay for *JNCHC* a few years back that meditated upon a question like the one I'm entertaining here—"What is Honors?" Being a good researcher, Dail investigated a number of honors program websites only to find that there was a lot of repetition of the same highfalutin phrases, which led him to the playful conclusion that all those statements might have been produced by an automated Honors Program Description Generator, which just goes to show how hard it is to put a name to the idea of quality I'm talking about.

So when it comes to the idea that calls us all here, I'm going to take a hint from Dail—and from that long-ago student of mine—and forget about trying to put into words what it is I'm talking about and go back instead to the notion of belonging to something that calls us out of ourselves. That is what NCHC means to me—not what we represent, but what we all are, here present with each other—on behalf of something that the Honors Program

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Description Generator will never catch up to. There is no better work than this, I'm convinced—being led by the virtues we summon up in each other when we're called together by this great idea. So I want to thank you all for the opportunity afforded me, as president of NCHC, to forget all about what I won't be putting into words and instead to give myself up—virtuously—to being led by things better than I can say. I thank you.

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