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Founder's Award Speech, NCHC 50th Anniversary Conference, Chicago, Illinois, November 14, 2015

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Founder's Award Speech

BERNICE BRAID

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(What follows is a slightly revised version of the address that Bernice Braid delivered on November 14, 2015, at the fiftieth-anniversary NCHC conference in Chicago. Bernice Braid received the inaugural Founder's Award in recognition and appreciation of her invaluable contributions to the NCHC and to honors education during the past five decades.)

This Founder's Award is about me, it's about you, it's about NCHC. At my first NCHC conference, in San Francisco, 1972, I noticed that the group gathered there was both composite and excited about its own variety of interests. It's possible that those characteristics excited me in part because of what I myself brought to the meeting.

Growing up in Philadelphia, then full of Quakers, Mennonites, and occasionally Amish families walking through downtown, I was always aware that people who passed those wearing broad, black hats and long beards, or wearing long dresses and starched voile caps, turned completely around to stare after them once they'd passed. The city was surrounded by rural areas with poor farmer families who spoke Pennsylvania German and ate food unlike what came out of my mother's kitchen. And I myself was born to a Russian

immigrant family and lived in a working-class neighborhood, stuffed with Italian immigrants, called Strawberry Mansion, a name that taught me the irony of metaphor.

Images and the sounds of the Other came with me into my study of comparative literature and maybe, once I was teaching, let me notice something odd in my literature classes: students seemed to be talking about their own lives when they discussed French and Russian novels. They rechristened characters whose names seemed too tricky to pronounce in order to make them familiar, to claim them as a part of their lives.

Those memories floated in my head in 1974 as I worked on an ad hoc Honors Semesters Committee with a group of experimentalists who were eager to create some way to invite a broad cross-section of American students to think about the America of this 1976 Bicentennial. We saw our national milestone as a perfect moment to tackle the notion of “Americana” writ large, and we spent two years shaping a multidisciplinary curriculum, finding off-campus housing, and setting up NCHC’s first-ever National Honors Semester, the Washington Bicentennial Semester. The program was based on our conviction that the streets of the nation’s capital were as important a learning laboratory as seminars with constitutional lawyers, colloquia on civil rights, and workshops on folk art and music. This project was NCHC’s—our—organizational foray into deep experiential learning, into the power of place.

With the success of the Bicentennial Semester, this ad hoc group morphed into a standing committee; planners grew in number and changed over time; and students came from all over mainland U.S. and sometimes from Europe and Puerto Rico, bringing with them their own cultures, metaphors, foods, and ways of speaking. From the get-go, the Semesters proved that students learn at least as much from one another’s cultural and ethnic differences as from the materials they read or the interviews they conduct in their fieldwork. In Washington we had tested independent Issues Colloquia as a means of tying together ideas gleaned from coursework, from reflections on being embedded in local schools or researching local political offices, and from living, cooking, and entertaining together in a residence hall off campus. The director of the newly created American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress came to our Folk Art and Music class party to play his fiddle for us—drawn, he said, by our explicit intention to learn from the streets and not just from class.

Treating the Semester as a laboratory led us to critique its integrative mechanism, the colloquia. In 1978 I was already testing, in the first New York

Honors Semester, what by the 1981 New York Honors Semester had become City as Text™, an integrative laboratory/seminar that focused on the site and theme of a Semester, the courses students took, their dorms or hotels, their projects, and each other's cultural backgrounds: all of these as the subject matter everyone in the Semester analyzed, reflected on, and drew from to create their final projects. Our one rule was that the project could not be produced nearly as well in the best library in the world as right here in this site, with these experiences.

Full immersion in place and in thinking, talking, and writing about experiences participants undertake together have become catalysts for insights that yield more than any of us expected. In our thirty Honors Semesters, in by now thirty-two Faculty Institutes, and even in the short City as Text experiences at conferences, we continue to see that what each of us brings to the venture shapes what all of us experience in the moment and that SEEING this reveals us to ourselves in unanticipated ways.

For instance, in a Faculty Institute set in earthquake-prone San Francisco, a team of two—one an urban planner trained as an engineer working with our colleague Shirley Thomas, a poet from the hills of Arkansas—startled themselves when he could only write about cracks he saw in foundations along the streets of Haight-Ashbury whereas she remained speechless, standing open-mouthed staring at a storefront featuring models wearing g-strings and leather straps at an S&M shop.

For me, the privilege of experimenting with these ways of mapping place and exploring images, metaphors, and ideas reveals the profound power of liberal education. Faculty and students carry with them their backgrounds, their lives, and their disciplines, all of which become as much a subject of study as the sites they and we explore together. Mapping strategy is, and has always been, about figuring out how we see, what we hear, how much we absorb: about an abiding passion for inventing an investigative language to connect the classroom and the world.

Once that passion is aroused, there's no stopping it, as Semesters alumni have proven. Their adventure has made them aware of who they are, of what they have seen, and of what they really care about. I am convinced that the single most important moment in this process is the moment of surprise, when what really registers is DISCOVERY: of something outside themselves, of something inside themselves, of their capacity to discover. That is the moment they never seem to lose.

There is a flurry of writing now on liberal education, maybe because we feel it's becoming, like so much else, an endangered species. Father John Walsh wrote an article for *Métropolitain* that he called "The Need For A Liberal Arts Education. It's About Being Human" <<http://www.themetropolitain.ca/articles/author/143>>, a title that gets at the heart of the matter. Our shared humanity is one of the most satisfying dimensions of our work on experiential learning: in *City as Text* and its spinoffs, we are somehow, together, keeping our humanity alive in its most creative, integrative, analytical, and deeply reflective manifestation, which is at the very core of NCHC. Reread your program for the Chicago conference, and note the adaptations of *City as Text* and of inspirations drawn from Faculty Institutes.

We have always concentrated on how it is that people transform space into place. We have always asked people to look at the surface, then look beneath the surface, to ask "What is it like to live here? For whom? What makes you think so?" If you have time, go to the Art Institute of Chicago, and visit the exhibit "Making Place: The Architecture of David Adjaye." He uses a version of *City as Text* to read a culture and environment before he even begins to design a building, in his case because he hopes to reshape "place" by addressing the social implications of buildings.

As some of you know, a mantra of mine has always been a sentence from Kafka's story "A Country Doctor" when the doctor thinks, "To write prescriptions is easy, but to come to an understanding with people is hard."

City as Text is a way of seeing and thinking that becomes a way of doing—and so a way of being in the world. The process itself is democratizing. To see oneself contextualized: that is deep learning, isn't it?

So tonight's Founder's Award is about me and my work. It's about you and your work. And it's about NCHC and our work.

Congratulations on our 50th anniversary.

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