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# The Spark of Reimagination

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**Abstract:** As part of the *National Collegiate Honors Council's* (2022) collection of essays about the value of honors to its graduates (1967–2019), the author reflects on the personal and professional impacts of the honors experience.

**Keywords:** higher education—honors programs & colleges; Utah State University (UT)—Honors Program

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Each experience was a thrilling opportunity to reimagine the world. The honors program at Utah State University presented my peers and me with challenge after challenge to envision the world through new eyes. Journalism historian Mike Sweeney offered perspectives for understanding global conflict and everyday communication in his Propaganda, Persuasion, and Censorship honors seminar, offered in 2003 as the U.S. was attempting to justify the decision to engage in the Iraq War. In Carol Dehler's historical geology course, the Rocky Mountain backdrop of our campus was transformed from a static outdoor playground for skiers and hikers into a rich and complex billion-year record documenting life, upheaval, and metamorphosis in its fossils and sediments.

With each of these experiences, I realized that I had entered college more naïve than I'd thought, and the world grew in small increments. Understanding geologic time gave my world more depth. Learning about the role of the media in uncovering the horrors of the Vietnam War brought nuance and dread to my world. A rich diversity of ideas, encounters, and approaches to life that I'd only begun to conceive began to take shape. At that point in my

life, I had barely left the state of Utah, but I would soon find myself in Brazil volunteering as a Mormon missionary, taking a leave from my studies like many of my peers.

My honors experience primed me for two years of exercises in empathy as I witnessed poverty and violence on a scale that I'd previously understood only in the abstract. I reimagined the world again as I recognized my privileges of food and shelter security as well as relative safety from gun violence. I was also confronted with my complicity. "I will not listen to a colonizer whose people have decimated the native Americans and now massacre the Iraqis," a stranger shouted one day at me and a fellow missionary in the street. We ignored the man at the time, but I dwelled on the encounter daily for years, recognizing the need to incorporate his perspective—on the trajectory of U.S. history, from colonial times to Vietnam to the present—into my own understanding. The episode demanded reimagination to a degree I wasn't prepared for at that moment; however, my honors experience would provide a means of reprocessing the world when I found myself faced with such difficult truths.

Upon my return to USU and its honors program, I was surprised to open one of my American literature textbooks, Elizabeth Bishop's *The Complete Poems*, and discover a group of poems set in Brazil that illustrated in detail community life in the favelas, street dogs, and violent scenes from the country's colonial past. Disarmed by this coincidence and the poetry's resonance, I approached the professor, Anne Shifrer, after our first class to discuss Bishop and what I found so striking about her work. That discussion quickly turned into a mentorship when she agreed to become my honors thesis advisor. We explored together how Bishop's experience in Brazil impacted her work and how she understood her sexuality—at a time when I felt quite isolated as I attempted to understand my own.

The USU Honors Program was more than a laboratory of ideas or reimagination; it was a world-building experience. As I gained greater understanding of sexuality, colonialism, research, and more, I was able to accept the truths that had shattered my narrow reality and to reformulate my world: "U.S. history is problematic." "I am gay." Professor Shifrer convinced me that my own experiences and perspectives had value to reshape the understanding of others. Thanks to her guidance, I was asked to present my work at a conference celebrating Bishop's one hundredth birthday alongside scholars who had studied the poet for years.

A decade on, I still conceive of my research as world-building—and I agreed to share my passion for such exploration with current USU honors

students as part of The Honors Passion Project alumni presentation series this past year. As a literary history scholar, I am using digital methods to develop a network map of 19th- and 20th-century queer writers. Using a tool I developed to search for mentions of these figures in relevant archival documents, I am slowly bringing into relief an understanding of the networks they formed to address their individual senses of isolation through their correspondence, translation of one another's work, and instances of collaboration. By visualizing this history, a better understanding of queer community and resilience will emerge.

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