

Descrying the End in the Beginning  
A talk given to the Integral Program by Tutor Joseph Lanigan  
[An excerpt from that talk]

III COMMUNITY

Near the beginning I said that a new enterprise brings us all together. A common enterprise, a common adventure tends to make for community and communion. For community is founded in something common.

But, since what is common in this instance is largely something intended or awaited rather than already attained, the gradual appropriation of, or assimilation to, what is common, depends upon the disposition of the members of the community. For, although a community cannot be fabricated, it must – if it is to grow – be chosen and cultivated.

The tutorials and labs and seminars are struggles with the task, the text, oneself, the others. But they are not adversary proceedings. The aim is not to score points, not to become king of the mountain of controversy, but to foster and sharpen and deepen the inquiry. This requires not only care and study, but also self-giving, a genuine friendliness.

The quality of the acts of the tutorials and labs and seminars and lectures, the quality of demonstrations and discussions does not depend, only on the thoroughness of individual preparation. It depends also upon active willingness to cooperate, to listen carefully and patiently to what is being said and to respond in a way which draws upon the resources of the text and of the ongoing conversation and advances the thrust of the discussion. At first this growing spirit of community may be manifest especially in a willingness bravely to trust the others so far as to venture forth those deep-down thoughts which could make one seem foolish (or even discover oneself to in fact be foolish). Later it may be manifest in a willingness to respect oneself and one's fellows so far as always to demand questions and judgements which follow out of the spirit of the conversation (which is, at one level, the logic of the inquiry; at another level, the third person the divine name which informs the conversation and gives it its life).

The community of the Integral Program enjoys and suffers its paradoxical situation as a college within the larger college. It shares some very broad objectives with the college but chiefly it functions in modes and directions counter to those of the conventional departments among which it is placed. This proximity to alternatives may offer special temptations to incoming freshman whose educational “dark nights” may be extinguished inopportunely by reason of easy access to the consolations of more “popular” and hence “more respectable” courses of study. As the year advances, however, the contrast becomes an aid in sharpening a sense of identity. We are surrounded by persons and facilities which we may respect and with which we may learn many things. Integral students take a notable part in the general culture and political life at the college. Some enterprising Integral students manage split, or double majors.

The questions we consider tonight at the beginning, the questions of the end in the means, of what we are about, of how we are about and what we are about – which implicate, personally, the questions whether to join/whether to continue – remain questions at the middle and, I suppose, all the way to the “ending” of the program, whatever that may be.

A continuing temptation for members of the program, as for participants in any human venture with lofty aims, is that we forsake such questioning and something more manageable and comfortable, for slogans and habits instead of searches and struggles. That way a community which should be confident in itself and open to the wide world, begins to shrivel into a self-satisfied and self-protecting clique.

This attempt to descry the end in the beginning had yielded three imperatives which may guide us from falling or aiding us to rise when we fall:

- I. Put first things first, beginnings before middles, the books themselves before the books about the books, the liberal arts before specific professional skills, becoming human before becoming a certain sort of human.
- II. Learn by doing rather than by having things done to and for us. Humans grow upon and against culture and tradition, rather than either by passively submitting to them or by seeking to begin afresh without them.
- III. Let conversation suppose and develop community rather than clique, through trust in each other and in promise of the whole enterprise/adventure, which is, finally, trust in the forming, transforming power of the Word.

# Meditation at Lagunitas

By Robert Hass

All the new thinking is about loss.  
In this it resembles all the old thinking.  
The idea, for example, that each particular erases  
the luminous clarity of a general idea. That the clown-  
faced woodpecker probing the dead sculpted trunk  
of that black birch is, by his presence,  
some tragic falling off from a first world  
of undivided light. Or the other notion that,  
because there is in this world no one thing  
to which the bramble of *blackberry* corresponds,  
a word is elegy to what it signifies.  
We talked about it late last night and in the voice  
of my friend, there was a thin wire of grief, a tone  
almost querulous. After a while I understood that,  
talking this way, everything dissolves: *justice,*  
*pine, hair, woman, you and I.* There was a woman  
I made love to and I remembered how, holding  
her small shoulders in my hands sometimes,  
I felt a violent wonder at her presence  
like a thirst for salt, for my childhood river  
with its island willows, silly music from the pleasure boat,  
muddy places where we caught the little orange-silver fish  
called *pumpkinseed*. It hardly had to do with her.  
Longing, we say, because desire is full  
of endless distances. I must have been the same to her.  
But I remember so much, the way her hands dismantled bread,  
the thing her father said that hurt her, what  
she dreamed. There are moments when the body is as numinous  
as words, days that are the good flesh continuing.  
Such tenderness, those afternoons and evenings,  
saying *blackberry, blackberry, blackberry.*

Robert Hass, "Meditation at Lagunitas" from *Praise*. Copyright © 1979 by Robert Hass. Reprinted with the permission of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.

Source: *Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (2004)