

World Masterpieces Seminar

*Stephen Fallon
F. Clark Power*

The First Year of the Course

The Great Books course begun in 1988 at the Center for the Homeless is the result of the cross-fertilization of two influences, 1) the historical emphasis of the Great Books movement on adult education outside university walls and 2) the Clemente Project Humanities course offered to economically disadvantaged adults in New York City (see Earl Shorris' *New American Blues: A Journey through Poverty to Democracy* [1997]). Shorris, who received a rigorous Great Books education while an undergraduate at the University of Chicago, devised his curriculum in the hope of demonstrating that the poor and marginalized could work with classic texts and would profit in tangible and intangible ways from doing so. In his book, Shorris makes a strong case for Great Books education as "an answer to the problem of poverty in the United States." He argues very simply that a Great Books education in the humanities opens the way for dispossessed people to begin to participate in the life of the community, or in other words, to engage in the political life in the widest sense.

Inspired by the Clemente Project and firmly believing that the privilege of elite university education should not be limited to economically privileged members of society, we began looking into offering a course for the homeless in the spring of 1998. We viewed the course as attempting to meet a responsibility central to the Great Books movement and at the same time as acting on "a preferential option for the poor," which is essential to the University of Notre Dame's Catholic identity. We decided to offer the kind of seminars that our department offers to its undergraduate majors. In these courses, faculty lead discussions in a wide variety of classic works, sometimes but not usually in their academic specialties. The teacher is a fellow learner, who in the tradition of "Great Books" pedagogy poses questions and helps the students to explore the text but who does not impose or necessarily even offer a reading. We were betting that Socrates and Shakespeare, Frederick Douglass and Emily Dickinson, Sigmund Freud and Martin Luther King, Jr., would engage the interest and speak to the concerns of the homeless (see attached syllabus).

We were fortunate in that South Bend is home to a pathbreaking Center for the Homeless, which has received national recognition for an innovative program that guides guests through a "continuum of care" from homelessness to employment and stability. We were further fortunate that Lou Nanni, then the Director of the Center, is a graduate of our "Great Books" department and was immediately receptive to our overtures. Lou and his associate, Deb Lane, who coordinates adult education at the Center, helped us to see opportunities, foresee difficulties, and to get the course going in the Fall of 1998.

Particularly because we have had to carve out time for the course after our full-time teaching and research responsibilities have been met, the help of the Center in coordinating the class has been invaluable. The Center has served as a clearinghouse, providing us with a pool of potential students and help in keeping track of the whereabouts and life changes of those enrolled.

Prior to beginning the course we spoke with administrators at Notre Dame. Their key contributions were waiving application and tuition fees and giving us the green light to offer Notre Dame credit for successful completion of the course. We saw this as having symbolic as well as practical value. We expected, and we have since had confirmed, that many of the homeless are remarkably intelligent, and as capable as our undergraduates of performing well in and benefiting from our courses. Being able to offer Notre Dame credit allows us to mark their achievement with visible, external validation.

Our first challenge at the Center was recruitment. Lou Nanni suggested that we present the course to all residents of the Center at the weekly meeting. We were nervous at first; how does one sell a small-group discussion course to a group of 120 or more? As it turned out, Lou's advice was wise, and we have continued to visit the Center's large weekly meeting before the beginning of each unit to recruit new students. Our strategy has been to screen a carefully selected scene from a Greek tragedy (we have used Sophocles' *Antigone*), and then to ask an opening question that addresses a significant theme in the play (e.g., a question as apparently simple but as ultimately complex as "should Antigone defy Creon and bury her brother?"). The response on every occasion has been electric. Hands fly up, voices compete for time, and we try to involve as many different guests in the discussion as we can. Invariably, when the fifteen or twenty-minute discussion ends, the group wants to keep going, and some will keep the discussion going with us or with each other afterward. We end the formal session by 1) stressing that the only requirements (but ones we take very seriously) are that every student do the assigned reading each week and come to class ready to discuss and 2) inviting those interested to sign up with Deb Lane at the Center's GED room. We limit the sections to 17 students, and we expect some attrition. The ideal number is from twelve to fifteen.

From there we begin to meet once a week for 90 minutes (we build in time before discussion begins for housekeeping, making arrangements for child care or class trips, etc.). Each one-credit unit meets for eight weeks. We taught three units the first year, and added a fourth unit in the fall. The units are built around themes (this year, "Justice and Tyranny," "Self-Discovery," and "God and Nature"). Some students have continued for the entire year. Others have left, a handful because they seemed overwhelmed by the reading but most because of conflicts with newly acquired jobs or because they left the area. Students may continue after leaving the Center. (As we expand, we plan to extend initial enrollment beyond residents at the Center. But as the Center serves as a clearing house for services and agencies, we will continue to coordinate through the Center.)

We meet at the beginning of each unit at the Center, and then offer the students the choice of whether to meet at the Center or on Notre Dame's campus. Each group has chosen the latter, and they have enjoyed the chance to meet in a university seminar room. Undergraduate volunteers from our department have driven vans from the university's Center for Social Concerns to pick up and return students. They along with two high school students (one of them Clark Power's daughter, Kara) have provided child care service at the Center during class.

Every unit, we arrange some theater or music experiences outside the class. Notre Dame contributed tickets to a university production of Handel's *Messiah*, and Saint Mary's College underwrote the class's attendance of a production of Shakespeare's *A Comedy of Errors* by a transatlantic touring company. For the past two years, we

have purchased season tickets for Notre Dame's theater productions. The most popular theater experiences have been those with Notre Dame's resident company, actors from the London Stage. These British actors have visited our community extension seminars to discuss Shakespeare, their productions, and to act with the students. We have attended their productions of *The Winter's Tale*, *As You Like It*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *MacBeth*.

Through the year, faculty colleagues, mainly from our department but also from Italian and the College Core course, have visited to share their expertise and their love of teaching. Now that the course has become more generally known on campus, more colleagues have offered to teach with us. It's an easy sell, as we have found the course with the homeless to be some of the most rewarding teaching we have done in our careers. We plan now to offer additional sections starting this fall, and our goal is to be able to offer all units simultaneously, so that a guest entering the Center at any time of year can begin with Unit 1 and work through the four units and four credits. Our experience has also raised the interest of colleagues who are interested in teaching at the Center but who are not necessarily interested in our "Great Books" approach, and we anticipate that there will be other initiatives between Notre Dame and the Center.

Expansion of the Course

In the fall of 1999, we hired an assistant, Mary Hendriksen, to help with coordination of class activities (class trips for the students, childcare, transportation) and to talk to other agencies in South Bend about beginning similar Great Books classes. She met with an enthusiastic reception at South Bend's YWCA, which in addition to serving as a shelter for abused women, houses a half-way residence for women (and, often, their children) in various recovery or job assistance programs. Gretchen Reydams-Schils, an associate professor in the Program of Liberal Studies, began a course at the YWCA in January of 2001 with a "Justice and Tyranny" theme. The course had a special emphasis on literature by and about women. [*Antigone* was the most well-received text, with Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* a close second.] When Prof. Reydams-Schils went on leave the next year, a senior PLS student, Mia Nussbaum, taught the course – for which she earned Notre Dame's "Woman of the Year" award.

We found that, like Mia, many PLS undergraduates were intrigued by the Community Extension seminar and eager to help with it. The presence of ready undergraduate volunteers coupled with an invitation from the principal of South Bend's alternative high school, Hamilton School, to begin a class there led to what has become a large part of the program – "Junior Great Books"-type programs in many of South Bend's public and parochial schools. Some of the schools have had Great Books Foundation courses already in place, but in most cases, the teacher, the PLS students, and Mary have worked together to fashion a curriculum to meet the unique needs of every class. Classes may begin with selections from the *Junior Great Books* series (Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron" has been universally popular and has proved a sure-fire way to spark students' enthusiasm for the course), but as the PLS student volunteers and the classroom teacher gauge the skill level and interests of each class, some have chosen alternate readings. For example, the Hamilton School class read selections from Plato's *Gorgias*, Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," excerpts from *The Declaration of Independence*, and two Flannery O'Connor stories. A public school

eighth-grade honors class read *Antigone* and was visited in class by actors from Notre Dame's student production of the play.

As the courses in the city's schools evolve, we hope to use the input of PLS students, classroom teachers, and the students themselves to fashion course books for different themes. For example, in the Winter 2002 semester, one of the honors classes will do a junior "Justice and "Tyranny" theme using *Antigone*, Thoreau's *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*, and Martin Luther King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail*.

So far we have been self-funding, selling department t-shirts to cover our relatively small expenses. W.W. Norton & Company has donated over 200 sets of its two volume *Anthology of World Masterpieces*. Our expenses have been primarily for photocopying selections not available in the anthology and for buying books to distribute (we believe that having books gives students a sense of ownership in the course). Additional funding, as we noted above, would be most welcome, for more books to distribute and for more and more ambitious activities outside class.

The Great Books Background and the Program of Liberal Studies

The Great Books movement began at Columbia University in the 1920s, extended to the University of Chicago in the 1930s under the Presidency of Robert M. Hutchins, and subsequently produced a small group of related programs, most notably at St. John's College (Annapolis and Santa Fe). From its inception, however, the Great Books movement reached beyond the university to working class adults. In 1928, with a gift from the Carnegie Corporation, Mortimer Adler and Scott Buchanan began offering Great Books seminars to adults in New York City. In the 1940s Adler and Hutchins established the Great Books Foundation, which promoted adult Great Books seminars throughout the country. Adler and Hutchins believed that education in classic texts was not for social and economic elites only, and that the American democracy demanded that all citizens become thoughtful and articulate citizens.

The Program of Liberal Studies (PLS) was established in the fall of 1950 as part of the Great Books movement. The core of the Program is the Great Books Seminar, a small class of 12 to 16 students which meets to discuss a set of classic works from ancient to modern in literature, philosophy, history, etc. Students in PLS grapple with texts ranging from Homer's *Iliad* to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, from Plato's *Republic* to Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. Students also take an array of required courses taught by department faculty in their disciplines (philosophy, theology, literature, history of science, music).