



NHC Alumni News



Nebraska Humanities Council

WINTER 2009

VOLUME 7, No. 2

Kerrey talks of God in “My Travels with Walter”

The question is how to resolve the apparent and real conflicts between the interests, studies, and requirements of humanity and the interests, studies, and requirements of religion. In the political world where the phrase “secular humanist” has become an opprobrium to be avoided, it may be impossible to have this conversation. However, in the social world it may be the most important one for us to have.

It all begins with simple questions. Where are we? How did we get here? Where did we come from? Where are we going?

The answers come in other questions. Did God create us in his image? Did some external event bring life to earth from a remote location in our universe? Or did life begin 3.5 billion years ago with a series of spontaneous chemical reactions between amino acids?

I was raised to believe the first answer is correct. I have read well-written arguments by well-educated people who believe the second. I have come to believe—thanks to the work of physical anthropology, primatology, archeology, linguistics and genetics—that the third answer is the right one.

Though I no longer believe the story I was taught about the origins of life, I still believe in God. In particular I believe in praying to God. I don't expect my prayers to be answered. The act of praying is an end in itself. In prayer I acquire—at least temporarily—the humility needed to see that I know and am worth less than I think. In prayer I become thankful, grateful, and capable of loving others more than myself.

I do not like asking others to pray for me, and I certainly do not like to have someone tell me I need to be-



Bob Kerrey has been president of The New School in New York City since 2001.

have differently as a consequence of something God told them while they were praying.

I do not like the expression “God Bless America.” It seems to me that God has already blessed us enough. Better to say “God Blessed America.” I distrust the invocation of God's favor when going into battle and distrust patriotism that is connected only to acts of war. I do not believe we were created in God's image. It seems to be a remarkably self-centered proposition.

I no longer believe in heaven or hell, or more accurately, I do not need the promise of eternal life in order to attempt to live by the laws laid down in the gospels, and in particular the commands urged upon us by Christ in his Sermon on the Mount. I do not believe that my parents or Walter or other friends look down on me and await my arrival when my life ends.

I do believe in human kindness and the capacity of kindness to trans-

form and change the lives of others. Kindness is free, it costs nothing, and yet it is the most valuable gift I have ever received or given in my life.

Kindness flowed from Walter Capps like water from a spring. Walter came into my life when I was governor. I don't remember who called to get him on my schedule. I don't recall exactly when our meeting took place though I believe it was during my last year in office. He came with a purpose: to persuade me to come to the University of California at Santa Barbara to co-teach a class with him.

I said yes in part because the topic of the class—the impact of the Vietnam War on America—would give me a chance to study the history of a war that had changed my life so profoundly. I said yes in part because the idea of spending January, February and March on the beach in Santa Barbara appealed to me. And I said yes because something about Walter ap-

(Continued on page 2)

(Continued from page 1)

pealed to me as well.

Walter was a Bunny, a Benson Bunny, who had migrated to California. He was a man who radiated warmth, whose curiosity was tempered with genuine humility, and whose considerable intellectual capacity was joined with a contagious sense of the potential for humans to do good and create good things. He was happy and grateful and generous.

I read and learned a lot about the Vietnam War thanks to Walter Capps. Probably as a consequence of the sympathy acquired from serving as Nebraska's governor, I forgave the leaders whose errors in judgment led us into this terrible tragedy. I got over my hatreds. I became much more

aware of the difficulty of making these kinds of decisions.

Thus it was that when Nebraska's senior Senator Ed Zorinsky died suddenly in March 1987 that I was inclined to become a candidate for public office. Had I not gone to Santa Barbara I probably would not have entered the race. Walter had changed my life.

Walter did not appear to me to be a political man. He was a popular professor who had written the definitive book on the study of religion in colleges and universities. So, I was very surprised when Walter told me he was going to enter a race for a seat in the House of Representatives.

Walter taught me that acts and works of human creativity are closer

to the divine spirit than rote memorization and repetition of Scripture, no matter how beautiful that Scripture may be. He added to my confidence that it was not a sacrilege to explore the story of this universe and our species' place in it. He contributed to my confidence that the act of human creativity—writing, singing, playing, and performing—helps us understand who we are and where we are, and that by doing so they deepen our connection to the divine.

Thus it is that I strongly disagree with those who say that a love for those things made by mankind is incompatible with those created by God. My view is they are one and the same. The cloth of creativity is whole

(Continued on page 3)

Visitors praise Omaha's cultural vitality at 2009 National Humanities Conference

When the Nebraska Humanities Council won the bid to host the Federation of State Humanities Council's 2009 National Humanities Conference, we saw it as an opportunity to put Omaha on the map with the nation's cultural and educational leaders and enhance the council's visibility with the city's leaders.

First, with the generous help of the Bailey Lauerman advertising firm, we created a compelling "Omaha09" promotional campaign to get people who may see Nebraska as "flyover country" to attend the conference (visit www.omaha09.org as an example).

Second, we worked with our cultural partners throughout the city to showcase the many treasures Omaha has to offer through a series of tours and other events. And third, we worked with the Federation to assemble an outstanding group of sessions and speakers highlighting the conference's theme of "Landscapes of the Heart: Renewing Public Life Through the Humanities."

The end result: the conference was attended by 324 people from more than 50 state and territorial humanities councils, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Smithsonian, and other national



Jason Skold of the Nature Conservancy, riverfront planner Larry Foster and historian Gary Moulton led a tour on the history and ecology of the "The Big Muddy" during the National Humanities Conference. Biologists from Nebraska Game and Parks Commission piloted 45 conference attendees on the Missouri River near Plattsmouth. Photo by Chris Sommerich.

partner organizations, a higher turnout than the previous year in Washington, D.C., despite the economy's negative impact on state council budgets. Those who attended raved about their experience in Omaha, time and again saying that they had no idea the city had so much to offer. Our mailbox overflowed with notes from attendees thanking us for

introducing them to Omaha and its thriving cultural scene.

The list of partners and volunteers who helped us showcase Omaha is too long to include here. Alumni included Roger Lewis (NFH 2002-2008) and Carol Russell (NFH 2000-2006) on the planning committee and Wanda Gottschalk (NFH 1997-2003) as a session panelist.

NEH cites NHC as “stellar humanities council”

This was a very full year for the Nebraska Humanities Council and Foundation. Not only did we host the National Humanities Conference, but 2009 was also the year that we were up for our re-authorization by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Some of our earlier alumni may remember the days of submitting annual and tri-annual proposals to NEH, much as other organizations do when they seek Endowment funding. In recognizing the state humanities councils as partners rather than grantees, the Endowment has moved to a process that re-authorizes each council every five years.

This has encouraged all of the

councils to become more sustainable organizations through strategic planning, diversifying our funding base, and adopting the best non-profit practices. As not-for-profit organizations are increasingly scrutinized for their transparency and effectiveness, the procedure is a very useful one.

The NEH site-visit team reviewed our self-assessment and 2009-2014 strategic plan that grew out of the series of town-hall meetings the Council and Foundation had conducted across the state during 2008. During their March 18-19 site visit, the three team members met with board members from the Council and Foundation and staff, as well as

panels composed of the organizations and scholars who work with the Council.

In reauthorizing the NHC for the next five years, the National Endowment for the Humanities concluded that the NHC is “a stellar humanities council.” In particular, it cited our variety of exemplary programs, outreach to communities across the state, diversified funding base, and a committed board and talented staff.

We are building on the strong foundation that you established for the humanities in Nebraska, and we hope that you will take great pride in the institution that you have helped to create!

“My Travels with Walter” continued

(Continued from page 2)

and cannot be torn apart by the false and largely political choice of humanities versus God urged on us by those who have made humanism a religion and those who see human creativity as an affront to the will of God. This choice is both unwise and unnecessary. Even an atheist can create as if the hand of God were involved.

That brings me to something I need to say to all Nebraskans: there is no place like Nebraska. However, the opening line of our state’s song must be more than a boosterism phrase. It must be the beginning of an examination of the story of this place. From the time tens of millions of years before the emergence of our species as told by our state museum in Lincoln right up to this moment here in the Joslyn, home of some of the most inspired art of the west, our hydrology, our soil structure, and our growing season establish the limits and possibilities of this place.

We must explore the story of humanity’s efforts here on the high plains as told by our historical society

beginning with Native populations whose stories we are just beginning to understand. The stories of European arrivals—their dreams, their struggles, their strengths and their weaknesses—who settled and built our cities and towns are told through the work of great Nebraska writers like Bess Streeter Aldrich, Willa Cather, Loren Eiseley, Wright Morris, John Neihardt, Marie Sandoz, and Ted Kooser. In fact, the lives of these individual artists and many more should be enough to convince all but the most unconscious that this is a special place deserving of study, respect and unsentimental awe.

So love the land of this place, the history of this place and the people—with all our limitations and shortcomings. Struggle to find a way to express your amazement at the unlikely reality of our existence and the miracle of our short, wondrous lives.

Former Nebraska Governor and U.S. Senator Bob Kerrey gave the Walter Capps Lecture Nov. 6 at the National Humanities Conference in Omaha.

Make a donation at www.nebraskahumanities.org

If you want to give online to the Nebraska Humanities Council, you can make a secure gift at www.nebraskahumanities.org. Just click on “Ways to Give.” For more information, contact Development Director Chris Sommerich at (402) 474-2131 ext. 105 or at chris@nebraskahumanities.org.

Alumni Notes

Jack Maddux received the Golden Spur Award from the National Cattle and Beef Foundation on Oct. 17 in Lubbock, Texas.

Keith Blackledge has a new book out, “That Town Fights About Everything,” the third that he has written since his retirement.

The Nebraska Humanities Council and Foundation lost two beloved friends this past year.

Dr. Elvira Garcia passed away July 11 after a battle with cancer. Chair of UNO’s foreign language department and an advocate of cultural exchanges for both students and citizens, Elvira served on the council from 1997 to 2003, and was a member of the program committee and the Governor’s Lecture committee.

Bess Brodkey was on the foundation board from 1993 through 1995 and served on the membership committee. A long-time advocate and volunteer for the Omaha Public Libraries and founder of their successful annual book sales, Bess died Nov. 30, two months short of her 100th birthday.



Nebraska Humanities Council

Suite 330
215 Centennial Mall South
Lincoln, NE 68508
Phone: (402) 474-2131
Fax: (402) 474-4852
E-Mail: nhc@nebraskahumanities.org
Website: www.nebraskahumanities.org



Mixed Sources
Product group from well-managed
forests and recycled wood or fibre
www.fsc.org Cert no. SW-COC-002827
© 1996 Forest Stewardship Council

To update address or cancel mailing, call (402) 474-2131 or e-mail nhc@nebraskahumanities.org

Alumni generosity has a big impact on NHC programs

We are very grateful that so many Nebraska Humanities Council and Foundation alumni continue to financially support our programming after completing your service on the board. There are many worthy causes that look to you for support, so we do not take this continuing generosity lightly.

This past year, 50 NHC and NFH alumni donated more than \$23,000 to support the council's work across the state, the equivalent of funding the Capitol Forum on America's Future program for one year; or more than 80 Speakers Bureau programs to schools and other groups; or an entire Chautauqua in one community; or six sessions of Prime Time Family Reading Time in three communities.

Our current board members are making their new gifts and pledges right now, and in January they plan to send a letter asking you to join them if you have not already. Please give that request your consideration.

NHC Development Director
Chris Sommerich or Executive Director
Jane Hood would welcome

speaking with you at any time about
your support and can be reached at
(402) 474-2131.

Generous alums July 1-Oct. 31

We appreciate the recent generosity of the following alumni and their families who provided financial gifts between July 1 and Oct. 31 in support of Nebraska Humanities Council programs. Private donations account for nearly 30 percent of our total budget, and those of you who have served on the Council and/or Foundation truly understand how important charitable giving has become to our programs. Thank you.

Mogens & Cindy Bay
Dr. James & Karen Butler
Jack & Sally Campbell
Ed & Betty Cook
Kit & Gerald B. Dimon
Kim & Tom Dinsdale
Wanda & Michael Gottschalk
Duane & Helen Krause
Roger & Carol Lewis
Darrel & Roberta Lloyd
Peter & Diane Longo
Jack & Carol Maddux

Sharon Marvin Griffin & Dr. William
T. Griffin
Bob & Mary Nefsky
Allison & Gary Petersen
Marguerite Radcliffe
Carol & Rick Russell
Pamela H. & Marcus J. Snow
Gene & Ann Spence
Bette Anne & Hal Thaut
Anne & Charles Trimble
Ross & Judy Wilcox
John & Susan Wunder