

## THE SENIOR COLLEGE MESSENGER

Issue 54: April, 2026

*This is an organ for members of Senior College to submit short articles that share news, letters to the editor, reactions to the program and anything that they feel will be of general interest. Its regular appearance will allow for an exchange of opinion on topics of interest to the members. In particular, it would be interesting to record reactions to the talks, colloquium topics, books discussed and items appearing in the Messenger.*

*We also welcome brief notices of important books of general interest that are worth reading and views on what should be included in a modern school curriculum from the perspective of your discipline. In particular, if you have written a book or an article in your field that would be of broad interest, please send in the details.*

Please submit contributions to the co-editors, Ed Barbeau at [barbeau@math.utoronto.ca](mailto:barbeau@math.utoronto.ca) or Mary Finlay at [booksaplenty1949@gmail.com](mailto:booksaplenty1949@gmail.com).

Any reader wishing a copy of this issue in larger print should contact the first co-editor.

### COLLOQUIUM ON THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION

In the January 22 Senior College Colloquium, we attempted to answer the question *What is the purpose of education?* Our first task was to clarify whether “purpose” referred to society or to the individual. John Dewey, an American philosopher and psychologist whose “progressive” ideas have influenced educational policy for the last hundred years, was firmly in the “individual” camp. The students’ particular needs and interests, according to Dewey, should direct the content of the curriculum and the method of instruction. But we also looked at Hilda Neatby, a fierce Canadian critic of Dewey and a spokesperson, in her 1954 book, *So little for the mind*, for the view that the education system should pass on the cumulative knowledge and wisdom of society, prioritising those students best able to understand and contribute to it. The alternative, as the title of the book suggests, amounts to watering everything down to the lowest common denominator. We spent most of the discussion debating how the interests of the individual and of society could be best reconciled in the education system. The one thing we all agreed upon was that there were no “good old days” when educators had this all worked out. *Mary Finlay*

### WELCOME TO SENIOR COLLEGE

*This month, we welcome **Joan Claire Bevan** into the Fellowship of Senior College.*

I am looking back at a fulfilling career as a pediatric anesthesiologist in the UK and Canada. When I graduated in medicine at Durham University, only 7% of medical students were female: a proportion that has increased to over 50% by my retirement years. The changing role of women in medicine, at a time when Anesthesiology was a rapidly developing specialty, allowed me to participate academically in clinical research, teaching and scientific publication. My husband, David Richard Bevan, and I emigrated from London, England to Canada for the opportunities which lay ahead in McGill University, the University of British Columbia and finally, the University of Toronto.

My main academic contributions arose from clinical research as a member of a team of investigators into the pharmacological and clinical actions of neuromuscular blocking (paralyzing) drugs in anesthesia. This work was presented at international conferences, as

articles in the scientific literature and in the book, “Muscle relaxants in clinical anesthesia” which I co-authored. At the same time, I was active in a wide variety of professional activities including memberships in the Canadian Anesthesiologists Society, the International Anesthesia Research Society and the World Federation of the Societies of Anaesthesiologists.

Over the years, I developed an interest in the ethical issues which challenged physicians participating in clinical research, in my own studies, as a member of university and hospital Research Ethics Boards and a reviewer for scientific journals. After I left clinical practice, I formalized my education in Biomedical Ethics and completed a Masters at U of T. For the next eight years, until my retirement, I served as the Consultant Ethicist for the Canadian Anesthesiologists Society.

Perhaps my career highlight came in 2012 when my late husband and I were both honoured to receive the award of Emeritus Membership of the Canadian Anesthesiologists Society. In closing, I would like to use David’s words on that day:

We are the first husband and wife to receive Emeritus Member recognition together. Over our careers, Joan and I did a lot in combination (neuromuscular pharmacology). There were very few occasions when we received awards at the same time, so this is very special. Appointments to Emeritus Membership is, I believe, recognition of our time in Canada since we arrived from England in 1978. It was surprising to see how few Emeritus Members there were and flattering to receive this as a nice addition to “life”.

### IN MEMORIAM

John Kenneth Chambers (July 12, 1938 – March 2, 2026)  
Professor of Linguistics

David Sanborn Scott (1935 – February 22, 2026)  
Professor of Mechanical Engineering (1967-1989)

### CALENDAR OF COMING EVENTS

Events marked with **F** are for fellows and external fellows. Advanced registration is necessary for each event. This can be done in response to a weekly email from Senior College to its members that describes the events or through the Senior College website.

**Save the date and register soon!**

*Twenty-first Annual Symposium*

**Canada at the Crossroads**

*Faculty Club: Wednesday, April 15, 2026*

For full information and links for registration, please visit <https://uoft.me/annual-SC-symposium>

*Speakers*

Bob Rae, *Some thoughts on a world turned upside down*

Dimitry Anastakis, *What now? The auto sector as a nexus of Canada-US Relations – past, present, future*

Dan Breznitz, *Innovation and prosperity for Canadians in a troubled global world*

Danyaal Raza, *The elephant in the room: funding, taxes and better medicare*

Tony Keller, *How Canada got immigration right and then wrong, and how to get it right again*

David Milne: rapporteur and commentator on the symposium

---

### Book Club: Mondays 2-4 pm (Zoom only) (F)

April 6: Charles King, *Every valley: the desperate lives and troubled times that made Handel's "Messiah"* (2024) (Leaders: Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon)

May 4: Rachel Carson, *Silent spring* (1962) (Leader: Sara Shettleworth)

June 1: Ian Johnson, *Sparks: China's underground historians and the battle for the future* (2023) (Leader: Peter Alberti)

July 6: Susan Casey, *The underworld: journeys to the depths of the ocean* (2023) (Leader: William Logan)

### Quotation

*In the March, 2026 issue of The Atlantic appears an article by Tyler Austin Harper with the provocative title The plot against the humanities: what is the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation doing to higher education? The author points out that federal funding in the U.S. in support of humanities scholarship is meagre and that many philanthropic institutions now have priorities other than university research. A notable exception is the Mellon Foundation. However, under the direction of its current president, Elizabeth Alexander, it has prioritized "social justice in all its grantmaking." The unfortunate effect of this policy has been to reduce support for disinterested research and direct it towards scholars "who can build a more diverse, incisive, and equitable academy". I wonder how much the following warning by the author applies to the Canadian situation.*

It is hard to see how an incentive structure that pushes scholars to fake or fudge an interest in social justice helps produce a more just academy. If anything, this seem likely to further entrench higher education's tendency to confuse performative preening with real societal improvement. It also effaces the difference between serious scholarship on race, colonialism, or gender and gaseous buzzword mongering.

...

In an alternate universe, with ample humanities funding for less politically salient work, one might see the fellowship program as an unalloyed good, providing support to projects that have not historically enjoyed sufficient resources. But in the funding landscape that actually exists, the reality is zero-sum. Every dollar that Mellon spends on this work is a dollar that it cannot spend on "non-applied" humanities research – in other words, scholarship for scholarship's sake that has no aim except to expand knowledge.

Some may argue that the trade-off is prudent. From my perspective, however, the gift of the humanities is that they liberate us from the tyranny of present opinion and the views of those in power – including those who sit atop multimillion-dollar philanthropies. A version of the humanities that sees its chief mandate as finding solutions to pragmatic problems doesn't ultimately seem all that different from the accounting department or the business school.

### Aftermath

A good game to introduce young children to a deck of cards is *Beat your neighbours* (also known as *Beggar My Neighbour* or *Strip Jack Naked*). It is choice free and the complete evolution of the play is determined by the original arrangement of the cards. It is played by two children with a standard 52-card deck consisting of four each of Jacks, Queens, Kings and Aces along with 36 spot cards.

The deck is split evenly between the two players and held face down. They alternately place a card face up on the table until a court card or ace appears. At this point, the opposing player must pay a penalty of one spot for a Jack, two for a Queen, three for a King or four for an Ace. However, if this is interrupted by a court card or an ace, then the penalty now falls on the other player. This continues until a penalty is successfully played and the player of the card imposing the penalty incorporates the cards on the table at the bottom of his hand. Play continues until one of the players has only spots remaining. A more expansive description and history of the game can be found at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beggar-my-neighbour>.

My own childhood experience indicates that, in practice, the game terminates in a reasonable space of time without trying the patience of a parent about to put supper on the table. However, it is conceivable that the game could continue indefinitely. Is this in fact possible?

Canvassing the possibilities is a Herculean task. There are about  $6.54 \times 10^{20}$  possible configurations for the deck at the outset. To put this figure into perspective, modern physics informs us that fewer than  $4.4 \times 10^{17}$  seconds have elapsed since the Big Bang. However, since there are finitely many possibilities, for a play to continue forever, at some point in the game, there would be an arrangement of the cards that previously occurred and the hands held by the two plays would cycle through a number of configurations.

When the December, 2025, issue of the *American Mathematical Monthly* landed on my doorstep, I was gratified to find that my longstanding curiosity is now satisfied. A consortium of eight authors was able to find a configuration that would allow a game to continue forever. The cycle kicks in when the one player holds 20 spots followed by these thirty cards:

*JSSQSQSQSQSKSKJSSKSKSASASASAJS,*

and the second player holds *JS*. This opens a cycle of 62 tricks before returning back to it.