

## THE SENIOR COLLEGE MESSENGER

Issue 22: August, 2023

*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 of topics of interest to the members. In particular, it would be interesting to record reactions to the talks, colloquium topics and books discussed.*

*Please submit contributions to the editor, Ed Barbeau at [barbeau@math.utoronto.ca](mailto:barbeau@math.utoronto.ca)*

### A SURVEY OF US STUDENT ATTITUDES

I recently came across the American College Student Freedom, Progress and Flourishing Survey carried out by the Challey Institute at the North Dakota State University. Towards the bottom of the webpage is the Heading “Recent Studies”; below a picture of students, there is a link to the 64-page report. The sample included 2250 students with a variety of ethnic backgrounds and political views (liberal, conservative, independent).

The three sections of the survey deal with free speech and diversity of opinion on campus, social attitudes, and views on capitalism and socialism. As one might expect, the young folks on campus are not as open to unpopular or controversial views as one might hope, and the comfort level of students in expressing their opinions depends on how friendly they perceive the environment. In particular, students who identify as conservative are more diffident. While a majority felt that professors should not avoid readings that students strongly disagree with or find uncomfortable, about a third of the students demurred and a similar fraction would withdraw invitations to controversial speakers. Perhaps the more disturbing finding is that 74% feel that professors should be reported for making comments that students find offensive. Since what amounts to offense is a matter of opinion, the survey lists a number of specific statements that might draw a reaction and breaks the responses according to how students classify themselves politically.

The second section reveals a mixed bag as to whether students find value in their education, whether they feel that the situation of citizens has improved or declined over the last fifty years, and how they assess their own personal prospects. Finally, students are asked about the role of capitalism and socialism in solving societal problems. How this question is answered depends on what is meant by either philosophy, and the surveyors offer two options for each. Overall, only 22% believe that capitalism can solve societal problems, although when the results are broken down by political philosophy, there is a discrepancy between liberals and conservatives.

This is a study of American students, and it is not clear how it would compare with a Canadian one, although recent political developments in this country suggest that the gap might not be all that large. The study does not explore how much

students feel that they are part of a collective body of citizens, which I believe is an important measure of how cohesive our society is. The politics of both the right and the left has tended to fragment society into groups more intent on looking after their own interests – towards libertarianism on the right and identity politics on the left – so that meeting the serious challenges of the present day is all the more difficult.

I welcome other perspectives and reflections from readers. I think it would be difficult for young people today to appreciate the sense of optimism and progress that infused the school and university years of those of us lucky enough to mature shortly after the Second World War. *EJB*

### SYMPOSIUM LINK

In case you missed the annual symposium in April or wish to have a record of the proceedings, here is a link to the abstracts.

### IN MEMORIAM

John Beckwith (March 9, 1927 - December 5, 2022)  
Faculty of Music; Institute for Canadian Music

Stewart McLean (November 19, 1931 - July 4, 2023)  
Department of Chemistry

Geoffrey Norris (August 6, 1937 - June 26, 2023)  
Department of Earth Sciences

### CALENDAR OF COMING EVENTS

Events marked with **F** are for fellows and external fellows. Registration a few days ahead 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 by going on line at [www.seniorcollege.utoronto.ca](http://www.seniorcollege.utoronto.ca) .

*Talks: Wednesdays 10-12 am (In person & Zoom)*

September 6: Elizabeth Harvey, *Out of one's mind: dementia in Anne Carlson's poetry*

September 13: Kang Lee, *Little cheaters and how to make them honest: the origins of academic dishonesty in childhood*

September 20: Valerie Tarasuk, *Food insecurity in Canada: a blind spot in public policy*

September 27: Howard Eisenberg, *How reality works and the case for non-duality: echoes from Plato's cave*

October 4: Geoff Rayner-Canham, *Chemistry and Inuit life and culture*

October 11: Paul Delaney, *The evolution of the space telescope*

October 18: Heidi Bohaker, *Ontario treaties as First Law: Indigenous-Crown relations and Land Conveyance Agreements*

October 25: Joanne Tod, *The dearth of irony: postmodernism, identity politics and the visual arts*

November 1: Sue Waddington, *In the footsteps of the group of 7 and Tom Thomson*

November 8: Marie-Hélène Budworth, *Diversity at work: uncovering barriers to inclusivity in employment*

November 15: Derek Denis, *English in multicultural Toronto*

November 22: Jacqueline Gibbons, *Spread your wings: Icarus to 1912 (Flight, the men and women*

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

September 11: David Graeber & David Wengrow, *The dawn of everything: a new history of humanity* (2021) (Leaders: Daphne Maurer, Susan Pfeiffer)

October 2: Tom Stoppard, *Arcadia* (1993) (Leader: Alexander Leggatt)

November 6: Charles Darwin, *On the origin of species* (1859) (Leader: Sara Shettleworth)

December 4: Jennifer Raff, *Origin: a genetic history of the Americas* (2022) (Leader: Susan Pfeiffer)

January 8, 2024: Kevin Rudd, *The avoidable war: the dangers of a catastrophic conflict between US and Xi Jinping's China* (2022) (Leaders: Max Nemni, David Milne)

February 5: Alistair MacLeod, *No great mischief* (1999) (Leader: Meg Fox)

March 4: Ed Yong, *An immense world: how animal senses reveal the hidden realms around us* (2022) (Leader: Sara Shettleworth)

April 1: Willaim Carlsen, *Jungle of stone: the extraordinary journey of John L. Stephens and Frederick Catherwood and the discovery of the lost civilization of the Maya* (2017) (Leader: Jim Gurd)

May 6: Siddhartha Mukherjee, *The song of the cell: an exploration of medicine and the new human* (2022) (Leader: William Logan)

June 3: Helen Macdonald, *H is for Hawk* (2014) (Leader: Peter Alberti)

July 8: Alex Ross, *The rest is noise: listening to the twentieth century* (2007)  
 (Leaders: Linda Hutcheon, Michael Hutcheon)

### Aftermath

About every five to ten years, the Ontario government gets concerned about mathematics instruction in the province and wants to monkey with the syllabus. At the time of Bob Rae's premiership, a meeting was organized at Queen's Park to bring together all the "stakeholders". At the time, I knew one of the civil servants in the Ministry of Education, a former mathematics teacher, and we thought it would be useful to compile a collection of mathematical puzzles and oddities that would illustrate the scope of the subject and be left on a table for anyone to pick up. When the provincial bureaucracy made it available, all the problems were as submitted except one, the so-called "Puzzle of the Jealous Husbands". It goes like this:

*Three married couples come to a river. The only vessel available is a small boat that can carry at most two of them. How can they cross the river, if at any time, no woman is in the company of any man unless her own husband is present?*

This was at a time when politically correctness was emerging, and someone had objected to the context. So the problem was changed to having three mothers and their daughters, with no daughter being left with another mother unless her own were present. It is not clear to me that this met any perceived difficulty.

The problem has a long and distinguished history, originating apparently in a compilation entitled *Propositiones ad Acuendos Juvenes* (Problems for the sharpening of the young) by the monk, Alcuin of York in the eighth century. He met Charlemagne while returning from a pilgrimage to Rome, and was hired by the monarch to head the Palace School at Aachen. The whole collection is available online: [https://mathshistory.st-andrews.ac.uk/History?Alcuin\\_book](https://mathshistory.st-andrews.ac.uk/History?Alcuin_book) .

Alcuin's version does not involve husbands and wives, and I wonder what the anonymous bureaucrat would have thought of the original saltier version: *Tres fratres erant, qui singulas sorores habebant, et fluvium transire debebant. (Erat enim unicuique illorum concupiscentia in sorore proxime sui.) Qui venientes ad fluvium non invenerunt, nisi parvum naviculam, in qua non potuerunt amplius nisi duo ex illis transire. Dicat, qui potest, qualiter fluvium transierunt, ne una quidam earum ex ipsis maculata sit?*

*Three friends, each with a sister, needed to cross a river. (Each of them coveted the sister of another.) At the river, they found only a small boat, in which only two of them could cross at a time. How did they cross the river without any of the women being defiled by the men?*