
FRIENDS OF THE OBERLIN COLLEGE LIBRARY

SCOTT BENNETT



SECOND CHANCES

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An Address

by

SCOTT BENNETT, '60

at the
Annual Dinner
of the
Friends of the Oberlin College Library
November 13, 1999

Root Room, Carnegie Building
Oberlin College
Oberlin, Ohio

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Published by the Friends of the Oberlin College Library
February 2000

Introduction

It's a great pleasure for me to introduce our featured speaker. Scott Bennett is actually no stranger to this podium. He served as President of the Friends of the Oberlin College Library during 1991-1992, the organization's inaugural year. He's been a close friend and supporter of our Library for many years, serving also as a member of the Library Visiting Committee and the Library Capital Campaign Steering Committee.

Since 1994 Scott has been University Librarian at Yale, where he has directed one of the nation's leading research libraries. His efforts at Yale have focused on space planning, organizational development, information technology, library instruction, and library services. A recent architectural issue of *American Libraries*—the magazine of the American Library Association—featured two projects with which Scott has been involved. One was the magnificent new music library at Yale, which has been built into a courtyard in a way that harmonizes beautifully with Yale's gothic architecture. The other was a renovation of the main reading room in the Sterling Memorial Library, one of the truly grand spaces in American libraries. The architectural firm for both of those projects was Shepley, Bulfinch, Richardson, and Abbott, a firm that is renowned for its library renovations.

From 1989 to 1994 Scott was the Sheridan Director of the Milton S. Eisenhower Library at Johns Hopkins University. Among his many activities in that capacity, he was a co-director of Project Muse, a pioneering effort to publish Johns Hopkins University Press journals in electronic form. He also completed a \$5 million endowment campaign for the humanities collections and launched a \$27 million capital campaign for the Eisenhower Library. Scott held previous library positions at Northwestern University, where he was the Assistant University Librarian for Collection Management, and at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Scott received his B.A. in English, Magna Cum Laude, from Oberlin in 1960. He earned both his Masters and Ph.D. degrees in English from Indiana University. Before switching to librarianship he taught English at St. Paul's College in Lawrenceville, Virginia and at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Scott has been a frequent speaker and author on such topics as scholarly communication, copyright and intellectual property in the electronic era, and collection preservation. Among his recent professional activities, he chaired a task force that recommended a significant expansion of participation in the National Digital Library Federation. Before becoming a librarian, he published numerous articles on William Dean Howells, Victorian periodicals, and other topics in 19th century American and English literature. He's the recipient of a Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship and an American Council of Learned Societies Fellowship.

I'm very pleased to have Scott address this Friends dinner which is being held in conjunction with the Oberlin Alumni Librarian Conference. His talk tonight has the intriguing title "Second Chances." Please join me in welcoming back to Oberlin one of our most distinguished alumni librarians, Scott Bennett.

Ray English
Director of Libraries

SECOND CHANCES

"Chance is a nickname for Providence"

Sébastien Roch Nicholas Chamfort, *Maxims and Thoughts*

"Always act in accordance with the dictates of your conscience, my boy, and chance the consequences."

Pirate King to Frederic, in Act I of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Pirates of Penzance*

Some years ago, Bill Moffett started to keep track of many of us, having noticed that a remarkable number of Obies become librarians. That is the fact that brings us together this evening. Nonetheless, a great many of us came to and left Oberlin without once having thought about being a librarian. Librarianship was, in fact, a second choice of profession for us. But if we came to our work as an afterthought, we rarely have second thoughts about it. Librarians are fiercely loyal to their calling. However belatedly many of us discover this wonderful profession, few of us can imagine being anything else.

So here we are, people who mostly now would not choose to be anything except what so many of us initially did not choose to be. There is surely something of a puzzle here. How are we to understand the improbabilities of our being and remaining librarians? How, in the name of goodness, are we to explain this turn of fortune? With your indulgence, I will take just a few comfortable after-dinner minutes to reflect on the processes of becoming a librarian as I experienced it. I can do this best in terms of the second chances we are given, sometimes richly and often without a conscious understanding of the gift.

I do indeed need to ask your indulgence for what follows, because it is inescapably autobiographical. I take some license here, knowing that President Dye often asks alumni to describe how their experiences at Oberlin influenced their lives. Surely she will become more discriminating in asking this when she sees how I intrude my own not very colorful professional life on your attention. Well, it may not be perfectly colorless. It does, after all, include the utter improbabilities of my youthful ambitions first to be a truck driver and then, later, a commercial artist. The first of these intentions was informed by a commonplace and ignorant dream of the freedom of the road, just as the second was fed by the self-delusions of just a little talent. In high school I was further, if briefly, infatuated by the discipline of drafting.

But nurtured by my late-found passion for reading and inspired by a set of remarkable high school teachers, I settled on becoming a teacher myself. I brought that intention to Oberlin and never once wavered from it. Certainly I knew that libraries would be an important resource in my chosen profession, just as they had been a place of refuge for me as a teenager. Just as certainly, I spent many of my waking hours here in the Carnegie Library, secluded in the book stacks or enjoying the main reference room in the company of the person who has now been my wife of thirty-nine years. But it never once occurred to me while at Oberlin that I might become a librarian. It would nonetheless be a mistake to say that my experience at Oberlin had nothing whatever to do with my life as a librarian.

It was fully sixteen years after I left Oberlin that I became a librarian. The first seven of those years were spent as a graduate student in English at Indiana University, with a year away teaching at St. Paul's College, a predominantly Black college in isolated south-central Virginia. Never before had this Nebraskan seen farming done from behind a mule! In 1967 I went to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to begin the teaching career for which I had spent a dozen years preparing. There by choice I taught introductory courses, believing my mission was with students studying literature as a required part of a liberal education. I wanted imaginative literature to matter in the lives of these students, as it did in mine. I felt I had this one, prized chance to introduce literature as a deeply liberating force in the lives of students readying themselves for professions that would never again lead them to the formal study of fiction, poetry, and drama.

Now the late sixties were exciting, indeed hard times for teaching. The campus protests of the Vietnam War aimed at creating discord and involved some damage to property, though happily no serious physical harm to people at the University of Illinois. Amid this turmoil, the educational watchword for both students and faculty was relevance. While I embraced the call for relevance, I was distressed that the term was largely reserved for learning that fed a deeply cynical, indeed a despairing view of public life. As there was so much to foster such a tragic view of human capability, I decided the best—the most relevant—thing I could do would be to help students understand the comic possibilities of our lives.

As you might suppose, I had mixed success in such an endeavor pursued while people were killing one another at My Lai and at Kent State. My grandest moments as a teacher of comedy came in an

honors course on the comic vision in William Faulkner, taught primarily by one of my students (now a Lutheran minister). My greatest difficulties came in an introductory special topics course, where I started with that absolute jewel of comic form, Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Pirates of Penzance*. My students, anguished by events in Vietnam and on campuses throughout the United States, simply could not understand my request that they think seriously about light opera. I'm afraid I lost them before we got to more evidently relevant but equally improbable works, such as Joseph Heller's *Catch 22*.

Such were the mixed successes of my chosen career as an English teacher. For a number of reasons, my department chose not to promote me to a tenured position. But neither did the department chair simply put me out on the street. This man, who appeared to have control of my professional future, saw there was work needing to be done at the university library and made my move there possible. So I first came to work as a librarian, quite to my surprise and quite without intending any such thing. Six months before I started in the University of Illinois library, I was single-mindedly searching for a teaching position. Indeed, I began at the library in many ways against my will. But six months after I started, I had discovered in the library a professional world wonderfully different from that of the English department. And I was beginning to discover a set of professional skills I had been entirely unaware of before. So it was that I unexpectedly had at the University of Illinois Library my second chance, not my second choice, but my second chance for a professional life. I will spare you the details of the ensuing years. It is enough to say they have had a goodly supply of the unintended and unexpected. We need not attend to them because the point of the story about my becoming a librarian, and about my education at Oberlin, lies in the events of twenty-five years ago that I have just described.

The students of comedy among you will already see the point of the story. You may even forgive the following simplifications about literary form, needed to clarify the point of my story. In both tragedy and comedy, the protagonist sets about doing something. It might be passing the responsibilities of rule along to one's daughters, as King Lear does; it might be fighting an air war in Italy as Orr does in *Catch 22*; or it might be fighting a war in Vietnam. At a stretch, it might even involve coming of age and wending one's way among a band of pirates. Except for the utter absence of the heroic element, it might be resolving to become an English teacher. Whatever the endeavor, one commits oneself to it wholeheartedly. But along the

way, events do not go quite as expected. Indeed, in both tragedy and comedy, events seem to mock our intentions. Events embroil us ever more deeply and ultimately leave us hopelessly trapped in our own purposes and by our own devices. In tragedy this train of events leads ineluctably to the fearful point when both protagonist and observers understand it is too late to do anything to remedy the situation. "Too late" are the very words of tragedy, as there are no more chances to set things right.

Things are miraculously different in comedy. At the very moment of despair—whether it is the evident defeat of law and order in Penzance or casting oneself into an inflatable lifeboat on the Mediterranean—the entirely unexpected and unintended happens. Against all the probabilities we know and feel bound by, the pirates turn out to be noblemen and Orr finds himself safe in Sweden, thousands of war-torn sea miles away from his downed bomber.

How silly, my cynical and despairing students said. How absurd! How little like real life. How irrelevant! Can life be like this? My answer is, of course, yes it can. As evidence, I point to my becoming a librarian, against all of my conscious intentions, and against all of my expectations or my sense of probability. As evidence of the comic potential of life, I point to the discovery of an entirely new professional world in libraries—my Sweden—and to the discovery of work skills entirely unrecognized before. Thus did I give up my youthful training as a pirate—er, English teacher. Thus did I, at a moment of apparent despair about employment, have a second chance in a profession then utterly strange to me. Why should any of this happen? In the normal course of events, where one is in control of life, it would not happen. But, against all probability and with a surrender to chance, it did happen. Silly and absurd as it may seem, I have no other way of accounting for the critical turning point in my professional life than by invoking the terms of comedy.

I might pause here to ask if, with this self accounting, I have lost you in the way I lost my students thirty years ago when I attempted to teach what is profoundly serious in the *Pirates of Penzance*. If I have, perhaps I can recapture some common ground by returning to Oberlin and to the education in comic possibilities that I all unknowingly received here. I will recall the Oberlin of the late 1950s, and most of you will have experienced an Oberlin quite different, in its particulars, from mine. But I cannot imagine that the Oberlins we knew were fundamentally different. I am sure that your education here, like mine, and indeed like all excellent liberating education, was an exercise in and a powerful confirmation of second chances.

Let me relate just two second chance stories about my time at Oberlin. As you will see, they are really stories about the remarkable teachers that undeserved good fortune gave me and the second chances they created for their students.

I came to Oberlin in 1956 much inflated by the praise of my high school teachers for my writing. I was confident I would test my way out of the required freshman course in composition, with just the confidence of Gilbert and Sullivan's Frederic that he would throw off his apprenticeship to the pirates on his twenty-second birthday. Ah, misplaced confidence! Contrary to my expectation, and much to my chagrin, I failed the qualifying exam and found myself in Professor William Arthur Turner's English I course. It was a struggle for this man, who struggled with physical disability without visible complaint, to teach me how poorly I wrote. It was less of a struggle for him to teach me how poorly I spelled, for the facts were plain even to me. I recall my embarrassment in getting a paper back with Mr. Turner's exclamation mark next to the perfectly spelled word, *b-e-a-r*, where what I meant called for the word *b-a-r-e*. I cannot tell you how many foolish mistakes of this sort Mr. Turner had to endure, how many inventive grammatical practices he confronted in my papers, or how many times he had to chastise my use of complex sentences and a lush polysyllabism where simple statement would have served. But Mr. Turner did these things without fail, even though it is hard to believe he saw much promise in my work. Enrolling in Mr. Turner's class and accepting the discipline of his teaching gave me a second chance as a writer. Indeed, I date my ability to write from those classes, which I did not intend or want to take. I cannot fathom the generosity of spirit that kept Mr. Turner, angel-like, wrestling with my freshman prose. I hope my senior honors thesis on Chaucer, which I wrote with Mr. Turner, showed some improvement. I fear that his second chance with my writing was nothing like so affirming for him as were the second chances this most wonderful teacher gave me, initially against my will, over and over, three times a week throughout the 1956-57 academic year.

My second second chance story is about French and Latin. I spent two Oberlin years and the summer in between making a perfect hash of the French language. Surely Professor William Hayden Boyers had few students as poor as I. My second chance in language study came with Professor Nathan Greenberg. My bafflement with French notwithstanding, I knew I could do little with the literary tradition I chose to study or with certain aspects of its language without comprehending Latin. I have no recollection of how or to whom I

expressed this need, but it was my good fortune that one other student had similar needs and Mr. Greenberg took us on, just the two of us, for introductory Latin in a private reading course.

And what an introduction we got! Under Mr. Greenberg's tutelage, I came for the first time to understand grammar as linguistic structure, rather than as a set of senseless rules useful only to English teachers determined to torment me. I can hardly hope to convey the sense of revelation I felt in discovering it really meant something to distinguish between the genitive and dative function of nouns and the utility of having somewhat different word forms to signal these functions. Most remarkable of all, Mr. Greenberg immediately put us to reading genuine Latin verse, not made-up Latin for the purpose of language instruction. Midway into the term we started reading the *Aeneid*. Now I need to report this with some care. You may be sure my reading of Virgil was very slow going, not least because of the difficulty of getting new vocabulary to stick in my head. But slow as it was, I genuinely felt I was reading Latin as Latin, as a language comprehended on its own terms, and not as a puzzle that became intelligible only when I succeeded in translating it into English. This was an entirely new experience for me, and a revelation of the power of language to transport one into an entirely different linguistic world.

I ended my study of Latin after only one term for what then seemed compelling reasons, but I regretted the choice then and have regretted it since. Never have I learned so much in so little time, and rarely have I found the learning so exciting. I treasure my dog-eared copy of Wheelock's *Latin* as the bedrock of this most wonderful of my learning experiences as an undergraduate. I have no idea why Mr. Greenberg took on the two of us, except for his love of teaching, but his generosity unlocked one language for me and prepared me for the study of German and Anglo-Saxon that were to come in graduate school. Surely this marvelous, this utter turn-around experience with language must count as an important second chance for someone intent, as I then was, on making the study of language and literature a life-long profession.

My second chances as a student seem to me less mysterious, less magical than the second chance I had in my choice of professions. But that is only to say, after a lifetime in higher education, that I understand the fundamental commitment in teaching to the creation of second chances. I contrast Oberlin and places like it to the School of Hard Knocks, where the teaching is equally powerful but much less forgiving. Mistakes and failures in the School of Hard Knocks have

inescapable and usually limiting consequences; its students are much less likely to be given second chances. By contrast, what I found at Oberlin—and what I am sure you found—were ample opportunities to experiment, to blunder, and to learn from my mistakes free of most of the penalties the world usually attaches to mistakes. Most fundamentally, schools are places where we suspend for a while the harshest lessons of failure. All it takes to create such places is the belief there is a better way to learn than that offered by hard knocks, and the immense generosity required to create such protective learning environments. I mean the generosity of the parents who got us to Oberlin in the first place and the immeasurable generosity of those who, through their gifts to Oberlin, ensured that this magnificent place for learning was—it seemed—just waiting for us to arrive.

And not least of all I mean the generosity of spirit we found in our teachers here. Why in the name of goodness—or rather, why except in the name of goodness—should Mr. Turner have been asked to deal with my inability to sort out the various spellings of the homophone *bare*, and why should Mr. Greenberg have added to his teaching load to favor a student who had nothing better to recommend him than a dismal record with French? There is no rational choice explanation for the behavior of these teachers. Indeed, one must say that teaching is not a rational enterprise, but one deeply involved in the comic world of second chances. I regard the committed generosity with which teachers create second chances for others as a mystery of human nature that one can describe, but not quite explain.

Allow me to make one final point about this mystery of second chances. The School of Hard Knocks trains us, quite powerfully, to make unambiguous connections between actions and consequences. It provides schooling in the certainties of life and does not leave us receptive to the good that lies in uncertainty and ambiguity. In the School of Hard Knocks, irony becomes the language of cynicism and condemnation, not a language for discovery. I felt that my students in the late 1960s were enrolled in the School of Hard Knocks, with the harshness of the world closing in on them. For a while, I knew that both for them and for myself I had to cling tenaciously to my life as a teacher, in spite of events that were making such a life impossible for me in the University of Illinois English department. I was by no means receptive to uncertainty and ambiguity about my profession as a teacher, no matter how untenable that profession was becoming.

How blind I was! Comically, as I would now say, events took over to destroy the certainties to which I had dedicated two decades of

professional preparation. Events overwhelmed my poor, narrow, but intense resolve and pushed me all unintendingly to the discovery of a new profession in libraries. Many things contributed to this liberation from the imprisoning certainties that had guided me from the time I was in high school. Among them, I am sure, were the surprising and powerful second chances I had in the classes of Professor Turner and Professor Greenberg. I do not mean that I recalled their teaching in my time of crumbling certainties. I was deeply preoccupied with other things and have only recently come to explain my becoming a librarian in the terms I have proposed this evening. I do, however, mean to say that without being explicitly conscious of it, what I had learned at Oberlin about recovering from mishap left me open to the entirely unexpected and unpredictable—indeed, the inexplicable—action of second chances. There was nothing in the explicit content of my course work at Oberlin that prepared me for librarianship. What I owe to this college is rather some direct experience of second chances, some release from the strict teachings of the School of Hard Knocks, some sense that more is possible than one would predict because we find ourselves surrounded, as I was at Oberlin, by a generosity of spirit that makes all the difference to what happens to us.

I feel I owe Oberlin a great deal for its teaching of second chances. So I feel some obligation, as I am sure you do as well, to insure that those who follow us here will have their own second chances. This effort to institutionalize the wonders of second chances is vitally important, but there is one thing still more important. And that is to embrace as directly as one can the miracle of second chances. I have described my own imperfect embrace twenty-five years ago. This summer we heard reported a much more moving embrace. When Lance Armstrong, just two years after the doctors had conquered his cancer, took his Tour de France victory lap past the Arc de Triomphe, “a French TV reporter came up on a motorcycle and stuck a microphone in the winner’s face. ‘I would just like to make one comment,’ Armstrong said in French. ‘If you ever get a second chance in life—go all the way!’”¹

¹ *Washington Post*, 26 July 1999, p. A7.