

A Map of the Labyrinth: My Path to the Global Humanities

By: Amy A. Gumaer, Doctor of Arts

(Slide 1: Labyrinth) I am so grateful to accept the **2017 Global Humanities Institute Humanities Leadership Award** this evening from my dear friend and colleague, Dr. Rita Kranidis, and her committee. I'd like to take this opportunity to share with you the story of my path to the global humanities and relate my personal philosophy of why I think the humanities remain vitally important and hold tremendous value for our students. This is a story about labyrinths, cave paintings, epic poems, unexpected commonalities and intersections: somehow it all makes sense, I promise. So please bear with me...

For my part, the study of the humanities has been a lifelong interest and one that has often had international dimensions. I received a Doctor of Arts Degree in Humanistic Studies from the University at Albany, State University of New York, in an interdisciplinary degree program combining course work in German, Art History, and the Humanities. I studied abroad at every level of my education— from high school to Junior Year Abroad to graduate school.

(Slide 2: Example of an Antique Map of New Amsterdam)

The knowledge gained through that study has helped me contemplate the complexities of life and conceptualize what I like to call my own map of the labyrinth— it's a kind of personal blueprint of what the Argentinian writer and

poet Jorge Luis Borges so brilliantly called “the divine Labyrinth of causes and effects” that underpins our singular universe of diverse beings.¹

Recently, my husband Peter and I had the opportunity to see cave paintings in France. **(Slide 3 – the Dordogne)** In the cave of the Font-de-Gaume in the Dordogne River Valley of Southwest France, not too far from the town of Les Eyzies **(Slide 4 – Les Eyzies-de-Tayac-Sireuil)**, we joined a small group that entered the last cave in France where you can still view authentic cave paintings; these date 17,000 BC from the Magdalenian Period. **(Slide 5 – Rock Face and Entrance to Grotte de Font-de-Gaume)** The paintings, made by Cro-Magnon man, who was among the first early modern humans, depict bison, bears, horses, reindeer, woolly mammoths and woolly rhinoceros, among other animals. The drawings are elegant yet simple renderings, and have an almost 3D quality because they follow the curves and contours of the cave walls.

(Slide 6: Cave Painting at Font-de-Gaume)

Professor Martin Pops wrote, “At Font-de-Gaume, Les Combarelles, Niaux, etc. an ancient man discovered the secret of the winding cave— that it is a labyrinthine threshold between profane and sacred zones....”² He further wrote, “The animal art of ancient man is our first evidence of human un concluded-

¹ Jorge Luis Borges, “Another Poem of Gifts,” trans. Alan Dugan, *Jorge Luis Borges, Selected Poems: 1923-1967*, ed. Norman Thomas di Giovanni, (London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1972), 291-223. References are to Labyrinth concept. <https://libraryofbabel.info/Borges/Borges-SelectedPoems.pdf> (accessed October 25, 2017).

² Martin L. Pops, “In Labyrinths,” *Salmagundi*, No. 27 (Summer-Fall 1974), 102. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40546823> (accessed October 25, 2017).

ness, and the dangerous winding cave our first metaphor of the soul's uncertain journey, its first rite de passage.”³

(Slide 7: Sketch of the Reindeer Painting at Font-de-Gaume)

These ideas resonated with me: there is something truly indescribable about the feeling you get when you view these ancient paintings and etchings, where recognizable images of animals comingle with abstract signs, dots, and engravings. Let me quickly show you a few examples from Lascaux, which we also visited. **(Slides 8-12 – Images of Lascaux Paintings;** Slide 12 is the head of an Auroch, which is a kind of wild cattle now extinct.) Unfortunately, the actual caves at Lascaux have been closed to the public since 1963 due to contamination by mold, but you can still view beautifully-executed reproductions at two locations: Lascaux II and Lascaux IV, the amazing new International Center for Cave Art.⁴

As I viewed these paintings and contemplated their meaning, I was drawn by their numinous, mysterious quality. The contrast of these massive, yet seemingly ephemeral forms is remarkable. As I thought of this uncertain and unconcluded journey at the intersection of the known and unknown: I asked myself, “Isn’t this essentially what draws us to the humanities today?” The Paleolithic cave art speaks to the very heart of the human experience. “The paintings,” as Dr. Ilse Vickers explains, “give a glimpse of eternity between two

³ Ibid, 103.

⁴ For more information, visit the Lascaux Museum website at <http://www.lascaux.fr/en>

worlds, the finite and the infinite, the conscious and the unconscious.”⁵ This was the time of the great Ice Age hunt – a terrifying time when man’s existence depended on his ability to hunt the bull and bison depicted on the walls. Yet, clearly, the cave painters felt a deep reverence and connection to these animals, which is especially evident in the sensitive depiction of the reindeer at Font-de-Gaume.⁶ The inner sanctums of their caves have the aura of holy places or temples.⁷

20,000 years later, the world is probably a safer place, but still scary. We are, all of us, bombarded daily with information—mostly negative—from multiple sources, whether from social media, newspapers, or television, that we need to sort, filter and process. For me, the humanities are a sanctuary: they bring a sense of semblance and peace in a chaotic world and help me retain what Borges called “that kernel of myself that I have saved, somehow—the central heart that deals not in words, traffics not with dreams, and is untouched by

5 Dr. Ilse Vickers, “The Descent into the Cave: The Dynamic Relationship between Palaeolithic Cave Art and Depth Psychology,” Page 4, “Spring Initiation Rites,” (London, January 2013), Bradshaw Foundation Website http://www.bradshawfoundation.com/cave_art_an_intuition_of_eternity/decent_into_the_cave/spring_initiation_rites_homo_religioso.php

6 Ibid, Page 5, “Summary.” On this topic, Dr. Vickers further explains: “Palaeolithic man had a fundamentally different relationship with and attitude to nature than modern man. He believed that there was a divine soul in nature, and he responded with feelings of profoundest awe and obeisance. He did not strive to master the animals; instead, he worshipped them with gratitude for their divine strength and knowledge, eternally sacrificed for the renewal of the tribe. If the psychological approach has helped to throw light on cave rock-art, it has also taught us that intellectual explanation and interpretation are not the end, and that what really matters is the experience - an experience which though defying rational elucidation is nevertheless real and truly enlightening, as those who have had such transformative experiences have again and again testified.” For additional information, see: http://www.bradshawfoundation.com/cave_art_an_intuition_of_eternity/decent_into_the_cave/summary.php

7 Ibid, 2. On this topic, Dr. Vickers notes, “Archaeologists and art historians of this period are almost universally agreed that these inaccessible spaces must have been used as underground temples, as sanctuaries, for carrying out religious, and/or shamanic rituals.” For additional information, see: http://www.bradshawfoundation.com/cave_art_an_intuition_of_eternity/decent_into_the_cave/decorated_caves_upper_palaeolithic.php

time, by joy, by adversities.”⁸ But even with that map, “I am what I am and I’m [still] falling gracefully down this path that I don’t know,” as Columbian-born singer Juliana Ronderos of the group Salt Cathedral sings in the lyrics for the song, *No Ordinary Man*.⁹ But having a map is still better than having no map when you are wandering around a labyrinth, or within the winding passages of a dark cave, and our students need their own versions if they are going to survive and master the twists and turns of life. This is why it’s critical to create rich learning environments that invite and inspire them. As the father of modern linguistics, Noam Chomsky, said recently, “That’s what teaching should be: inspiring students to discover on their own; to challenge if they don’t agree; to look for alternatives if they think there are better ones; [to] work through great achievements of the past, and try to master them on their own because they are interested in them.”¹⁰ **(Slide 13 – Book Cover)**

As I reflected on what I’d like to say tonight, my first instinct was to turn to my repository of knowledge, the books that line the wall of my home office.

Instinctively, I pulled from among my favorites ***The Renaissance Philosophy of Man***, a book I have turned to again and again for inspiration and reflection.

It’s a compilation of essays translated into English and its purpose was to

⁸ Excerpted from Jorge Luis Borges, *Two English Poems*, 1934. *Jorge Luis Borges, Selected Poems: 1923-1967*, ed. Norman Thomas di Giovanni, (London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1972), 89. References are to Poem II. <https://libraryofbabel.info/Borges/Borges-SelectedPoems.pdf>

⁹ “No Ordinary Man,” Salt Cathedral, 2016. <https://open.spotify.com/track/6hWjywgSn9XF14RrfoJ6P4>

¹⁰ Noam Chomsky, “The Purpose of Education,” presented at the Learning Without Frontiers Conference, October 6, 2015, London, England. Included on a website by Transpersonal Psychology Video: <http://twocanteach.com/followpsychology/video/noam-chomsky-the-purpose-of-education/>

acquaint the student of philosophy with major thinkers of the early Italian Renaissance. In trying times, I like to turn to the Italian Humanist Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola's ***Oration on the Dignity of Man***, which is a beautifully written celebration of human beings and our potential. Written in the 15th century, it has been called the "Manifesto of the Renaissance" and remains a critical text of Renaissance humanism. Of the early humanists, I am drawn to Pico because he imagined a world where human beings exist above beasts and below angels, hovering somewhere right in a middle zone. And as many of the early humanists did, Pico celebrated our ability as humans to make choices: as he saw it, we can aspire to be like angels or we can descend into depravity like beasts. "We can become what we will," he wrote.¹¹ I find Pico's recognition of the mutability of our nature and our enormous potential thought-provoking and inspiring. **(Slide 14: Pico & Dweck)**

It's fascinating that in modern times it has been determined that believing in the capacity to change and grow our minds can have a profound impact on learning, as evidenced by the work of Stanford psychologist Dr. Carol Dweck in her ground-breaking work, ***Mindset: The New Psychology of Success***. Dr. Dweck's research provides an inquiry into the power of our beliefs and how changing even the simplest of them can have a major impact on nearly every aspect of our lives.¹² Her research has demonstrated conclusively that the

¹¹ Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola, "Oration on the Dignity of Man," trans. Elizabeth Livermore Forbes, *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller and John Hermann Randall, Jr. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956), 227.

¹² Carol S. Dweck, Ph.D., *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, (New York: Penguin Random House, LLC, 2006). https://www.amazon.com/Mindset-Psychology-Carol-S-Dweck/dp/0345472322#reader_0345472322

hand you're dealt is just a starting point: what you do with that hand is up to you. It's your intellectual agility that is the key to self-improvement.

As Pico understood it, "Man is the intermediary between creatures, the intimate of the gods, the king of the lower beings, by the acuteness of his senses, by the discernment of his reason, and by the light of his intelligence the interpreter of nature, the interval between fixed eternity and fleeting time, and (as the Persians say), the bond, nay rather, the marriage song of the world..."¹³ There is something so uplifting and poetic in Pico's call to "Let a certain holy ambition invade our souls..."¹⁴

From my own experience, I know that the study of the humanities has the power to illuminate, sustain, and inspire, maybe even heal, and I have benefitted greatly from the many opportunities I've had to study them in depth, both in the United States and abroad. My engagement with the humanities is ongoing. Looking back, I realize that my interdisciplinary study of German literature and Art History has helped me appreciate and see unexpected intersections and commonalities across different artistic mediums. **(Slide 15: Cézanne)** For example: I never would have been able to understand the post-Impressionist French painter Paul Cézanne's use of *passage*, a painting technique he used in his landscapes and still lives, where multiple viewpoints

¹³ Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola, "Oration on the Dignity of Man," trans. Elizabeth Livermore Forbes, *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller and John Hermann Randall, Jr. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956), 223.

¹⁴ Ibid, 227.

are presented in a single glance, had I not read the Latin epic poem, *The Aeneid*. What really helped me understand Cézanne's *passage* technique was seeing how Virgil, as a writer, presented time as a fluidity of moments in his epic work *The Aeneid*; it's a work in which the Gods have the unique talent to move effortlessly back and forth across a continuum of time that encompasses the past, present, and future as one concept.

Standing in front of one of Cézanne's paintings, I suddenly understood what he was trying to achieve. In ***Still Life with Basket of Apples*** (pictured here, completed around 1895), Cézanne features a basket of apples spilling out onto a wooden table covered by a heavily creased tablecloth. The painting is rendered from a series of multiple and shifting perspectives. The various objects, including the unnaturally tipped basket of apples; the dark green wine bottle; and the yellow biscuits stacked on a white dish, all cling together tenuously, while appearing to slide off the picture plane. Time is not presented as one single moment but rather as a snapshot of multiple moments isolated in a single glance. Both Virgil and Cézanne created an illusory world, not unlike that of the cave painters 20,000 years before: it's a world where temporal time is suspended and reconceived according to some unexpected internal guidelines, which, while alien to us, transfix us with their familiarity.¹⁵

¹⁵ For additional information on this topic, see Amy A. Gumaer, D. Arts, "Virgil and Cézanne: Transcending the Limits of 'Counted Time,'" Essay written while a student at the University at Albany, State University of New York, Humanistic Studies Program, 2004. (Not published. Copies provided on request.)

The humanities likewise provide a glimpse of a whole other existence—they invite deeper thinking that extends beyond the obvious and into the mysterious. Walt Whitman captured this idea in his *Leaves of Grass*, in which he wrote: "I do not doubt interiors have their interiors, and exteriors have their exteriors—and that the eye-sight has another eye-sight, and the hearing another hearing, and the voice another voice..."¹⁶

(Slide 16: Keats) The Romantic poet John Keats considered a willingness to embrace uncertainty and mystery as qualities that could form what he called “a person of achievement,” especially in literature. Keats coined the phrase, “*Negative Capability*,” which is the ability to function in the face of uncertainty, mystery and doubt, without grasping after facts or reason.¹⁷ He said Shakespeare possessed it enormously. I think the cave painters possessed it, too. As I see it, Negative Capability is the ability to “live the questions,”¹⁸ embrace ambiguity, and persist in the face of uncertainty. And that, for me, is what the humanities provide: in addition to being a sanctuary, they nurture a kind of intellectual resilience. They also help us discover and contemplate who

¹⁶ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1860), Part 7, 218. The Walt Whitman Archive. <http://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1860/poems/33>

¹⁷ Maria Popova, “The Art of Negative Capability: Keats on Embracing Uncertainty and Celebrating the Mysterious, On the art of remaining in doubt ‘without any irritable reaching after fact & fiction,’” Brain Pickings Website. <https://www.brainpickings.org/2012/11/01/john-keats-on-negative-capability/>

¹⁸ Jacqueline Novogratz, founder and CEO of Acumen Fund, Commencement Speech, May 20, 2012 at Gettysburg College's 177th Commencement, as discussed in an essay by Maria Popova, “Live the Questions: Jacqueline Novogratz’s Advice to Graduates,” Brain Pickings Website. <https://www.brainpickings.org/2012/05/29/jacqueline-novogratz-gettysburg-commencement/>

we are and why we are here, connect with our creative sides, and expand our possibilities of perception.

My own path through the humanities has helped me consider issues of identity as I hope our new NEH grant project, ***Many Voices: One College***, will do for our students.

(Slide 17: My Ancestors) My own story is one of a 14th generation New Yorker, a German American, whose many English maternal ancestors from my mother's side of the family were trained as teachers and educators. Their work included serving as governesses, as teachers in one-room schoolhouses, as elementary and high school teachers, journalists and writers. I am proud to represent the legacy of six continuous generations of women in my family through this maternal line, as a writer and educator, and I accept this award in their memory and honor.

Our students at Montgomery College bring tremendous potential with them when they arrive at our College. A large percentage of them are immigrants and non-citizens. Many of them speak a different language at home or are immersed in a different culture when they leave the College environment. When they arrive in our classrooms, we must embrace their experience to keep them engaged and interested. I believe strongly that we can do that by providing a place where they can share their stories and contribute their own narratives, where they can begin their own journeys. Global learning allows that because it creates space for students to share the story of their own rich heritage, to

compare that to someone else's, to discover the differences and find the similarities. It holds the potential to reveal, what Borges called, "explanations of yourself, theories about yourself, authentic and surprising news of yourself."¹⁹

The educator John Dewey wrote that interest operates by a process of "catch" and "hold"—first the student's interest must be captured, then maintained. Piquing interest is about seizing attention and stimulating the imagination. This is an arena where the global humanities thrive and excel.

(Slide 18: A Guide to the Constellations) I'd like to end with an illustration from my great-grandmother's Astronomy textbook. It's fascinating to think that in the 1800s, Astronomy and the sciences generally were considered ideally suited to study by women: my, how times change... (The illustration of the constellations pictured in this slide was created by a woman in an Astronomy textbook published in 1869.)²⁰

In conclusion, I'm thrilled to be recognized as a leader in the humanities because I think the humanities have the power to save mankind. If we become deeper thinkers, more thoughtful and insightful, if we are able to understand nuance and navigate through ambiguity then maybe we can all avoid the

¹⁹ Excerpted from Jorge Luis Borges, *Two English Poems*, 1934. *Jorge Luis Borges, Selected Poems: 1923-1967*, ed. Norman Thomas di Giovanni, (London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1972), 89. References are to Poem II. <https://libraryofbabel.info/Borges/Borges-SelectedPoems.pdf>

²⁰ For more on women and science in the nineteenth century, see Renée L. Bergland, "Urania's Inversion: Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville, and the Strange History of Women Scientists in Nineteenth-Century America." *Signs* 34, no. 1 (2008): 75-99. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/588428.

pitfalls of polarized thinking that leads to extremism and ultimately to war. Maybe it can help us chart our path through the labyrinth, gain some Keatsian Negative Capability, and become more receptive to the beauty and wonder that surrounds us. I'd like to end by urging you to let the humanities help you to "live the questions"²¹ and "... brave the downward-inward journey to the unchartered regions of [your] mind...",²² just as the cave painters did. Thank you for this tremendous recognition of my work. And thank you to those who have supported me through my own meandering path through the labyrinth, including many of those in the audience this evening who were instrumental in realizing the goals of the Global Humanities Institute. I am deeply humbled and honored to accept the **2017 Global Humanities Institute Humanities Leadership Award**. Thank you.

²¹ Jacqueline Novogratz, founder and CEO of Acumen Fund, Commencement Speech, May 20, 2012 at Gettysburg College's 177th Commencement, as discussed in an essay by Maria Popova, "Live the Questions: Jacqueline Novogratz's Advice to Graduates," Brain Pickings Website: <https://www.brainpickings.org/2012/05/29/jacqueline-novogratz-gettysburg-commencement/>

²² Dr. Ilse Vickers, Ibid, 5. As Dr. Vickers wrote, "It appears that modern, 'civilized' man's highly differentiated consciousness has come at a price. Modern man's inward path is made difficult by the demands for explanation, logic, justification, profit, use, effect, and so on. However, those willing to push past these obstacles, those with the stamina to brave the downward-inward journey to the unchartered regions of the mind will, like Palaeolithic man, find the 'right' spot, the place of penetration, where all opposites fuse in the divine spark of creation." See the Bradshaw Foundation Website: http://www.bradshawfoundation.com/cave_art_an_intuition_of_eternity/decent_into_the_cave/summary.php