

**“Whilst the Flame Flickers:”
Restored to Wholeness in Conversation**

“If I knew only Thoreau, I should think cooperation of good men impossible. Must we always talk for victory, and never once for truth, for comfort, and joy?”
– Emerson, *Journal DO* (1854)

In the summer of 2009, I taught a course at Stanford on the Irish playwright Brian Friel in conjunction with a theater season dedicated to his plays. This was an evening course for adults, offered through the Continuing Studies Program. I mention this because all the students were there for the intrinsic pleasure of reading Friel and talking about him with fellow students. There were no grades, no credit, and nobody expected “take aways” – skill sets or strategies – that would help them make more money or get a better job.

One evening, after we enjoyed a particularly good conversation about Friel’s most popular play, “Dancing at Lughnasa” (1990), I started thinking about the experience of conversation itself. But first, let me sketch in a little background on the play. The date is 1936, a particularly grim and repressive time in Ireland; and the place is Ballybeg, literally “Small Town” up north in Donegal. Five sisters are living together in a cottage, and struggling to make ends meet by knitting for piece work and teaching school; and in spite of the gray thinness of their lives, they manage to remain cheerful and kind to each other. But they are frustratingly aware that in spite of their efforts, their lives remain anemic and marginalized. The absence at the center of their lives is symbolized by the traditional harvest festival of Lughnasa that never quite happens anymore, or if it does it’s just among a handful of teenage slackers who go up to the “back hills,” drink beer, and fall drunk into their bonfires. In the past, these fires lit up the night and everybody gathered around them to dance, sing, drink, tell stories, and carouse joyfully until dawn. The cost of it all was a fierce hangover the next morning – a small price to pay for the feelings of solidarity and belonging that lasted (ideally) until the next festival.

But now, in 1936, the town has stopped dancing, and the five sisters are left to suppose that Life – healthy, robust, full life – must be happening elsewhere; they just don't know where. That is, not until their elderly Uncle Jack, comes to visit from Africa, where they believe he has been a Catholic missionary for the past 25 years. But, as his stories reveal, he had pretty enthusiastically gone native a long time back. In one memorable scene, Jack describes to his pious niece Kate the Festival of the New Yam (pointedly, a midsummer harvest festival like the now absent Lughnasa):

It's an important ceremony, you would have three to four hundred people . . . [T]hey begin very formally . . . with the ritual sacrifice of a fowl or a goat or a calf down at the bank of the river. Then the ceremonial cutting and anointing of the first yams and the first cassava; and we pass these around in huge wooden bowls. Then the incantation – a chant, really – that expresses our gratitude and that also acts as a rhythm or percussion for the ritual dance. And then, when the thanksgiving is over, the dance continues. And the interesting thing is that it grows naturally into a secular celebration; so that almost imperceptibly the religious ceremony ends and the community celebration takes over. . . . We light fires round the periphery of the circle; and we paint our faces with coloured powders; and we sing local songs; and we drink palm wine. And then we dance – and dance – and dance – children, men, women, most of them lepers, many of them with misshapen limbs – dancing, believe it or not, for days on end! It's the most wonderful sight you have ever seen! (*Laughs.*) That palm wine! They dole it out in horns! You lose all sense of time . . . ! Oh yes, the Ryangans are a remarkable people: there is no distinction between the religious and the secular in their culture. And of course their capacity for fun, for laughing, for practical jokes – they've such open hearts! In some respects, they're not unlike us.

Dancing in Ryanga not only integrates the community, it integrates each individual who participates, bringing together their religious and secular selves, dream lives and waking lives, and public and private identities. Friel suggests that such rituals restore our psychic health, and that through them we become "whole" again (OE *hæloth*, related to *hāl*, "whole"). In the absence of such rituals, we remain partial, partisan, and apart – from each other, and from dimensions of ourselves. And then we become sick, or just lost. "Dancing in the Dark."

As readers or viewers of “Dancing at Lughnasa” we are prompted to ask ourselves this question: in the absence of the traditional rituals that are designed to restore us, where do we go to renew our health and retrieve our wholeness? Well, we don't have to look far. At the end of the play, we realize that we in the theater audience have just participated in a communal ceremony that provides all the benefits Jack finds in the Ryangan harvest festival. Going to the theater is inclusive, bonding, and interactive. The actors need us as much as we need them, and together we make whatever magic we experience. We are taken out of ourselves imaginatively by identifying with the characters, and we allow them to “enter” us. As long as the performance lasts, the membrane separating our partial selves from others is permeable, and we are restored to some larger whole. We go away feeling invigorated, enlivened, better aligned with life and life's positive purposes.

And, here's what I'd like to explore: I think this same experience of invigorating wholeness happens in a good conversation in class. I say “in class” because the phenomenon I have in mind requires some of the formality that is present in a communal ceremony and in the theater, and is absent in the informal conversations we may have over dinner or walking with a friend. Everybody comes to a class meeting with a shared expectation of formal structure, which includes some of the following:

- The conversation will last a fixed amount of time (and will consequently have a kind of narrative or temporal shape),
- It will be about an agreed-upon topic, and while individuals' remarks may be personal, they are expected to be contributions to the topic at hand which is impersonal,
- There is an unspoken contract that nobody leaves until the end, and that everybody has responsibility for the success of the common project,
- Typically there is a leader (what the ancients called a *symposiarch*, the convener of the symposium),

- While there are no formal rules for how to begin, sustain, and conclude a conversation of this sort, there are well-known protocols that govern what sorts of things get said,
- More is expected of participants than talking in turn; everybody is also expected to pay attention, listen, accommodate others, and take responsibility for the group's coordination.

When it works, and the conversation has been good, everybody leaves feeling energized, and grateful to the others – grateful because they had thoughts they could not have had without the group, and found articulations that would otherwise have had no occasion. In other words, when a conversation takes off, everybody becomes more – and better – than they feel themselves to be when alone.

Nobody describes the exhilaration of a good conversation better than Emerson, who makes the unpredictably emergent quality of talk sound as exciting and dangerous as going up in a hot air balloon. In his beautiful essay “Circles” from 1842 he describes the paradoxical experience of self-loss and self-enlargement that comes when, enabled by those with whom we are talking, we say things we could never have said without them. He calls this experience “Pentecostal” because, in fact, we find ourselves speaking in tongues unavailable to us when we are alone.

Conversation is a game of circles The parties are not to be judged by the spirit they partake and even express under this Pentecost. Tomorrow they will have receded from this high-water mark. Tomorrow you shall find them stooping under the old pack-saddles. Yet let us enjoy the cloven flame whilst it glows on our walls.

When each new speaker strikes a new light, emancipates us from the oppression of the last speaker to oppress us with the greatness and exclusiveness of his own thought, then yields us to another redeemer, we seem to recover our rights, to become men. . . . The facts which loomed so large in the fog of yesterday – property, climate, breeding, personal beauty and the like, have strangely changed their proportions. All that we reckoned settled shakes and rattles; and literature, cities, climates, religions, leave their foundations and dance before our eyes. (257)

There is more than a little *eros* in the experience Emerson describes here: the willing invasion of one's self, being taken up, suspended, passed from one caresser to another. At the same time, I think, Emerson is trying to understand the paradoxical feeling we have of simultaneously remaining an individual ("apart") and being taken up into a whole ("a part"). This paradox is embedded in the verb "to partake" and may, in fact, describe our common existential condition: we are social animals who are "part of" a culture or society from which we "take" our identities. Emerson is often inaccurately remembered as the champion of "self reliance" which libertarians believe means solitary and competitive individualism when, in fact, Emerson was always mindful of our doubleness as takers and partakers, as beings deeply dependent on others to become whole.

It might help, in thinking this through, to turn to another arena where similar sorts of dynamics play out, namely jazz music. Wynton Marsalis writes in *Moving to Higher Ground: How Jazz Can Change Your Life* about the "conversation" of jazz musicians, one with another, as they play – improvising, offering, stepping aside as one or another takes a chance, acknowledging, folding back in, etc. The drummer knows that he cannot play what he plays – cannot be the person he is – without the sax and the trumpet and the bass, and *mutatis mutandis* for the others. This is why, when the music stops and the applause begins, jazz musicians gesture to each other, as though to say, "No, not me . . . him" or, more accurately, "without him . . . no me."

The other thing that makes jazz, and theater, so much like conversation is that in all three activities there is no "take away." We don't go to hear music or see a play or have a conversation in class with some instrumental purpose in mind. We go because the activity is pleasurable in itself, like gardening or hiking, not a means to some further end. If we find these activities fulfilling, they become part of our secular "practice," part of a complete life, and the only thing we can imagine doing with them is to repeat them, come back, and do it again – over and over.

I chose that word “practice” intentionally because, while I don’t believe that conversation teaches us “take away” skills, I do believe that conversation offers us the opportunity to practice social and intellectual virtues, among which I’d include:

- *Attention*: This is not a commonly cited social virtue, but only by paying attention can we perceive and receive the world outside of the small ego of the self. In conversation, this means listening to others, staying engaged, and not allowing oneself to become distracted (no checking email on your smart phone under the table). The etymology of the word “attention” cues us to the scope of its ideal: in Latin, *attendere* means “to take care of,”
- *Accommodation*: In Korea they say that building stone walls teaches the virtue of accommodation. Because all stones are asymmetrical, as soon as a waller places a stone, he knows the next one will have to accommodate its neighbor’s eccentricities. Once a stone is set, it will not be removed; once a remark is made in conversation, it cannot be withdrawn, and it becomes the responsibility of the listeners to figure out how to receive it, no matter how odd or awkward,
- *Cooperation*: Conversation is not debate; there are no winners and losers, and competitive one-upsmanship, stubbornness, and ideological fanaticism are the fastest way to kill its magic (Churchill once quipped that a “fanatic” is somebody who cannot change his mind and will not change the subject). A debate, like a baseball game, aims toward its end; and even if along the way there are virtuoso moments of non-competitive performance, what counts is the score at the end. By contrast, in conversation, all the goods are internal, and the end does not come with a judgment separating winners and losers but marks a reluctant cessation, commonly agreed upon. And while the conversation lasts, everybody has an equal and non-partisan interest in not only sustaining it, but lifting it to its highest levels of mutual satisfaction – stoking the cloven flame that glows on the wall.

Michael Oakeshott, the British philosopher who wrote a number of consequential essays on conversation, especially “The Voice of Conversation in the Education of Mankind” (1946), and “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind” (1959), has this to say about the virtues that get practiced in conversation:

[W]hat the practice of conversation requires is not a certain number of participants, but a certain disposition Those who are disposed to think conversationally will use the voice of conversation even when they are alone and speak only to themselves. Indeed, all the characteristics of conversational talk: the readiness of sympathy, the forbearance from dogmatism, the naïve pleasure in the exchange of ideas, the generosity in giving and taking, the intoxicating blend of the consequential and the inconsequential, the internal discipline combined with the absence of a route to be taken or a conclusion to be reached, are only the images of a certain manner of thinking. . . . Conversation, in short, is a disposition of the human soul; it may often reveal itself in talk, but it is capable of civilizing any of the activities in which human beings engage.” (192-193).

I’d like to underscore that last term Oakeshott uses – “civilizing” – because it is another way of describing the tricky and demanding ideal we have already pointed to of learning how to be simultaneously “apart” and “a part.” The mark of a civilized person is that he or she has developed this dual consciousness, and understands him- or herself as both an individual with legitimate and defensible private goals and as a constituent part of a larger social whole (a *civis*) with equally legitimate and defensible public goals. When this balance is lost, one either reverts to tribal partisanship, unable to see the whole, or succumbs to totalitarian homogenization, surrendering individuality to a putatively superior mass. Those of us who see civilization and citizenship as precious and precarious ideals, also believe that we need frequent occasions to practice the virtues that promote them, because citizenship is not only a right, but a skill that improves with regular rehearsal. And –

as I have been suggesting – happily, this practice is a joy and a pleasure in itself, and we go back eagerly to those sites like theater, music, and conversation, where it can be enjoyed. The joy and pleasure are not incidental; like the Feast of the Yam that Father Jack describes in *Dancing at Lughnasa* good conversation is a remarkable hybrid of discipline, attention, earnestness, along with intoxicating release, receptivity, and joyful openness. Emerson again: “All conversation is a series of intoxications; the talkers recover themselves at intervals, see how pleasant the gas was, inhale it again, and disport themselves gladly. If they kept cool, there would be no joy.” (*Journal AB*, 1847, vol. II, p. 341)

One theorist whom I have found useful in trying to understand the dynamic in conversation between individual and group, part and whole, person and impersonality, is David Bohm. Bohm was one of the most brilliant quantum physicists of his generation, and worked closely with both Oppenheimer and Einstein. Because he was also a radical peace activist, however, he was hounded by J. Edgar Hoover and HUAC, and was ultimately forced to leave the US, first for Brazil, and then Israel, before settling at the University of London where he remained for the rest of his career. A nimble thinker, he was not content to limit his understanding of particles and systems to physics, but saw their applicability to both human psychology and human social interaction. Later in his life, he became fascinated by dialogue both in theory and practice, and developed a particular method designed to give groups of 20-40 participants the experience of what he called “the unfoldment and revelation of the deeper collective meanings.”

This is not the place to go into detail on the particularities of Bohm Dialogue, but I want to borrow a little from him to help me understand the phenomenon I am trying to describe, namely the emergence in conversation of shared meaning or impersonal thought – those understandings which are created between the participants, but feel, at the same time, profoundly personal. Here

is Bohm:

Participants in dialogue find that they are involved in an ever changing and developing pool of common meaning. A shared content of consciousness emerges which allows a level of creativity and insight that is not generally available to individuals or to groups that interact in more familiar ways. This reveals an aspect of dialogue that Patrick de Mare has called *koinonia*, a word meaning 'impersonal fellowship,' which was originally used to describe the early form of Athenian democracy in which all the free men of the city gathered to govern themselves." (5-6)

And, I can't help going back to Emerson again, this time in the essay "The Oversoul," where he takes this notion of "impersonal fellowship" and expands it into a metaphysical principle:

Persons themselves acquaint us with the impersonal. In all conversations between two persons tacit reference is made, as to a third party, to common nature. That third party or common nature is not social; it is impersonal And so in groups where debate is earnest, and especially on high questions, the company becomes aware that the thought rises to an equal level in all bosoms, that all have a spiritual property in what was said, as well as in the sayer. They all become wiser than they were. It arches over them like a temple, this unity of thought in which every heart beats with nobler sense of power and duty, and thinks and acts with unusual solemnity. All are conscious of attaining to a higher self-possession. It shines for all.

At times like this, Emerson believes, we get a glimpse of what he regards as the Truth, that "the heart in thee is the heart of all; not a valve, not a wall, not an intersection is there anywhere in nature, but one blood rolls uninterruptedly, an endless circulation through all men, as the water of the globe is all one sea, and, truly seen, its tide is one" (249). This is a belief whose truth-value cannot be proven or refuted, but as William James would say it is "pragmatically true" because it puts the believer into a healthy (*hale* -> whole) relation to the world.

The German philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer, who wrote extensively on conversation and dialogue, would agree with Emerson that to be in conversation

means to be beyond one's self. Gadamer's vocabulary is different, but he draws his inspiration from a Romantic ideology of trust and mutuality not unlike Emerson's. To be beyond oneself, for Gadamer, is to think with the other, and we can only do this when we talk together. In successful conversations, my "horizon of understanding" (one of Gadamer's key terms) merges with another's, as though a new lens were attached to my perceptual camera, and while the effect lasts I can see and know more. Gadamer also shares with Emerson the acknowledgment that this merging of horizons does not last. It is the effect of the Pentecostal "cloven flame" that flickers on the wall while we talk. Gadamer also agrees with Emerson that the participants in conversation do not need to care so much about each other as individual personalities, but that together they go someplace that is *impersonal*, beyond each personality:

Thus it is a characteristic of every true conversation that each opens himself to the other person, truly accepts his point of view as worthy of consideration and gets inside the other to such an extent that *he understands not a particular individual, but what he says* (my emphasis). The thing that has to be grasped is the objective rightness or otherwise of his opinion, so that they can agree with each other on a subject. (Gadamer *Truth and Method*: 347)

This impersonal "truth" is not something "out there" waiting for the group to discover it; rather, it emerges in the talk, and evolves as the talk progresses. David Bohm says that when a conversation really gets going, we glimpse "an unbroken wholeness in flowing movement." It would be very hard to write something like this down or record it, but then one wonders why you would want to do that, any more than you'd want to "write down" a jazz performance.

Montaigne, in his lovely essay "On the Art of Discussion," writes with characteristic gratitude about the pleasure he finds in conversation: "The most fruitful and natural exercise of our mind, in my opinion, is discussion. I find it sweeter than any other action of our life; and that is the reason why, if I were right now forced to choose, I believe I would rather consent to lose my sight than my hearing or speech." What is it about conversation that makes it more valuable to Montaigne than his eyesight? I

think the answer is the same one Emerson and Gadamer have offered: it takes us out of ourselves, helps us escape the partisan ego, and makes us larger than we are: “The study of books is a languishing and feeble activity that gives no heat, whereas discussion teaches and exercises us at the same time. If I discuss with a strong mind and a stiff jousting partner, he presses on my flanks, prods me right and left; his ideas launching mine. Rivalry, glory, competition, push me and lift me above myself.” And, like Gadamer and Emerson, Montaigne finds this exhilaration in the mysteriously impersonal “third party or common nature” that emerges in conversation: “When someone opposes me, he arouses my attention, not my anger. I go to meet a man who contradicts me, who instructs me. The cause of truth should be *the common cause* for both”[my emphasis]. Montaigne calls it “truth,” Emerson calls it “Pentecost,” Gadamer calls it the “expanded horizon,” and all agree that our access to this visionary space is by way of talking with others, “through speech” (*dia-logos*). Oakeshott agrees that conversation is the source of our most gratifying intellectual pleasure, but, with his British allergy to metaphysics, he offers a more modest comparison – it is really more like cooking, he says, than anything else we do:

Success does not lie in the conclusion of the discussion by some unanswerable pronouncement; that is failure. Success is to maintain this delicate equilibrium, to keep alive what has miraculously been given life. We may win a point, score a hit; but that is incidental; nobody wins the conversation Like those of the art of cookery, the achievements in conversation are transitory, and consequently its pleasure is absolute in each moment. (190)

Oakeshott’s last insight – that the “achievements” of conversation are transitory, and so we better pay attention and not miss their fleeting pleasures – is an echo, it seems to me, of Emerson’s existential recognition that the cloven flame flickers briefly, against a wall that remains in place. Liberation is relative; tomorrow the pack saddles. But, he says, “let us enjoy” – let us enjoy the cloven flame whilst it plays, and let us feel grateful for those who come to our conversations and strike the match.

There are those, of course, who come and do not stoke the flame, but smother it. Emerson, so much a lover of conversation, had many evenings when the flame sputtered, and he wrote about them in his journals. Here is an entry from 1841 that we can imagine was scribbled after an apparently exasperating gathering in Concord:

You come into this company meanly. How so?

We have come for the love of seeing each other & of conversing together. You have come to give us things which are written already in your note-books, and when you have told them, you are spent. The best of our talk is invented here, and we go hence greater than we came by so much life as we have awakened in each other; but you, when your quiver is emptied, must sit dumb & careful the rest of the evening. Everything you say makes you poorer, and everything we say makes us richer: you go home when the company breaks up forlorn: we go home (without a thought on ourselves,) full of happiness to pleasant dreams. (Journal H, 1841, pp. 53-54, Library of America)

As always with Emerson, the idealism wins out over the annoyance. “We go hence greater than we came . . . without a thought on ourselves” – what a wonderful thing to say!

Emerson and his circle were great talkers, and met regularly in each other’s parlors -- the room in a 19th century house, as its name reminds us, that was set aside specifically for the pleasures of talk. Some of these gatherings were informal and impromptu, but others were more deliberate, and took place in one or another of the earnest clubs – early forms of adult education – that were designed specifically for the pleasure of communal talk. Elizabeth Palmer Peabody experimented with a discussion course for women as early as 1831. In 1836, Bronson Alcott started a Friday night conversation class for schoolteachers. By that time, Alcott was infamous in Boston for the scandalous conversations he had conducted with his pupils in the experimental Temple School on the Bible. Convinced, like Wordsworth, that children come “trailing clouds of glory from God who is our home,” and are consequently able to intuit deep religious truths, Alcott reasoned that it made less sense for adults to

instruct young people on the scriptures, than to listen to what they had to say. His *Conversations on the Gospels*, published at the close of 1836, caused such a scandal that within a few years enrollment in the Temple School dropped from 40 to 30, then to ten, and finally to one, Alcott's daughter.

Almost twenty-five years later, Alcott was given another chance to build an elementary school curriculum around conversation, this time as Superintendent of Schools in Concord, a position he held between 1859 and 1862. He instituted a number of reforms, introducing singing, physical activity, and diary writing into the curriculum and – not surprisingly – he made conversation the preferred mode of pedagogy in the classroom. In one of his reports he had this to say in defense of conversation:

Conversation is the mind's mouth-piece, its best spokesman; the leader elect and prompter in teaching; practiced daily, it should be added to the list of school studies; an art in itself, let it be used as such, and ranked as an accomplishment second to none that nature or culture can give.

Certainly the best we can do is to teach ourselves and children how to talk. Let conversation displace much that passes current under the name of recitation; mostly sound and parrotry, a repeating by rote not by heart, unmeaning sounds from the memory and no more.

'Take my mind a moment,' says the teacher, 'and see how things look through that prism,' and the pupil sees prospects never seen before or surmised by him in that lively perspective. . . . life calling forth life; the giving of life and a partaking. Nothing should be interposed between the mind and its subject matter—cold sense is impertinent; learning is insufficient—only life alone; life like a torch lighting the head at the heart.

Alcott's prose frequently suffers from a kind of oracular airiness, and we witness the beginnings of a dangerous ascent in the last sentence above. But it is not accidental, I think, that he draws on the same Emersonian vocabulary of enlargement ("the pupil sees prospects never seen before") and illumination ("life like a torch lighting the head at the heart" – an original anatomical

fancy). And there is that intriguing verb again: *to partake*. Alcott says that conversation is “life calling forth life” – the direction of flow reciprocal now between teacher and pupil, between one pupil and another – “the giving of life and a partaking.” Even Thoreau, not much of a socializer and almost allergic to “parlors,” felt a kind of levitating expansion when he talked to Alcott: “Great Thinker! Great Expecter! To converse with whom was a New England Night’s Entertainment. Ah! Such discourse we had, – hermit and philosopher, – and the old Settler I have spoken of, – we three; it expanded and cracked my little house.” (1846-47 draft of *Walden*)

Margaret Fuller assumes a prominent position in the history of the liberal Boston conversation movement, in part because of the awesome force of her personality and intelligence, but also because of the star-studded cast of intellectual women she attracted to the classes she held. Between 1839 and 1844, twenty-five to thirty women signed up year after year to attend a conversation class that met on the second floor of Elizabeth Peabody’s bookstore in West Street. The first series on Greek mythology was followed by a second on the fine arts, and others on ethics, education, and the meaning of life – five in all. One participant confessed that she often attended “to be entertained,” but that Fuller always had a “higher purpose” and infused the conversations with “the spirit that giveth life” (*Memoirs*, Vol. I, p. 349). Some prospective participants asked if they might attend but not speak, and Fuller said no, “the success of the whole depends on conversation being general,” with the promised reward of full participation nothing short of “real health and vigor.” (*Memoirs*, pp. Vol. I, 326-327). Only once did Fuller experiment with a class that included men – a series on mythology – and it was a failure. Emerson attended one session and remarked that Fuller seemed “encumbered” by the men “who fancied, no doubt, that . . . they . . . must assert and dogmatize” (*Memoirs*, Vol. I, 347-348). But, in 1844 when she finished her last class on “Education,” Fuller wrote to Emerson with pride in what had been collectively accomplished, “How noble has been my experience of such relations now for six years, and with so many and so various minds. Life is worth living, is it not?” (quoted in Ronda, 194)

Here, Fuller sounds like Montaigne: life is worth living if it is filled with such conversation, or conversely, a fulfilling life is made up of such conversation. It is remarkable how consistent this coupling of conversation and vitality appears across cultures, across centuries, and coming from such different thinkers as Montaigne, Habermans, Oakeshott, Gadamer, Emerson, and Alcott. And to add to this remarkable consistency, I can cite from my own experience as the director of an adult education program that convenes people for serious conversation, the frequency with which this coupling is invoked by students who tell me things like “This program is my oxygen!” or “I feared getting old and getting stuck, but Continuing Studies is keeping me nimble.” On this note, I’d like to end with an anecdote.

Back in 1998, I and some colleagues at Stanford formed a reading group that met once a week in the evening to discuss Gary Snyder’s new book of poems, *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. It is a luminous collection, but the poems are challenging, and we needed each other’s help. At one session, a friend of a friend, named Locke McCorkle, dropped in – coincidentally on the very night we were discussing “Bubbs Creek Haircut,” a poem in which Locke appears as a character, a hiking buddy of Snyder’s in the Sierras in the 1950’s. During the conversation we were lucky to have many “flying moments” of intellectual partnership and pleasure, and the flame flickered on the wall. As we were packing up to leave, Locke – who is not an academic and confessed to feeling a little intimidated when we began – said “Well, I’m not sure I understand these poems any better, but I know one thing. I feel a whole lot more alive than I did when I came in.” We all did. We felt enlarged, invigorated, restored to wholeness and health, and we understood that we couldn’t have done that alone. Although it wasn’t our idiom, it was our feeling, and Emerson said it best: We went hence greater than we came by so much life as we had awakened in each other. And we knew that we’d be back for more.

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