

"In the Beginning"

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When I selected my title, I thought it had a nice Biblical ring to it, but I didn't realize it would cause all kinds of speculation about my pro-posed topic. Was I really--some of my friends asked, especially after seeing in the daily bulletin I was preaching a sermon--was I really going to talk about the first chapter of Genesis? "Well, why not?" I said. We all know verse 3: "And God said, Let there be light: and there was light." Luxesto, right? And we all have certainly had Lights in our lives.

But the title really has to do with a question--one I've been asked many times in recent years. When people hear I was involved years ago with the Foreign Study Program, they ask, "What was it like in the beginning? How did it all get started?" Today I thought I'd try to tell you, based on some re-search I did last year and on my own memory, what it was like in the beginning and how it did get started. Does it matter? I Hope you'll think it does.

In its beginnings almost thirty years ago, foreign study at Kalamazoo was unlike that at any other college or university. Most such programs, you see, start as the brain children of individual faculty entrepreneurs usually foreign language professors who have contacts abroad, or who need a way to get abroad, or both. If the programs continue (and the dropout rate is very high) they usually remain individual fiefdoms or become extensions of the professor's home language department. Often they are given little attention by faculty or students from other disciplines or by the central administration, unless they become commercial enterprises and do extensive, outside recruiting for participants.

But the Kalamazoo program did not start with a faculty entrepreneur. The person who introduced the idea of foreign study at Kalamazoo was, wonder of wonders, the chairman of our board, Dr. Richard U. Light. He and his family had all participated in a French-language program at Grenoble during the summer of 1956, and he liked what that experience had meant to him and to his four sons. He was specially convinced that effective language instruction could be greatly enhanced if done abroad, and he was aware as well of the many fringe benefits that could accompany such instruction. Consequently, sometime late in the summer of 1957, he approached President Weimer Hicks and the then-current academic dean, Larry Barrett, about the possibility of sending a group of Kalamazoo students to Europe to do essentially what he and his family had done the summer before.

Dr. Light, however, didn't just come with an idea. And here is another major difference between Kalamazoo's program and others. Most ideas of this sort have to seek and find financial support from some outside source, or the students have to pay through the nose and the program is limited to those who can pay. But, wonder of wonders, Dr. Light's idea turned out to be tethered to the S.R. Light Trust Fund. This trust had been established by Dr. Light's father, and that spring it had reverted to the donor because the original recipient had not met its stipulations. Even so, Dr. Light and Dean Barrett visited New York to see if another

foundation might also have interest in the project. But they didn't, at least to the extent of investing funds. In October, therefore, Barrett wrote up a proposal for the Light Trust requesting grants of \$12,000 for each of the next five years. The proposal was brief and dealt in rather general terms about what the grant would do. But one sentence seems worth quoting: "Certainly it is the responsibility of a liberal arts college to graduate men and women for whom at least one foreign language is not a graduation requirement met and forgotten, but a living medium of communication with other peoples."

Not surprisingly, the proposal was successful.

In the beginning, then, was the idea. But the idea was viewed somewhat differently by those involved. Dr. Light, as I have already indicated, saw it primarily as an efficient and effective way of teaching languages. President Hicks recognized the educational rewards for the students but, shrewd man that he was, also immediately grasped its public relations and admissions potential. Larry Barrett, finally, who was actually given the responsibility of putting flesh on the bones of Dr. Light's idea, had another perspective. And his notion of what foreign study might be largely shaped the program and established a Kalamazoo foreign-study concept. This, in another important way, set us apart from all others.

Larry Barrett saw foreign study as a unique opportunity for us to experiment and innovate, to see if a boldly different kind of educational experience could be made to work. And he wanted this just because he always_ wanted education simply to be better for the students. He saw summer study abroad as pure enrichment, extra and over and above the four years at Kalamazoo. What would happen, he thought, if students didn't have to worry about credits or grades, if we could pick out our best and brightest and send them to Europe, mostly at our expense, there to learn and experience what Europe had to offer? We would treat them as inquiring and curious adults and provide only a minimum of supervision. The concept was radical for the '50s, and maybe for the '80s, but because no credit was involved and the money was available, no approval was needed from anyone, not even a faculty committee. Larry Barrett and Dr. Light simply charted the course.

The Kalamazoo program's beginnings were unusual in still another way: the speed with which all of this was implemented. Remember that the first discussions did not take place until late summer or early fall, 1957. Now listen to this timetable:

By October 25th Barrett's proposal to the Trust was written. Soon there-after the money was made available.

On Dec. 2 the program was announced in general terms at the regular faculty meeting and endorsed by the faculty, though not everyone was enthusiastic. The Dean of Women was quite sure the students weren't ready for such an experience, several language teachers were convinced the students would pick up all kinds of bad linguistic habits, and other faculty members were skeptical about what was in it for their students. My response was probably typical in its narrow departmentalism. This is fine, I thought, for foreign language majors, but

shouldn't English majors go to England? We all still had a lot to learn.

A week after the faculty meeting, on Dec. 9, Barrett reserved places for 26 people on the "Arosa Star," sailing from Montreal on June 17. At this point no contact of any kind had yet been made with any European universities, and the College had no idea where these students would go once the "Arosa Star" landed. This was a time of faith and confidence'

And in fact, early in February these "minor" details were settled by Dr. Light himself, who flew to Europe, checked with various knowledgeable people, visited a number of possible sites, and then made the arrangements for our students to be received in Madrid, Spain; Bonn, Germany; and Caen, France--three centers we are still using to this day.

Meanwhile back on the campus, even before the European arrangements had been made, students were told about the program, and a faculty committee was appointed to select the first participants. They needed at least one year of language; beyond that, we based our selections on grade-point average, faculty recommendations, and Dr. Light's idea that students should go as early as possible, preferably after the freshman year. Students did not apply for the program. We sought them out and determined if they wanted to go and if they could afford to cover about 1/3 of the cost, roughly \$300. If someone we felt was very strong couldn't afford to participate but still wanted to go, we looked for additional funds. Listen to this memo from Larry Barrett to President Hicks:

This student is one of our most promising freshmen. He has already spent more time supporting himself than, in a completely just world, a student of such great promise should have to. I wish that we had some way by which more time could go into developing his potentialities, and I do not think that he should spend more hours working next year than he is already committed to do. As will be evident from a study of the figures, he will not be able to return to college unless we find some way of compensating for the \$700 he would earn this summer. This means finding him about \$1,000. He is planning on medical school after graduation, for which he anticipates going into debt, and he does not feel it would be wise to increase the debt further by borrowing now.

Weimer Hicks found the money!

By the end of February, we had put together twenty-five of our very best -- fourteen freshmen, six sophomores and five juniors-- and, although some thought we were too impressed by grades and were at the same time too whimsical, we were pleased with the results. The lists, I'm sorry to say, were rather cavalierly announced in chapel, an exhilarating experience for those who had won the lottery but a devastating one for those who had not. I'll never forget my meeting afterward, however, with the young man of the memo, who told me with tears in his eyes that Kalamazoo College must be the greatest school in the world. (Incidentally, in case you're wondering, he did go to medical school, and he is now a psychiatrist teaching at a leading medical school.)

Orientation that first year was necessarily minimal and except for shots and passports, not very helpful. It even included misguided instructions from a faculty wife about what to do when introduced to someone of noble birth. And, oh yes, wonder of wonders, a thirty-year-old untenured Assistant Professor of English who had been at Kalamazoo only three years, who had never been to Europe, and whose oral language skills were minimal was selected to take the group over and give them--what else--could he give them?--minimal supervision. Because I had just received a Fulbright to teach at Heidelberg and was going anyway, I suppose they thought they could get me cheap. They did. In any case, plans had been carefully made, but there was simply a lot we just didn't know. We did know, however, that we were involved in a great adventure, an adventure that had tremendous implications for us and our college. And we knew we had the responsibility for making it work.

And despite seasickness on the "Arosa Star," Spanish bedbugs, German motorcycles, and other assorted difficulties, it did work, first of all because the idea was sound. And it did work partly also because the timing was right on the other end. The European universities at that time wanted, and even needed, American students, a situation very different from that now. And, as I heard later, they liked this Dr. Light, who knew exactly what he wanted and was willing to come all the way to Europe to make arrangements for students not even his own. It worked also in part because of some of the great people on the other end, many of whom, like Andre Heintz and Gunther Spaltmann, have taught many Kalamazoo students both here and abroad. And it worked mainly because of a fantastic group of students who felt a kind of moral obligation to enjoy, or at least accept, everything, and who shared a tremendous sense of responsibility to pass on this opportunity to those who might follow them. They learned languages,, got to know foreign peoples and cultures, and in the process, many of them came of age. In that group of twenty-five were about eleven or twelve future Ph.D.'s (three from Harvard) and two or three M.D.'s. And one of those Ph.D.'s, Kathy Rajnak, is currently teaching at Kalamazoo.

The results of the successful summer were immediate. Although some language teachers were predictably critical of accents and grammatical errors, the students' language fluency was obvious, and their enthusiasm was contagious. Even the faculty was impressed. Also impressed by what he saw was Dr. Light, who immediately arranged for the entire S. R. Light Trust to be turned over to the College and set aside to support the foreign study program, which continued in its summer incarnation for four more years and a total of 191 students. The success of foreign study was also obviously an important factor in encouraging Larry Barrett, this time with the help and involvement of many faculty members, to put together the K Plan, with began with a shift to the quarter system in 1961, twenty-five years ago this fall. By 1962 the K Plan had incorporated a new and much expanded foreign study program--still subsidized but now credit-bearing, multi-faceted, and open to virtually every Kalamazoo student.

The rest, as they say, is history. Or is it? The story still goes on. Some 5800 students later, the Kalamazoo College Foreign Study Program still seems, at least to me, exciting and innovative. It is now regarded by those involved in similar enterprises as a model of its kind, and

it is known around the world as one of the best run and most successful. Joe Fugate is recognized as probably the top expert on foreign study in this country, and his advice is being sought from various quarters almost daily.

Although the program is properly perceived as being primarily oriented to-ward Europe, about one out of each nine of our participants has gone elsewhere. 462 have gone to seven different locations in Africa, more undergraduates than have been sent there by any other American university or college and perhaps more than have been sent by all other American universities and colleges combined. 107 students have studied in South America, and 44 have gone to various locations in Asia. These are impressive numbers. They become even' more impressive when we realize that fewer than 5% of all American students who study abroad go to third-world countries--and that includes graduate students and individuals not in programs. And though our program is sometimes locally perceived as being limited to our own centers, students have actually studied in over fifty different locations in thirty-six different countries. Right now our students are located in at least twenty-two different places. These are also impressive numbers.

But, of course, the program is not perfect today, nor was it ever perfect in the past, no matter how rosy my nostalgic glasses might make it. And I'm sure it never will be perfect, partly because it always seems to involve maintaining a precarious balance among a whole set of conflicting demands, a balance that has to shift from year to year, from group to group, and even from individual to individual. I was struck last year by how constant some of these tensions have been. For example, how much pre-departure preparation is appropriate? Knowing what to expect eases anxieties, minimizes adjustment problems, and increases initial sensitivities. But does it tend also to program responses and reduce the thrill of discovery? I wrote this to Larry Barrett after that first summer:

Most of the group feel they have learned a lot from having to pioneer, and think there would be some disadvantages in having things too well organized. They think, for example, it will be a mistake to tell next year's group too much about Caen and Bonn.

Last year a student told me much the same thing. But this position is balanced by more frequent cries of "Why didn't someone tell us this?" even if someone had. What is a good balance between the academic and the experiential? What is appropriate for the College to do for the student, and what should the student do for himself or herself?

Again, how do we balance the desire of the student to go where he or she wants, in one of our programs or outside of it, with our need to be able to maintain and guarantee places for future students? How much supervision is needed and how much is too much? How many regulations are needed and at what point do they become repressive? (We put in a rule about motorcycles after that first summer.) Finally, if foreign study is available to all, does it then become a right rather than a privilege? Does it have to be earned to be appreciated? I could go on, but I think

you get the idea. Running a foreign study program is a lot more complicated than it appears to the untrained eye.

Permit me to make a few final observations. Jeff Smith, in the financial campaign's excellent slide show, says that Kalamazoo College "honors the past as we anticipate the future." I think that describes rather well what I have been trying to do this morning. Foreign study is an extremely rich treasure earned for the College and her students by the vision, imagination, effort, and dedication of those who have gone before--trustees, administrators, faculty, and students. We have been given something that can't be bought. We need to cherish that treasure and nurture it--not as an untouchable sacred cow to be worshipped and venerated but as a vital force that continues to contribute mightily to the education and growth of our students. It's a legacy that belongs to all of us, whether or not we have directly participated in it. Our joint responsibility as students, faculty, administrators, and trustees is to make sure that future generations receive a foreign-study legacy equally valuable. Maybe someday Kalamazoo College will actually be the greatest school in the world!