Go East, Young Man!

by Jack Curley

Americans both real and imagined have long headed west in search of a better life. In fiction, characters from Cooper’s Natty Bumpo to Kerouac’s Sal Paradise have followed the sun while chasing their vision of the American dream. As a scholar of American literature, Brandeis English Instructor and BOLLI SGL David Razor, who spent his early years in Long Beach, California, pursued his quest in the opposite direction. His journey led him east to Massachusetts, the stalking ground of many of the country’s great 19th century writers, where as a Brandeis graduate student he sought a deeper understanding of these authors and their works.

David's passion for fiction grew during his high school years, culminating in his discovery of the short stories of Ernest Hemingway while browsing the book stacks of Long Beach Public Library. This encounter led him to Whittier College, where he studied Milton and Shakespeare. Here, David encountered caring professors whose life-changing examples inspired him profoundly. David states, “As a first-generation college student, Whittier College gifted me with not only an education, but also with a professional life and purpose as an English teacher. Ever since, I have been trying to emulate and pass on to my students the formative engagements and opportunities with literary texts that I received as an undergraduate.”

After graduation, David spent nine years as a high school English teacher in Orange County. He also served as a Master Teacher for the California State University, a role in which he taught beginning high school teachers the finer points of classroom practice. He believes the keys to classroom success are student buy-in and participation, and he compares a teacher’s role to that of jazz legend Miles Davis, who, he says, “provided a creative framework in which his ensembles could participate, offering guidance with the illusion of freedom.”

David chose Brandeis not only for its location but also for the strength of its English Department faculty, including BOLLI favorite Billy Flesch, for whom David was a teaching assistant. He is a great admirer of Billy’s ability to hold the interest of a class, a talent much in evidence during Flesch’s BOLLI seminars.

As the recent recipient of Brandeis’s University Prize, David was given the opportunity to design and teach an upper-division course in his field of study. The course, “Separated by a Common Language,” examined the cross-pollination of ideas between 19th century British and American novelists. During 2015 and 2016, David has...
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continued to explore this transatlantic interaction by leading BOLLI courses on George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* and the early works of Herman Melville, including *Moby-Dick*. Participants in the latter course became so engaged with Ahab and the crew that David developed a course for the current semester devoted entirely to the novel. He has enjoyed his time at BOLLI, and says of his students that he “never imagined I’d teach a class with such a great concentration of knowledge and experience both within and without academia.”

Razor’s BOLLI experience has led him to ponder the possibility of a more significant societal role for lifelong learning programs. Given the recent decline in the study of the humanities, might lifelong learning programs such as BOLLI become repositories where the values of a liberal arts education could be promoted and preserved? David plans to address this idea in a talk he is preparing for this fall’s National Humanities Conference in Boston.

Not surprisingly, David’s reading tastes tend toward what he calls “the dark undercurrent of American Literature with Faulkner, Hawthorne, Poe, Flannery O’Connor, and Dickinson in his pantheon of authors. Why, then, is the British novel, *Middlemarch*, his favorite? “It expands and changes each time you read it,” he says, “and Eliot creates for her reader a world unto itself, which becomes realer than real life.” David hesitates when asked if, in his opinion, there is a “Great American Novel,” but suggests two candidates besides *Moby-Dick*: Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, “both in the dark, Gothic 19th century tradition.”

David and his wife Sarah, who works at the Humanities Center at Harvard, love this part of the country for its literary and cultural riches. Among their favorite institutions are the Massachusetts Historical Society and the Dickinson “Homestead,” where they travel each spring to assist with replanting the poet’s legendary garden. But what’s next? With Ph.D. in hand, David hopes to teach at a small, student-centered liberal arts college with a strong English Department. Whichever direction his journey takes him, it’s certain that his memories of Brandeis, BOLLI, and New England will come along for the ride.

**Turner Street “Takes”**

*Bobbe Vernon considers her plans for the week; South Street Market lunches await the end of second period classes; Jane Kays catches up on BOLLI news.*
“The World Café is built on the assumption that...people already have within them the wisdom and creativity to confront even the most difficult challenges; that the answers we need are available to us; and that we are Wiser Together than we are alone.” (World Café Federation, statement of core belief)

What is a World Café? It is not, as you may think, a small restaurant or coffee shop. It is, rather, a peer-learning environment or, as defined by the World Café Foundation (WCF), “a powerful social technology for engaging people in conversations that matter...understanding that conversation is the core process that drives personal, business, and organizational life....” Based on methodology developed by the WCF 20 years ago, World Cafés have sprung up around the globe--some led by professional facilitators, others independently run. On May 16 BOLLI members will have the opportunity to participate in their own World Café, organized by the Membership Committee. Facilitator and BOLLI member Alan Nemeth will lead participants in small group discussions to explore ways to deal with the current “Crisis of Media Credibility” with a focus on issues such as “alternative facts,” media illiteracy, and what it means to be an informed citizen in a free society.

On May 9, John Carroll, Assistant Professor of Mass Communication at Boston University, will visit BOLLI to offer preparatory remarks in a Membership Committee presentation titled “The Credibility of the Media: When Fake News Becomes Real.” During the May 16 Café, participants will share thoughts and ideas in response to both the issues addressed by Professor Carroll and related topics. We will be asked to listen carefully to each other to gain new insights and information, as well as to build on each other’s wisdom and experiences. Breakout groups will form and later come together to seek solutions for the issues discussed.

Lest anyone think that World Cafés are forums at which talk takes place merely for its own sake, WCF leader Marilee Adams notes that “questions are intrinsically related to action; they spark and direct attention, perception, energy and effort....” WCF has found that the sharing of ideas in World Cafés can be particularly empowering in peer-learning environments such as BOLLI. Perhaps instead of feeling angry or helpless, participants, working together, can devise plans to begin to better understand and resolve critical issues. We are pleased that Alan Nemeth, who has had experience participating in and leading such groups, will be helping us to try this out. The results of our World Café efforts will be recorded for publication at a later date.
Welcome Back Brunch

This term’s Welcome Back Brunch was a full-house affair. Not only was every seat in the Gathering Space filled, but there was also overflow into the classrooms. Returning members were eager to connect with old friends, and newcomers were looking forward to meeting their future classmates. The photo exhibit in the Purple Room was well attended, and many new members explored Special Interest Group opportunities.

Our cohort of Photo Club photographers provided coverage of the event. Top left to right (photos by Joanne Fortunato): Helen Abrams and our new events monitor; the brunch crowd. Middle left to right (photos by Joanne and Sue Wurster): Irving Gates with Judith and Arthur Sharenow; Charlie Marz and Steve Goldfinger. Bottom left to right (photos by Sue and Sandy Miller-Jacobs): Dick Levinson and Phyllis Walt; Mary Jo Hollender, Harriet Gould, and Phyllis Freeman.
A Very Full House!

Top left to right (photos by Harris Traiger and Sandy Miller-Jacobs): Sandy Traiger and Abby Pinard; Amy Marks, Liz Lieberman, and Nancy Alimansky. Left, (photo by Joanne Fortunato): Bill Thedford and Maike Byrd. Below left to right (photos by Sue Wurster): Carole Grossman and Harris Traiger; Carl Lazarus, Marjorie Roemer, Sandy Sherizen, Bette Lehmann, and Joyce Hollman. Bottom left to right (photos by Sue, Sandy Miller-Jacobs, and Joanne Fortunato): Jan Hilley, Larry Schwirian, and Rosalie Fink; Matt Medeiros and Megan Curtis; Avi Bernstein on the microphone.
“Have you ever run away from home?” “Met a celebrity?” “Been in the same room with a king or queen?” The Gathering Space at 60 Turner Street begins to hum in response as a large circle of BOLLI members and Brandeis students engage in animated, ice-breaking conversation. They are Sages & Seekers, an intergenerational collaboration examining beliefs and practices about aging and gender.

Four years ago, while Brandeis Professor of Anthropology Sarah Lamb was teaching Aging in Cross-Cultural Perspective, she was struck by how many students reported having little to no contact with older people. “They barely knew their grandparents,” she says, “some of whom had died, while others lived far away or were experiencing dementia. I wanted to give them an opportunity to do some field work and actually get to know some older people.” She thought of her daughter’s high school experience in Sages & Seekers at Concord Academy and began to explore the possibility of the program expanding from the high school to the college level.

Soon after, Lamb met with the program’s founder and executive director Elly Katz, BOLLI director Avi Bernstein, and BOLLI member Margie Nesson, who was participating in the program at The Rivers School in Weston. It was a natural fit for all.

At BOLLI, under the guidance of Lamb and Nesson, this extra-curricular, volunteer activity meets for ten weeks during the fall term. An initial “ice-breaking” session is followed by a “speed dating” session; then sages and seekers are paired up to spend six weeks sharing their experiences. During the ninth session, the seekers give oral presentations about their sages, and the final session is devoted to debriefing, evaluating, and celebrating the experience as a whole.

According to Margie, this year’s group was an exceptional one in which some very deep bonding took place. Those connections were clear in the seekers’ oral presentations and in their sages’ reflections upon the experience.

Seeker Kishah Rajendran said that she and her sage, Mary Klatt, bonded over their Midwestern roots, but their conversations ranged far beyond that first discovery. “Conversation with Kishah was easy,” Mary said. “There was lots of give and take—never a dull moment.” Before the end of the term, Mary took her seeker on a tour of her neighborhood, and Kishah, in turn, invited her sage to attend her annual cultural performance. “My family is in Nebraska and has never been able to come,” she said, “so this time, with Mary in the audience, I felt like I had family with me.” Mary found it to be “a treat to interact with these wonderful students who shared their stories and thoughts. And as for Kishah, I now consider her a friend.”

Jessica Spierer and Sandy Sherizen connected immediately. “He was dating a Sandie, and I’m dating a Jesse.” Jessica said that neither was ever sure who was sage and who was seeker. “It shifted back and forth.” From Sandy, Jessica said, she learned how important it is to follow your passion and maintain integrity. “He showed me how rich and full life can be at any age.” Sandy enjoyed getting to know Jessica, indicating in addition that “I hadn’t done a retrospective on my life before, so this was an eye-opening experience. It was nice to have a chance to review my life, good and bad.” They are both committed to Jewish learning and the synagogue. Before the term ended, Sandy
invited Jessica to a service at his synagogue. “How do you know each other?” they were asked multiple times. “We’re in a program at Brandeis,” Sandy began. Without missing a beat, Jessica added, “And now, we’re friends.”

Emma Gutman also found that she and her sage, Andy Thurnauer, a Brandeis graduate, had more in common than just their choice for college. They followed unconventional paths in elementary school. “He skipped a grade, and I got held back in ‘developmental kindergarten,’” but I’m okay now,” she laughed. They both grew up in suburban New Jersey four-person families, identify as non-practicing ethnic Jews, love baseball and books, and described themselves as having been good students in high school who were also rather awkward socially. At Brandeis, they shared majors (history), studied German, and worked as copy editors for student publications. Andy visited one of Emma’s American Legal History classes, “which was fascinating,” he reported, “but the real treat was having lunch in my old freshman dining hall!” Later, he was in the audience for her performance in the Brandeis Adagio Dance Concert. “In a way, by getting to know Emma and traipsing the Brandeis campus with a student, I connected with my 21-year-old self.” At the end of her presentation about Andy, Emma said she believes that they are “kindred spirits.” Andy says, “I love that description.”

Since its inception in 2008, the Sages & Seekers program has spread across the country. While it is still largely a high school initiative empowering teens and honoring seniors, the BOLLI version created and led by Professor Lamb and Margie Nesson now serves as a model for other college and university collaboratives.

In the Sages & Seekers national newsletter, Elly Katz says: “In 2006, Barak Obama spoke to Northwestern graduates at their Commencement about ‘cultivating empathy.’ It is a moving speech in which he says, ‘There’s a lot of talk in this country about the federal deficit, but I think we should talk more about our empathy deficit—the ability to put ourselves in someone else’s shoes; to see the world through the eyes of those who are different from us…the child who’s hungry, the laid off steelworker, the immigrant woman cleaning your dorm room.’ I agree that this should be a significant focus at this time in our society. And yet, while we all know how very important the development of empathy is to humanity, it is not a quality that can be taught. It is a quality that must develop.”

At BOLLI, our sages and seekers seem to have gained more from the experience than they thought they would. In their evaluations of the experience, all 22 participants stated that they had more in common with each other than they imagined possible. With very few exceptions, they commented, as well, upon the friendship that grew between seeker and sage. Engaging in ongoing conversation to get to know each other helps to erase misunderstandings and stereotypes while promoting the development of compassion and empathy—truly unique and exciting “field work.”

Seeker Kishah Rajendran and her sage, Mary Klatt, after Kishah’s presentation; Jessica Spierer gives Sandy Sherizen a copy of her remarks; Andy Thurnauer and Emma Gutman engage in conversation. (Photos by Margie Nesson)
Upcoming Campus Events: Music, Theater, Art

Compiled by Ellen Moskowitz (Photos Online)

**BRANDEIS CHAMBER SINGERS - Slosberg Music Center.** Sunday, April 23 at 3:00 p.m. Brandeis University’s premier choral ensemble, recently returned from their tour of Italy, will perform under the direction of Professor Robert Duff. (Free Admission)

**LEONARD BERNSTEIN FELLOWSHIP RECITAL - Slosberg Music Center.** Sunday, April 23 at 7:00 p.m. Recipients of the prestigious fellowship perform chamber music classes. (Free Admission)

**JAZZ DUO NIESKE & NOVICK - The Mandel Center for the Humanities.** Wednesday, April 26 at 12:00 noon. Join Brandeis Professor of Music Bob Nieske on acoustic bass and clarinetist Billy Novick for a lunchtime event featuring their “spare soulfulness and inventive sound.” (Free Admission)

**THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE - Slosberg Music Center.** Thursday, April 27 at 7:00 p.m. and Saturday, April 29 at 1:00 p.m. A Brandeis student-directed production of the beloved 1879 comic operetta by Gilbert and Sullivan. (Free Admission)

**INTRODUCING...LENNY BRUCE - The Goldfarb Library - Monday-Friday, 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. through July.** On view in the Archives and Special Collections Department, the extensive Brandeis holdings of the comedian's controversial work.