

**Tufts University Chaplaincy
Russell Lecture on Spiritual Life 2015
“Questions Without Answers: Education, Worth, and Empathy”
The Reverend Janet Cooper Nelson, G72**

**Monday, April 6, 2015
The Coolidge Room, Ballou Hall
Medford, Massachusetts**

The Reverend Greg McGonigle: Friends, at this point I'm delighted to introduce Dr. Michael Baenen, who is the Chief of Staff in the President's Office and Assistant Secretary of the Corporation at Tufts. Michael received an A.B. in History from Columbia and his Ph.D. from Harvard and previously served as the Special Assistant to the President at MIT. Here at Tufts, Michael has been the best friend that the University Chaplaincy could have, guiding the visioning process that led to our current multifaith structure and supporting initiatives such as our new Humanist in Resident position and core programs, such as our CAFE interfaith pre-orientation program. In addition to being a very wise and thoughtful senior colleague and advisor to us, he is also a great friend. It's not often that you can say a supervisor is a *super*-visor but that really is true when it comes to Michael. So please join me in welcoming Michael Baenen.

Dr. Michael Baenen: Ok, now that was embarrassing. So I just wanted to say a few words of welcome on my own behalf and also on behalf of President Monaco to everyone here. It's wonderful to see so many and such a diverse crowd assembled for this year's Russell Lecture. I think that this is good evidence of the fact that old traditions can be vibrant traditions, since as Greg mentioned, the Russell Lecture is indeed the oldest continuously established lecture series at the University. It has a very distinguished tradition of bringing in speakers to reflect deeply and broadly on spiritual experience and ethics in a rigorous intellectual context.

Before getting to this evening's Russell Lecture, I also wanted to take a minute to say that this is also a really nice time of year to celebrate all that the University Chaplaincy has done during the course of a very busy academic year, and I really want to salute Greg and all of his extraordinary colleagues for what I think has been an exceptional couple of semesters of work. Greg and his longer serving colleagues, Lynn, who gave the grace, Jeff, and his extraordinary Hillel team, Linda, Emily, and a team of great student workers, and Janet Hunt, Music Director, have been joined this year by a really remarkable array of new colleagues, and I think it's testimony to Greg's ability as a leader of the Chaplaincy and to the quality of his existing colleagues that so many new colleagues have been brought on board, have fitted into the Tufts Chaplaincy and Tufts community seamlessly I think, and really added enormously to the work of interfaith life and denominationally or specific-faith

based practice here on campus. So thanks to Zach, and Walker, and Celene, and Chanta, and the Venerable Upali for all that they've brought us during this remarkable year.

So I think Greg was actually looking over my shoulder as I was eating because he actually stole a couple of my bullet points, because I was going to say that this has been a year that has seen the Chaplaincy extend its reach to include Humanism and Buddhism, reaching both new communities of students and also giving all the University community a chance to engage creatively with very important traditions that had not been formally represented in the team. This year has also welcomed colleagues from across the country to an extraordinarily successful professional conference of the ACURA group at the beginning of the year; engaged with really difficult issues through a profound and I think quite successful multifaith series of programs on Restoring Dignity to the Israel-Palestine conversation; worked, as Greg mentioned, on relaunching an interfaith pre-orientation program; and also provided support to students and other members in the community through all the ups and downs (and there have been some very sad downs) during the academic year. So I think that I'm certainly grateful; I think people across the community are grateful; and I know our President is deeply grateful to Greg and his colleagues for all that they do to keep this community well.

Turning to tonight's lecture, it's a special pleasure to help welcome Janet Cooper Nelson back to campus, since as Greg mentioned she's an alumna. I actually got to know Janet before I got to know Greg, because when we were doing our intensive visioning process in advance of the search process that brought Greg to Tufts, one name that kept coming up when we talked to people and said, "Who should we talk to find out how to do university chaplaincy right?" it was Janet's, and she and I during the course of that process had a very long conversation that gave me a lot of insight and ideas to chew over as we began to develop the model for the chaplaincy in its next phase, and would also reveal her to be an extraordinarily thoughtful and compassionate person of faith herself. It's been a treat to get to know her again now with Greg's arrival and I am really delighted that he can look to Janet as someone who is a mentor and senior colleague as he has assumed the complex roles of leading the range of programs here. So I'm delighted on multiple counts that Janet is here this evening to deliver the Russell Lecture. Thank you.

Now Greg and Janet, if Greg and Janet will join me, Greg and I want to give you an official token of recognition on behalf of the University, which actually may mean that you may not even have to give the lecture; you'll get the gift, you can just bag it [laughter]. Thank you so much.

The Reverend Greg McGonigle: Thank you so much Michael. And can we just take a moment to thank our servers who have taken such good care of us?

There is so much that I could say to introduce the Reverend Janet Cooper Nelson, as a religious leader, a higher education leader, and a leader in the interfaith movement. But if I were to describe all of her accomplishments we would not get to her lecture, and that is the reason we are here tonight.

Janet received a Bachelor's from Wellesley College and a Master's from Tufts as we've said and an M.Div. from Harvard Divinity School. Before becoming the Chaplain at Brown in 1990, she served similar posts at Vassar, Mt. Holyoke, and Dartmouth. As a minister in the United Church of Christ, Janet has been an articulate and powerful leader for women's rights, LGBT rights, racial justice, and all manner of liberation.

Janet's work leads on many levels: she speaks, writes, and consults nationally and internationally from her post at Brown; she teaches at Brown Medical School and serves on the visiting committee at Harvard Divinity School; and yet she is known and probably most loved for the deeply personal ministry she offers, through pastoral care, countless weddings and memorial services, and educational programs like the interfaith suppers that she and Steve host in their home every Thursday night.

Programs like the Thursday supper and her initiative on religious literacy are outward manifestations of the deeper work that Janet has done to make Brown a hospitable community for all manner of religious and philosophical belief and practice. The multifaith chaplaincy that she has pioneered and created is a model that is looked to as the paradigm by campuses around the country and world. Through all this, Janet facilitates the convergence of the life of the mind and the life of the soul and heart. And very personally, I will simply say that she has been an amazing friend to me and to my family, and just one of the greatest mentors of my life. So I ask you to join me in welcoming Janet to give the Russell Lecture.

The Reverend Janet Cooper Nelson: Wow. I remember very well when the phone rang and it was Michael, and he was calling about what would happen next at Tufts, and I actually didn't know what was happening at Tufts. It's the mark of, I think, many of us who pass through these places, loving them and finding them home at the time we're there, and then moving forward to the next place we find home. And it was wonderful to hear about how Tufts was thinking carefully about what would happen for religious life here and what had been happening in rich and wonderful ways, and what would happen going forward. I loved those conversations, and I have to say tonight's invitation to be here, seeing around the room so many friends of such long-standing, people who have been my teachers, people who have been dinner companions for many, many decades, as well as new friends whose names I'm still learning. I made Greg tell me at dinner: "Who are all these people?" and so he took me around the room, and it's wonderful to see the students who are helping

to lead religious life, to be meeting some of the new colleagues as well as the continuing ones here at Tufts.

So I begin by saying thank you. I hope that you will forgive me, before I even begin, if I tell you that tonight's lecture is not really much about religion. Greg reminded me that I am in a place whose heritage is Universalist, so perhaps in that sense it's broadly about spirituality and the sacred, but I mean that I'm not going to be taking you through the texts for Holy Week or Passover. I didn't even, in perhaps a way I should apologize to Krister Stendahl, pick a biblical text for this piece, which might be a sermon more than it's a lecture. There are a few slides that I want to show you as we move through, at least the beginning of this talk so I hope you'll be able to see them from where you are.

I wanted to say something that, seeing something that Greg's colleague Linda sent to me about the historic purpose of this Russell Lecture, which is in its 148th year here at Tufts, strikes me as just extraordinary. There were two purposes with which one was to speak to if one gave this lecture. The first was on the importance of Christian faith and belief in the formation of the character of the good citizen – and the good man. I don't think I'll be very good at either one of those. The second possibility was on the sufficiency of the promises of the gospel to meet the reasonable wants of man – again, a little tough for me – both in time and eternity. And quite honestly, I think it's that last phrase, “both in time and eternity,” that is the driving idea behind tonight's talk.

I do also want to bear witness at the beginning that this is only the sixth time that a woman has given this talk, and I stand gratefully among those sisters because every one one of their names is not only known to me personally, but in the case of Connie Parvey, who was the very first woman to give this talk, I would speak of her the way Greg was speaking of me. She was absolutely a mentor and a friend who thought that ministry in university settings was something that mattered and was even possible, and I had not really seen that or heard that and her great Lutheran tradition gave her a scholarly as well as faith-filled way to begin. But other colleagues including Grace Mattson, whom many of you know, Gloria White-Hammond, Professor Elizabeth Prodromou, and Sister Simone Campbell, and every one of those women, if you missed that Russell Lecture, I bet it must be on tape somewhere, and I hope you will not only thank Tufts for the invitations to those remarkable women but by the time this talk has been given 248 times, I'll count on the fact that that equation will have equaled itself out a little bit.

So tonight, if I were renaming my talk, if you give these talks you know you have to send the title early, I would rename this talk. And the title I would give this talk is “The Girl in the Blue Bathing Suit” or maybe “The Very Little Girl in the Blue Bathing Suit.”

[Showing picture of a lake.] This is pretty close to the view I remember, but I'm asking my memory to retrieve an image from more than 50 years ago. In my mind's eye, the gold on these trees was instead a lush almost blue-green, and the haze on the face of the lake correlated directly with the abatement at the end of the afternoon of intense heat and humidity that is captured by every Philadelphia summer. In the late afternoon, my Mom would sometimes arrive home from work to ask if we wanted to go to the lake. Those words never prompted an answer from me; I simply ran to find my blue bathing suit.

This gorgeous lake is Westtown Lake, 16 acres in Westchester, PA, contained within the 600-acre campus of the Westtown School. Westtown School is considered to be the oldest continuously operating coeducational boarding school in the country. It welcomed its first students in May 1799. It was established by the Philadelphia yearly meeting of the Religious Society of Friends; we know them better as Quakers. An all boarding school, so that children might have a "guarded education," one based on useful learning in a setting that promoted mindfulness of God's continuing presence.

At age five, I knew nothing of these Quakers, or that they were too, as we were, pacifists. Perhaps they were some kind of distant kin, the way in Israel if you're misbehaving on the bus, everyone is your grandmother or your uncle, and is entitled to correct you and you are obliged to listen and shape up. I knew nothing of their decision, those Quakers, to create a residential guarded education, nor of their focus on useful learning and their commitment to create a residential community and school able to foster heightened attention on God's continuous presence.

I knew that they had a lake, with blessedly cool water on sweltering days, that we were invited, permitted, allowed, not prevented from swimming, and we could picnic on the shore, too. And these moments were islands of perfect joy for me. They were long remembered afterward, and they were anticipated eagerly, and they came very unheraldedly, just as they were possible. It took only a word to send me hurdling to my room to jump into my beautiful blue bathing suit.

As the youngest in my family, I loved it. It was dark turquoise, really, and it was new – not a hand-me-down. (I have 23 first cousins.) It sparkled just a little, and it looked like the tank suits I had seen worn by the older girls who swam competitively, and I dreamed of joining them someday. But for now, it was my beautiful suit. And no antics in the water made it come loose or pinch.

Afternoons would turn to evenings, and my family would emerge from their dip in the lake, usually quick, to eat supper in fading light. I didn't have any interest in supper. With mosquitoes descending and lightning bugs everywhere, my Mom would call and call and call for me, and I'd hear her voice from across the water, from well out beyond the ropes, which I ignored completely, and I would reluctantly

leave the shadows of the lake, nearly blue myself with cold. Wrapped, shivering in a towel, I'd eat dinner that she'd saved for me in the car, and hours afterward in our cramped breathless brick bungalow, my beautiful blue suit still damp and cool, I'd lobby not to go to bed until it was dry.

[Showing second picture.] I remember this view of Westtown School, it was what you saw if you went to the wrong entrance to get to the lake. That was all I really cared about, so if you saw these buildings it meant that whoever was driving had taken the wrong road, and in fact it took longer, it meant that the walk to the dock would be a bit longer, and we'd have less time to swim. I don't remember ever waiting to dive in or worrying about how deep the water was. I don't even remember ever learning how to swim, or anyone ever watching me swim, or worrying about me swimming alone. I do remember playing with my family in that water, and loving being in that water and under that water, and being cool, even cold, and never wanting to leave, even when I was in that water all alone.

[Showing third image.] This is a more complete view of the school than I had at that early age. Seeing this shot for the first time in many, many decades in preparation for this talk, I was stunned. How one could drive past those imposing buildings and not see them, or remember them at all, tells you just how important, if you look to the corners of the picture, you see the blue of the lake. It mattered not at all to me that that building was there. Trust me, this image has a point.

But I was really struck, as I looked at this photo, by the encompassing embrace of the lake. Peripheral, yet definitional, and extraordinary for its contribution to the overall aesthetic of this imposing campus. I find myself wondering now about its place at the hearts and imagination of especially Westtown's youngest students. While these canoeists are much older than I was when I first encountered their lake, their joy is recognizable to me. Their residence in school began much earlier in their education than mine did. I first went away to college when I was 18; some of these students begin to live at Westtown School just in the middle school years. Their standard issue life vests tell me that there are more rules about this water than I remember. It tells me that someone is watching over them carefully. And my investigation tells me something more; it's no longer safe to swim in the lake's water. Swimming at Westtown School, when you go to the website, is now trumpeted as something to be done in a beautiful competition-sized pool, the kind that grew to be my home, too, for many years of my education as a result of learning that began on hot summer nights in this lake.

The ideals and values of Quakers reverberated around me as I grew up, well beyond the welcome of Westtown School. It included an invitation that I would never, ever have expected to lead me to tonight. Public high school students in our neighboring town were welcome in the Swarthmore College library. And we wrote papers, we checked out books, we slept on the carpet, and we looked at those people who were

college students with real intrigue. Work to combat racism was underway in the neighboring impoverished city of Chester, PA, where my mother worked in a real estate office and saw the ravages of racial inequity that she attempted to ameliorate with tools as small as neighborliness and fairness.

“Questions without Answers” seemed to be the right title for tonight’s remarks, because encounters with higher education were really moments that I didn’t realize I was having. I had no glimpse as a child into university life. You would call me a “first-generation student.” And in fact, while my dad got an Associates’ degree at Penn at night, the Wharton School told him it wouldn’t be likely he should get a degree from there, because since he was a pacifist in World War II, he probably wouldn’t have a promising business career. He also had no G.I. Bill to go to school on.

I didn’t see higher education, but it was everywhere. It was in the form of that beautiful school that welcomed us to swim in their lake, an institution. But it was an institution whose rules and manner and welcome I barely recognize. It’s not the case if you want to swim at the pool at Brown University that you can just do it.

“Questions without Answers” seemed the right title for another reason. As I headed to college with what seemed to me a clear, if uphill path, and swimming at that time had become a staple in my life, a source of employment (you can always be a lifeguard), and fitness with only occasional eruptions into lively competitions (some of those came early in my life but I wasn’t as fast as I wanted to be). I didn’t seek a campus with a lake, but Wellesley had a beautiful 25-acre lake and soon it became apparent to me that if I wanted to boat in it or swim in it or whatever I’d have to go over to the pool put on a sweatsuit and jump in the pool and demonstrate that I wouldn’t drown. (I don’t know if anyone is required to do this anymore.) And once you’d done that you could go in the lake. Once in a while in the dorm we’d talk about how we couldn’t figure out how anybody watching the lake could figure out if we’d passed that test or not. I headed to a college in the footsteps of my older sister, fully intending to become, as she did, a physician, and with absolutely no idea whether I would like chemistry or whether in fact all that science would lead me to anything nearly as intriguing as the inner workings of a poem. Mine was not a well-paddled context from our community, nor was it a direction I fully understood, but I was excited about it.

Campuses were, in fact, in the late ‘60’s getting hotter by the day, and before my junior year in college was over, students had been shot at Kent State and television broadcasts of the Democratic Convention in Chicago and the footage of the war in Vietnam were strangely similar, for their common militarism. I left for college hoping to get away from the answers I’d always held at home, while also feeling a deep concern to preserve the truth of our family’s rare religious identity and history.

I'd been warned that college might well undermine all of that. I felt fearless about this possibility, much like I'd felt beyond those ropes, in the middle of that lake with the lightning bugs. If you stay under the water the mosquitoes can't get you. I was eager to dive in, regardless of the depth, and with no sense that supervision of any kind was needed. I wanted to explore, to be assessed by those who didn't know me already and love me. The teachers in our school had grown to know who the smart kids were. It was very hard to get any real response from them that really was useful. I wanted to get on to find what I thought surely must be there in university: the real answers. And I was suspicious of the ones I already knew.

Quickly, I heard a new language of university-speak – professors expressing the understanding that real learning and education was to be focused on moving beyond answers, to the work of forming the right questions. Of the many things I imagined, this approach was not only unexpected, but it also left me deeply unsettled. Initially I assumed it was some sort of a game – school is always a game isn't it? There's somebody up there speaking in some kind of code, which if you stick at it long enough you'll eventually figure it out. My art history professor sent us for the first time from Wellesley to the Museum of Fine Arts. She told us we were to spend 30 minutes studying the woodwork. We were not to look at the paintings. Once we'd studied the woodwork, we were to write about the woodwork. It worked.

So I looked for this new set of conventions, the new vocabularies, and in fact whether it was art history or chemistry, there were things like that to learn. I thought tonight about this speech, and I thought in fact to say to you, if I were to address you in the language of the academy and confess what you already know, I would say what I learned to say at the end of all my papers. "This paper opens more questions than it answers." And then in fact you only had to write two more sentences and you were home free. Whatever it was you had learned you largely reported out and drew no conclusions because in fact the person teaching you was so much brighter than you, and told you there weren't any anyway. I can't be the only undergraduate who employed this statement or its rough equivalent. It was less about matter of accuracy – I frankly had drawn conclusions (they weren't necessarily good ones, but I'd drawn them). And in fact you'd go into hour exams – that's what we called midterms - and we wrote them in blue books rather than on computers so of course no one could read what you wrote anyway. And the more you scribbled with your handwriting, and you'd drop in some proper nouns and try for some clever verbs, and you'd hope that that vocabulary would dazzle faculty the way it dazzled parents. And those moments seemed to be the ones where at home, back in that setting where answers were a bit confining and where life was deeply and importantly identifying, home was a place that was simultaneously a place of insularity and a place of anchoring. I began for the first time to really understand attention that now I find myself spending almost all my time thinking about.

In humility, I know that I do not know the answers to my own questions, let alone the questions that you are raising. The years that I've spent in and out of my own religion and in and out of my own traditions have taught me what a stranger I continue to be in the intimate lives and language and vocabulary of those with whom I travel. But I've also found myself enormously impatient with the idea that somebody thinks the education we're about in universities is designed to get somebody a job. Jobs are those things you can use swimming for, when you need some money. And there's nothing dishonorable about that. My Mom's work as a real estate agent was not at all the work of her mind or the love of her heart. It wasn't the work of her life. The work of her life was to get her three children through university, and she potted gardenias and she did boring jobs, but she also rushed home to ask if we wanted to go to the lake.

The extent to which these universities, with traditions as old as this lecture tonight or traditions as old as the Westtown School, to have wanted for those children since 1799 a guarded education in order to give them a view of the holy. What does that have to do with moving educational goals in the direction of worrying about jobs? I expect that there will always be jobs to be done, and I actually expect to do them. I think work in that way is not only honorable, but it accomplishes tasks that need to be accomplished by mothers, and fathers, and children. We will need to farm the food, and serve the food, and clean up the planet, and we'll need to do every job. But the work of these places, while it will be predicated on that work, the work of these places is done out beyond the ropes in the water. It's done where the water is cold and the nights are hot. It's done by the invitations of mothers and fathers, who dare to ask us if we want to do that thing that brings us such joy, such love, that we remember it decades later as transformational.

I found myself thinking a lot about this as I've been reading a book that I do seriously recommend, Andrew Delbanco's recent book about what college has been, what it is, and what it will be. But I was reading a set of reflections of his that I draw on now that are about another piece of writing that I have always adored. That piece of writing is *Moby Dick*. Mr. Delbanco teaches literature at Columbia and he has long immersed himself in the joys of literature, and he says in this piece that he found in the reading of *Moby Dick*, and in thinking about Ahab, and in thinking about the ways that Ahab was bringing to life a cause and a purpose, something simultaneously compelling and terrifying.

He writes, "in this astonishing chapter in *Moby Dick* in which Melville tells us about Captain Ahab, and how he reveals himself to the crew of the whale ship Pequod and explains to them what their voyage is actually going to be about. They've signed on thinking it's just another whaling voyage, where they're just going to go out to sea and kill so many whales, chop them up and boil the blubber into oil and fill the barrels and bring it back to port. But of course Ahab has another agenda, which he does not reveal to his men until they're out on the open sea. In this chapter he

explains to them that it's not about killing whales, it's about hunting down one particular whale. And he confesses under pressure from a couple of his officers that this particular whale is the whale that has dismembered him and mutilated him."

"The extraordinary thing about this chapter," writes Delbanco, "is that it describes how a powerfully articulate, eloquent, charismatic 'person' is able to make this diverse crew come around to seeing the world exactly the way he sees it, how he manages to make his pain their grudge, and by the end of the chapter they've lined up with him. He's fused his will to theirs, and they have become an instrument of his will. They have felt in his engagement, in his eloquence, an opportunity to become heroic, an opportunity to make a difference in the world, to strike back at the world."

As universities have worked over these years to welcome many swimmers, people who have swum in every lake imaginable, in waters cold and warm, in places near and far, they have gathered their ships full as Ahab did. Crews of people that have bound together by identity have in fact found in their common lives, in their common practices of religion, of race, of ethnicity, of identity, ways that they can speak in code, somewhat the way I knew that those Quakers who were pacifists were like me. But they weren't, because we were barely working class and we had to go to their school, and they had the lake and we didn't. Those political realities come into view later.

This is the tension I mean to put before you. Think of identity and empathy of Ahab and his crew, of Moby Dick and of every other great cause. Mr. Delbanco goes on to talk about this analogy as applicable to Hitler and other great, terrifying leaders who have arisen in society and been able to gather around them people who understood the code they spoke, who had swum in the same waters, and who wanted to be gathered under a charismatic leader. The concentric circles of identity, the places in the middle where you and I have been in the same lake, where we have been, in fact, close and maybe even reluctant comrades when the call of Mom to come in in the dark had been uttered, and we decided to swim to the other side. Those kind of comrades. Those are the folks with whom we share the closest identity.

But moving outward, is it possible we use the word in universities of "allies," people who know an identity but don't share it, and yet understand an injustice, some grave and important work of moving forward the articulation of that identity, some work of inclusion? Those folks are in that next circle out and they feel a sense of solidarity, a sense of loyalty with us in the center. And so the circles move. The movement between those circles might best be called empathy. It is the capacity, not condescendingly or paternalistically to look down, but it is the question of looking to the side and seeing next to you someone whose life is not yours, and yet someone whose life draws a deep chord of commonness and concern.

That sense of alliance is something that I think as we've built diverse universities, we've cared deeply to create. We have known that we were truly bringing together people whose faith traditions were, in fact, at times antagonistic to one another, did not have common regard, and yet we believed those chords of empathy, those circles of concentricity (I love that word), could in fact be built in universities and people would move out having shared time swimming together in the lake. Whether we're right or not, history will tell us. There are, in fact, some examples, in medical education for instance, that by the time you get done with your medical education, your capacity for empathy will have diminished.

I want to tell you that I feel personally responsible for that, and I say it for this reason. We spend a lot of time talking to doctors about "being professional." And what we mean by professional very often is keeping a distance, not being drawn into the *pathos* of the moment, being able to speak in ways that are perhaps more clinical, when in fact the emotion is strong. Patients tell us they can tell when doctors are doing that. Doctors tell us when they're doing it, they don't like it, and they know that they're fleeing from the power of the moment. And we who teach them tell them, well, these are open questions. There's really no answer for how to do this correctly. It will take your whole life, but we'll be watching to see if you develop professionally. We retreat as they pour out how difficult it is to do this, and we do it because truly we don't know the answer to the question, and we have been in that place and felt that tug at our hearts and known we couldn't travel even empathically the path of every person's identity and experience, that somehow we needed to position ourselves in alliance, near, heart-filled, and yet honestly expressing some of what it would take to be candid about our limits and candid about our love.

Mr. Delbanco's worries about what this means for higher education are quite near my own, and he ventures into territories that it's lovely to read because in fact he's not afraid of words like "evil." It's not a word we even use very much anymore. He talks about it in terms of the experiences people describe in their histories and in their family lives and says that people come to universities knowing that there's evil and knowing we won't talk about it. It's too much. It's too intimate. It's too near. But in circles of identity, in places where you can let it be spoken, we confess to one another that there really are things that scare us, things that seem bad, things to which we should be opposed, things that we should name clearly as wrong. So he writes, "I guess it's annoying me to, at least for our own sake, figure out some way of understanding what it was, where it came from, or how we ought to respond to it when we see that thing, that bad thing."

Remember what he told you about *Moby Dick*? Because he said that it was in fact Ahab's ability to make clear that the whale was the source of this evil and that if only the guys on the ship could get themselves organized to take on this challenge and defeat it then they would be free of it, or at least Ahab thought they would be. If you

haven't read the book, this is a spoiler alert. I won't tell you what happens, but I will tell you that his synthesis, his notion that, in fact, you could figure out the answer to the question of what was evil, identify it, chase it down, and be done with it, isn't exactly how it all turns out.

So I want to leave you with something that I think you will not have heard before. I'm just learning it from a colleague at Brown. It requires that I teach you an Arabic word, which I hope you'll go home and turn over in your mind, take it swimming. The word is *muzayida*. It's commonly evoked in Leftist, activist circles, a place I admit enjoying being. But there is no ready English equivalent. People who engage in *muzayida* are constantly upping the ante, asserting that they are even more morally pure or politically committed than you are or their comrades.

It's *muzayida* to turn to fellow activists, for example, who are committed to a sit-in and to proclaim that the only way forward is to combine the sit-in with a hunger strike for ten days. And then it's *muzayida* again to assert that the only truest most dedicated actors will extend their hunger strike for 15 days. Those who engage in *muzayida* are judgmental and suspicious of others' levels of commitment, and they are always more committed, more dedicated than everybody else. Like all political positions, issues of autonomy and justice, issues of purity, are riddled with *muzayida*. Universities are riddled with *muzayida*.

We find ourselves standing at distance and more distance, particularly intellectual distance, from all manner of ideas, such that when you meet a colleague who is actually fired up about something, whose response to "should we go to the lake?" is "yes" and they're running for their suit, we know that they're not serious. We know that that person is not really intellectually curious in the way that they should be and we know that their dissertation isn't going to be finished on time, and they are probably not the person we're going to invite to write with us in the journal.

I have a dear colleague, now at Brown and soon to be at Swathmore, but who was once at Tufts. His name is Sa'ed Atshan. Sa'ed is a Palestinian and Sa'ed is one of the people I love most to hear talking about *muzayida*. He laughs about it and then he says something that tells you about that concentricity again. His suggestion is that *muzayida* is a luxury. *Muzayida* is something that those who really have no skin in the game can afford to practice. Those who can sit in a classroom and analyze because there's no one they're likely to lose.

Muzayida is what our Brown students felt our faculty was exercising when they thought they could invite Commissioner Ray Kelly to just come give a lecture at Brown. We've been trying to mop that mess up ever since and it doesn't work. The reason it doesn't work is because the students who were people who lived in New York, students of color, students whose fathers and brothers and uncles and neighbors had been on the receiving end of Commissioner Kelly's stop-and-frisk

movement knew that you could sit in a classroom and discuss it if you wanted. You could invite somebody and call it civility to promise free speech, but who was going to call him out on the fact that crime statistics in New York had not lowered and innocent people had been sent to jail. Who was going to talk about that?

Mr. Delbanco would tell you that universities are not places where we simultaneously draw together communities whose experience and belief and expression is as widely different as we can afford to create and then see to it that we all swim out beyond the ropes. We must be where the lifeguards are near enough at hand to help us out, but the risk of real engagement. Not just the moving around on the surface of intellectual pieces is the work of the university. Not where the work of the university can be reduced to “will you get a job.” Not where we will fail to realize that even the budgets of universities are moral documents.

If we can in fact promise, what I still hear in the words of my Mom, “Does anybody want to go to the lake?” If the invitation to university can be that, real swimming, real cooling, real mosquitoes, real lightning bugs, dinner saved for the ride home, a suit that fits well, and joy, then the engagement in the university’s life will not be superficial. The discussions that those who want to tell us that we’re spending too much money or we’re not spending it on the right things. They are probably right, but that doesn’t mean that the venture is wrong. It means that we must work at it harder. It means that the gates must be more opened. It means that lectures that have gone on for 148 years and asked this question, this beautiful, beautiful question, of whether or not it’s possible for time and eternity to be sufficiently addressed.

If we can address those questions in university, in a lived and breathing way, if we can speak to one another about who in our families been arrested, and whose life won’t go forward because their service record isn’t correct and the business school won’t find that a promising candidate. If we can tell the whole story here, then joy is not too much to imagine and the friendships that will be built here will change an absolutely aching, but amazing world that’s waiting for the youngest students in this room to graduate and for those of us who tonight have been referred to as senior statespeople, to imagine that this work is worth our time, is worth our lives, then in fact those blue bathing suits that are waiting in your drawer and mine will be the things we’ll run for when the invitation is “Does anybody want to go to the lake?”

May we swim safely, but go out beyond those ropes. You’ll meet amazing people.

Thank you.