

INTRODUCTION

It is a pleasure and a privilege to introduce J. Edward Chamberlin to you as the first annual Grand River Forum Lecturer at Wilfrid Laurier University's Brantford campus. Laurier Brantford is home to the largest undergraduate core program in Canada — Contemporary Studies (CT). CT courses are designed to address the complexity of contemporary issues — in ethics, the environment, citizenship and social justice — from multiple perspectives in the humanities and social sciences. All students at Laurier Brantford enroll in Contemporary Studies, with many doing a joint major in another program. This situation creates some genuine possibilities, one of which is a still-new initiative, the Grand River Forum, in which all incoming Brantford students are assigned to read a common text in the summer before their first year. The chosen book should combine good writing (accessible, for a non-specialist audience) with substantive interdisciplinary concerns. Each year a new text, and a new series of issues, will be addressed — ideally from a different disciplinary perspective, and with a different faculty member at the helm. The Grand River Forum is meant to emphasize dialogue, discussion, and a larger campus conversation, so that when students move into residence and meet their mates for the first time, they will already share a common text, and perhaps many opinions about it.

Laurier Brantford's Development Team, Vice President of Student Affairs David McMurray, Brantford Dean Bruce Arai, President Max Blouw, and the Contemporary Studies program have been instrumental in supporting this program. They see the Grand River Forum as a way to strengthen the core curriculum at Laurier Brantford, and of furthering the interdisciplinary conversation among

students, faculty, and the wider world. This is the conversation around which Laurier Brantford was founded, and for some time now has been based.

The 2010 Forum text was J. Edward Chamberlin's *If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories? Finding Common Ground* (2003). Over six hundred members of the Laurier Brantford community read this book. Some dove straight in; others may still be puzzling over its many meanings. In his University Lecture, Dr. Chamberlin sheds new light on some of the old contradictions, wonders, and tensions his writing brings up — the ceremonies of belief that give currency and credit to our covenants, constitutions, and creation stories, and to our various traditions in science and the arts, in liturgy and law. He treats the strange power of stories and songs to bring people together, and to pull us apart. There is a long history of both types of story along the banks of the Grand.

The centrepiece of the Forum is that the book's author visits campus for a few days in the fall to participate in meetings and lectures with students and faculty. A number of first-year Contemporary Studies courses incorporated the book as a required text; a fourth year Special Topics course was organized around the text and its themes; a range of other courses and programs adopted the book. An Artists Speak! series was held, in which students worked with local artists and the Brantford Arts Block to produce individual and collective visual responses to the themes of the forum. The collective piece mapped the "deep history" of life on the Grand River, documenting the collision and commingling of cultures and histories that might well constitute Brantford's common ground. The Forum Conference, in which faculty and student presenters treated a shared set of themes in a genuinely interdisciplinary manner, created a dialogue among diverse research programs that frankly startled us in its clarity and conviction. A forthcoming issue of the *Journal of Canadian Studies* has evolved from this day. Not least, an Arts Opening and reception was held, with student artmakers guiding us through their works. Dr. Chamberlin's conference keynote address was titled "If You Are Ignorant, Books Cannot Laugh at You": The Value of an

Interdisciplinary Core Curriculum.” Both of his lectures are video archived at Vimeo and Fora.tv.

Dr. Chamberlin has lectured widely around the world on cultural and political issues, on literature and the arts. A university professor emeritus in English and Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto, an Oxford-educated scholar from the tall-grass prairies of Alberta by way of the mountainous interior of B.C., a river-running canoeist and hunting guide with degrees in mathematics and English, Dr. Chamberlin has worked for over thirty years on land claims in Canada, the United States, Africa and Australia. Some of these stories from the field surface in his work, in which he characteristically moves from traveller’s tales to linguistic theory, from cowboy poetry to supreme court verdicts, from raging sixteenth-century debates that haunt us still, to bedtime stories and nursery rhymes. Only in his work have I found a U2 song referred to as a prayer, Rastafarianism celebrated as a great creation story of the Americas, and the old dichotomy of civilization versus barbarism seen from a thousand angles, like a cubist painting that always manages to just cohere.

Dr. Chamberlin has written books on Oscar Wilde, *Ripe was the Drowsy Hour* (1977), on native and non-native relations in Canada, *The Harrowing of Eden* (1975), and on horses, *Horse* (2006), those wonderfully powerful and purposeful creatures he calls both a necessity and a luxury. His book on West Indian poetry, *Come Back to Me My Language* (1993), is a foundational text in the field. Further still, Dr. Chamberlin is former poetry editor of *Saturday Night* magazine, and senior research associate with the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in Canada. It is a great blessing that he has been able to join us at Laurier Brantford, where contradictory claims on the land and the concomitant tensions of civil and uncivil society remain unresolved. Ted Chamberlin has been finding common ground between natives and newcomers for a very long time.

— Ian J. MacRae
Founder & Coordinator Grand River Forum

A COVENANT IN WONDER WITH THE WORLD THE POWER OF STORIES AND SONGS

In a wonderful book called *Suddenly They Heard Footsteps*, the Toronto storyteller Dan Yashinsky describes the quintessential signature of storytelling at that quintessentially Canadian storytelling ceremony, an evening campfire at a summer camp near Bolton, in Ontario, where he was a counsellor. Another counsellor had just finished telling the tale of Old Man Bolton, a grim and ghostly figure who lived in the neighbourhood long ago — which is to say, before flashlights — and was said to do all sorts of frightening things, a number of which the storyteller had just described . . . things likely to strike fear into the heart of anyone out there in the woods, especially now that the campfire was dying out and dark had settled down.

He finished the story, and after a pause designed to heighten the wonder — and the dread — of it all, said cheerfully “bed-time, kids. Off to your tents.” Nobody moved. “Bed-time,” he repeated. Still nobody moved. Finally, a still, small voice spoke up. “Is old man Bolton still alive?” “Probably not,” said the counsellor.

That “probably not” is at the heart of all stories. So, of course, is “probably.” Every story, in every society, hovers — or shuttles — between them, with allegiances to both. “We’re not sure” is the signature of good science, even as “we are sure” is the signature of its storytelling. In the arts, it’s often the other way around. The Danish writer Jens Peter Jacobsen — whose work inspired artists as different as the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, the composer Arnold Schoenberg, and the painter Paul Klee — once wrote a short story that he called “Two Worlds” . . . but he said that if the language had allowed he would have called it “Two World.” That’s the world of stories, the

world of both probably and probably not; and in a correspondence acknowledged across cultures, such stories make the world — or the two world — we live in. Or some say it is the archetypal trickster, the storyteller rather than the story, who does so, striking a deal that goes to the heart of what it is to be human.

Humans are hard-wired for making deals, which is to say, hard-wired for belief and for the ceremonies that nourish it. Language may be the earliest of these, which is why it is sometimes said that we are genetically coded for language. But I think it is for belief, and for ceremony — both of which underwrite language — and for the covenants in wonder and the constitutions of community that represent the most important deals we make with ourselves, with others, with what we call reality, and with the mysterious powers around and within us.

Covenants are binding agreements. They often involve the divine, and the language used to describe spiritual powers reminds us of the obligations they impose and the obedience they demand. For many of us, covenants have strong Biblical associations, differently conceived in the Old and the New Testaments, with “testament” itself a translation of the Greek word for covenant. And covenants can have legal as well as religious authority, familiar in land transactions where they effect or restrict ownership. Indeed, restrictive covenants have a long history, and Abraham’s deal with his god is merely one of the most famous.

A constitution, on the other hand, has moved in meaning from a point in classical rhetoric — framing a question or an argument — to the nature of the human body and finally to regulation, which is the sense in which it was used by Henry II in England in the middle of the twelfth century to describe his early attempt to turn unwritten custom into statute. Nowadays, constitutions often refer to the whole structure of a society, and to the rights and duties of individuals in relation to the power of the state or the church. Like covenants, constitutions sometimes have an elusive character, nicely illustrated by the way in which England was described in the eighteenth century as the only monarchy in the world with a con-

stitution, and in the nineteenth century as the only democracy without one. Stories and songs that define a community are often said to provide its constitution, and it is this connection that gives a national literature its edge. But the same stories and songs also give a covenantal stamp to collective identity, sealing a deal that both holds communities together and keeps them apart from others.

Language is an important part of both covenants and constitutions, as well as of communities; and whether it begins with words or with phrases, with gestures or with music, language becomes one of the biggest deals we enter into as humans. The association of commerce with language is very old, with words credited in much the way we credit other forms of currency. We believe that words mean something, and are worth something, even though we know they are simply sounds and scripts to which we assign value according to local custom, just as we credit coin and paper currency with value even though it is usually worth nothing in itself. Credit, after all, means he or she believes. We depend for the power of language on a collective belief in its value. Accordingly, deflation or inflation are constant threats, with literary critics and newspaper columnists and writers of letters to the editor maintaining standards like governors of a central bank.

Language also presents us with a contrast, being an agent of both fate and freedom, determining our thoughts and feelings on the one hand and emancipating them on the other. Intelligent people have disagreed about which is more important for a very long time. William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who were close friends and collaborators on so many other subjects, took opposite sides. Wordsworth was convinced that language embodied thought (language is its incarnation, was his image, and he described in his poem “Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood” how “shades of the prison-house begin to close upon” us as we grow up and learn a language). Coleridge, on the other hand, believed that language merely conveyed thought (as a slide rule calculates sums, he said, liberating us).

A little earlier, the eighteenth-century scholar Giambattista Vico

argued that we misrepresent much of the world because of the structure of our languages, offering an early version of the coding of language (to which feminists brought renewed attention a generation ago) when he contended what a difference it would make if we thought of God as a verb rather than a noun. Whatever side we take — and most of us sit on the fence — language can be both an instrument of confinement and a force for freedom. Both have their appeal. When we are confined or enclosed, we have a strong sense of community — there's no community quite like a prison community — in which every language, even every dialect (as the psychologist Frantz Fanon used to say), is a way of thinking and feeling and behaving. When we are liberated, we can re-create the world in our own image, or at least in the image of our language.

Language, of course, also gives us stories and songs, and they in turn give shape and substance to the things we believe in, from the elegant theories and elaborate explanations of the sciences to the poems and performances of the arts, and from the praise songs of philosophy and politics to the storylines of the professions. They perpetuate ideals and identities, and they provoke controversy and conflict. They include our explanations of the origin and purpose of things, of causes and effects and sequences of events, and of our relationship to the forces that surround us; the institutions we establish, the ways in which we constitute ourselves as communities, and the covenants we enter into with secular as well as spiritual powers. In one way or another, these stories and songs provide both our declaration of independence from the tyranny of the everyday and our first line of defence against it, bringing order to chaos and dignity to the fierce and often fatal indecencies of life. All stories and songs provide a way of managing life and death, the joy and sadness of love, the mysteries of friendship and contentment, and the menace of accidents and disease. That hasn't changed in ten thousand years, for we understand many of these things little better now than we did during the last ice age; and the impulse to turn to stories and songs to push back against the realities of the world is ancient and universal.