

## HONORS CORE 101, UNIT A

**DR. BERLIN, FALL 2012**

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***Unit A: What do we know? What do we believe? What is the difference? What, therefore, should we do?***

Course Description

"Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer."  
(Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*.)

"Isn't it the mind's capacity to overflow its forms that drenches existence with significance?"  
(William Pitt Root, *Knocking at the Gate: Notes on Poetry and Related Matters*.)

Tell me the four mute letters.

I tell you one is mind, the second is thought, the third is writing, the fourth is fear.

(From the Old English *Adrian and Ritheus*)

How long does a rhinoceros last  
after he's moved to compassion?

(Pablo Neruda, *The Book of Questions*)

This is a course about questions--choosing them, posing them, exploring them, and, as Rilke says, living them. In this section, in addition to working with the questions raised in *Asking the Right Questions*, we will examine the larger question of what it means to be human and how we can do a good job of it. We'll start by looking at wisdom traditions, medieval and modern, including Old English riddles, charms, and songs of experience; riddle contests--such as those between Solomon and Sheba in Jewish folklore or between Odin and the giant Vafthrufnir in Nordic texts; the still-living Zen Buddhist koan tradition, which poses questions impervious to logic in order to break through the curtain of what we believe about reality, and 20th c. Chilean poet Pablo Neruda's *Book of Questions*, containing 320 verse questions aimed at preparing the imagination for an inner quest. The two novels in this unit both embody awakenings to truths about oneself or truths about the world in which one finds oneself. And you will, of course, have a chance to pose and refine big questions of your own, concerning your own lives, truths, and beliefs, for yourself and others.

All of our reading will be done within the context of the major objectives of the Honor College core curriculum:

1. to develop critical and synthetic thinking skills
2. to develop the ability to solve problems effectively a team member
3. to improve writing

And, since this is a literature course, we will go about figuring out how to interpret literature, even literature that does not appear initially to make much sense.

### Course Texts

- Browne and Keeley, *Asking the Right Questions* (to be referred to in the syllabus as ARQ)
- Crossley-Holland, ed. *The Exeter Book Riddles*
- Pablo Neruda, *The Book of Questions* (poetry)
- Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*
- T. H. White, ed. *The Book of Beasts: Being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the 12th Century.*
- Reps and Senzaki, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones.*

Some course materials will be available as handouts or on various web sites, as well. See the syllabus.

### Common Readings

Common readings for HC 101 are available on the HC website under Unit A. Please print a copy for yourself of:

- Plato, "The Allegory of the Cave"
- W. K. Clifford, "Ethics of Belief"

Be sure to bring whatever text we're using to class each day.

### Course Requirements and Grading

PLEASE NOTE: Make sure you have backup copies--both paper and flash-drive or disk--for ALL your written work in this course. Computer problems are common.

#### **1. Critical Essay: 45% of your unit grade.**

Length is 5-8 pages. This paper will be based primarily on the course readings, your journal entries, and your analyses. Additional research is not required. We will use your reading journals as a space for developing ideas for this paper. A full draft of this essay will be due for swapping with your peer editors on Friday, October 5. **Failure to bring a full draft to class on paper swap day OR to me when the revisions are due will result in**

**an F for the essay.** When turning in revision, please include the first draft with my comments as well.

## **2. Peer editing grade: 10%**

You and two other classmates will swap drafts of your critical essay. Each of you will provide detailed written comments and suggestions for each draft writer: these are the basis for this grade. You will ALSO give a copy of your critical essay to a sophomore (or upperclassman) editor and receive written comments from that person (who will also be graded by his/her professor). (Note that 10% is enough to make the difference between one letter grade and the next.)

## **3. Journal and other writing assignments: 30%**

You will have three sorts of brief writing assignments in this unit:

- **4 short Reading Journal entries of 1-2 pages.** The purpose of this reading journal will be to provide a space for you to consider your reading carefully and to practice critical thinking skills. The journal is also a space to develop ideas for the Critical Essay. Within the syllabus, I provide prompts for each entry. Quality of writing counts more than quantity.
- **2 short essays (2-3 pages).** The purpose of these essays will be to give you practice in putting the ideas you generate into the best prose that you can. For these essays, I will be providing you with a choice of questions to which to respond, before the due date.
- **4 journal entries based on articles in the *New York Times* (1-2 pages).** You will be seeking articles or opinion pieces that you believe are related to the main unit question. You will practice critical thinking skills by applying techniques from ARQ to your chosen article. (Note: Working with an article with which you do not agree is often easier than working with an article with which you strongly agree.) Be sure to attach the article to the journal entry.

## **4. Participation: 15%**

A mix of activities will be counted as participation:

- **Attendance.** Attendance at class is, of course, required. The Honors College attendance and participation policy, available on the HC website and in the Core 101 Master Syllabus, states that "**more than one unexcused absence per unit will result in an F grade for the course.**" This policy IS enforced. You are allowed ONE unexcused absence per unit. "Excused" absences are for emergencies or serious illness and require supporting documentation on the day you return. Please let me know if you're going to be gone for more than one class day. Coming to class on time is also of importance, particularly since class time is so short. The Honors College considers being late twice as one absence.

- **Class participation.** Come to class prepared and set to go. This is too self-evident a point to belabor, but I will belabor it anyway. The Honors College is a community of learners, and that community falls apart if all are not there to participate. Your particular point of view on the class material is very much needed if we are to have the fullest possible intellectual experience. Questions are always welcome. Pertinent comments are welcome, particularly those comments that open the conversation up and keep it rolling. Listening carefully and respectfully to classmates is also an important part of participation. I will feel free to call on students in class to help encourage participation, if necessary.
- **Small group work.** Periodically, small groups will also be assigned to teach us something or lead the discussion for a while--starting with ARQ. Pairs or small groups will also work on journals.
- **Fine Arts.** Students will be required to attend three Fine Arts events during the unit: two-professor-led events, which may include some pre- or post- performance discussion, and an opera.

**Grading:** All unit writing, except the journal entries, is graded on a scale of 1-10.

The two essays will receive comment and suggestions as we work toward your thesis paper. Revisions are welcome, and you are warmly invited to speak with me during my office hours about any and all writing concerns. (The timing of these revisions will be discussed in class.) NYT journals will receive comments and suggestions the first one or two times. After that, you should be getting the idea. If any of your writing is unsatisfactory, I will let you know and provide an opportunity for revision so that you may receive credit for the assignment.

## Syllabus

Please note: While I plan to adhere to the syllabus as set forth, changes at times may be necessary to accommodate class interests or needs. Any changes made to the syllabus will be made with the agreement of the class. Assignments should be read by the date indicated on the syllabus.

### Week 1: Aug. 27-31

M Great Hall: Introductory lecture on Plato's "**Allegory of the Cave.**" Unit assignments will be announced.

T Re-read Plato, "Allegory of the Cave," for today. (PDF is on the HC website.) Introduction of classmates. Syllabus review. Questions on Plato's "Allegory of the Cave." Locate a journal partner for Thursday's assignment applying ARQ to Plato. Guidelines will be provided in class. Discussion of "Plato's Cave" (10 questions).

R **Reading Journal (RJ) #1 due:** Analysis of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave " using ARQ chapters 1-4. Don't forget to do this work with a partner. In-class discussion of insights and difficulties with the journal. How to do the *NY Times* journals. Small groups get assignments to teach ARQ chapters 1-7, starting on Friday.

F Read **Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief."** Print out a copy from the HC website to read and bring to class. (This is in the Books and Readings section under "Freshman Core"). Also read the short short story, "**Things You Should Know,**" by A. M. Holmes (handout).

### Week 2: Sept. 3-7

M LABOR DAY

T **Working with Asking the Right Questions (ARQ). Group 1 teaches ARQ chapter 3. Group 2 teaches ARQ chapter 4.** EVERYONE reads t **chapters 1-4** and comes prepared to demonstrate these concepts--critical thinking, issues, conclusions, reasons--with a passage from the two readings so far or from an article in the *New York Times* (NYT) or from personal experience. In preparation for writing your Credo, due Thursday, listen to poet **Gregory Orr's statement for "This I Believe,"** archived on NPR (National Public Radio). Instructions for the NYT journal entries will be provided.

R **RJ #2 due :** Select one topic. 1. Your Credo. This is one of the few journal entries on which you will work independently. Consider what you currently believe about what is important in life, how we should live, what reality is like, the nature of people and of being human, etc. Bring definitions of knowledge and belief. 2. Things You Should Know. In response to the last paragraph of the short short story by that title, write your own list of things you hope to know.

Read T. H. White (editor), *The Book of Beasts*. Start with the Appendix 230-270, providing information about the manuscript, the bestiary genre, and influence on literature. Also read Book I, pages 1-99, on beasts. (If time is tight, read selectively, but do not skip the elephant or the beaver.) This section will help us to understand the Hereford World Map, in the next class. Handout: copy of the Hereford World Map.

(To see a lovely, full-color medieval bestiary, go to the Aberdeen Bestiary project: <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/translat/8v.hti>.)

Receive packet of handouts for Friday's class.

F **NYT journal #1 due. The Hereford World Map:** A Map of Knowledge and Belief. Read the **packet** containing works by medieval authors Adelard of Bath and Roger Bacon on science and modern author Naomi Kline on the animals in the Hereford World Map. Have your copy of the *Book of Beasts* with you. We will examine the map via a CD-Rom edition in class. Assignment for first short essay, due next Friday, will be provided.

#### Week 3: Sept. 10-14

M **Group 3 teaches ARQ chapter 5** (Ambiguous Language). EVERYONE reads this chapter and comes prepared with three examples of ambiguous language from either the reading for this week, a NYT article or opinion piece, or real life. **Old English Wisdom Literature:** a packet will be provided.

T ***The Exeter Book Riddles.***

R **Riddle Contests.** Read on-line: Louis Ginzberg, the Legends of the Jews, the sections on the Wisdom of Solomon and, especially, the section on the Queen of Sheba, which contains the riddle contest ([http://philologos.org/\\_\\_eb-lotj/vol4/p05.htm](http://philologos.org/__eb-lotj/vol4/p05.htm)). Please print this out. Also read the packet to be provided containing other riddle contests. Question: Why bother having a riddle contest? What do they teach? What's at stake? **Group 4 teaches ARQ chapter 6**, on assumptions. EVERYONE reads this chapter and comes prepared to give examples of a value assumption, a values conflict and how it's resolved, and a descriptive assumption from either the reading for this week, a NYT article or opinion piece, or real life. Apply this chapter to the account of **Merlin's boyhood** from *Lawman's Brut* (handout).

F **SHORT ESSAY #1 DUE.** Receive assignment for Short Essay #2, due Friday, Sept. 21. Class review and discussion of these essays.

#### Week 4: Sept. 17-21

M ***Zen Flesh, Zen Bones***, pages 1-118 (Zen stories).

T **RJ #3 due.** How does one teach enlightenment? What values are apparent in Zen stories or koans? ***Zen Flesh, Zen Bones***, pages 119-76 (koans). A **packet** of materials on "Joshu's Mu" will also be provided. Questions: What is a koan, and what is it for? How does one go about working with one? Is a koan a work of literature?

R Neruda's *Book of Questions*. Is this wisdom? What makes sense? What doesn't? Select at least one question or set of questions that you really liked, one that you really didn't like, and one that you found baffling. Develop at least one technique that you think we could use to make some sense of the poem.

F **NYT #2 due.** Re-read *Neruda's Book of Questions*, all of it, in order to provide an interpretation, based on criteria developed in the last class period.

#### Week 5: Sept. 24-28

M Start *Song of Solomon*, pages 1-112 (chapters 1-4). Background: Biblical allusions. Working with on your own, with a partner, or in small groups, track down the characters' biblical names: Ruth, Pilate, Corinthians, Magdalena, Hagar. What stories are associated with these figures, or, in the case of Corinthians, what sort of biblical text is it? How do the names relate to the characters in the novel? Consider making use of an on-line biblical concordance to speed up finding these references. PRELIMINARY QUESTION DUE.

T **NYT #3 due.** *Song of Solomon*, pages 113-218 (chapters 5-9). Background: Emmet Till and the Birmingham bombings. Working on your own or with a partner, develop an understanding of who Emmet Till was, what the Birmingham bombings of 1963 were, and how these relate to the Civil Rights movement.

R **RJ #4 due. Group 5 teaches ARQ chapter 7**(logical fallacies). Everyone comes prepared with examples of 3 fallacies for some event in the novel. Examples may be drawn from anywhere within *Song of Solomon*, but take a look specifically at the argument between Milkman and Guitar in chapter 6.

F **SHORT ESSAY #2 DUE.** *Song of Solomon*, Part II, Chapter 10 (pages 221-61).

#### Week 6: Oct. 1-5

M **NYT #4 due.** REVISED QUESTION AND PRELIMINARY THESIS DUE. **Workshop on Thesis Statements.**

T *Song of Solomon* concluded. Handout: The Myth of the Flying African. RE-REVISED QUESTION AND THESIS DUE, based on what you learned from the workshop.

R Class time to work on our presentation

F **Paper Swap.** Bring THREE copies of your polished first draft with you to class. Two copies will go to peer editors, one to a Junior Core editor. Time to work on presentations.

Week 7: Oct. 8-12

M **Peer Edited Papers due.** In class, editors share comments with authors. Sign up for conference times.

T Presentations (2) in Great Hall

R Presentations (2) in Great Hall

F Presentation (1) in Great Hall. Critical Essay due.

Week 8: Oct. 15-19

M Individual conferences with professor. No class.

Note: The final revision of your critical essay is due to me ONE WEEK after your conference. Please ATTACH CONFERENCE VERSION containing my comments.

T Individual conferences with professor. No class.

R Great Hall: Introductory lecture to unit B.

F First day of Unit B class.