

Developing Content, Conversation, and Community: a dialogue with Gregory Nagy and Leonard Muellner

GREGORY NAGY: Maybe what I could do, dear Lenny, is talk to especially Claudia, and Janet, and Sarah, about our experiences back in the seventies. Very hard to remember all of the details, but I do remember that we used to meet regularly every Thursday

LEONARD MUELLNER: We didn't have all that internet stuff!

GREGORY NAGY: No! This was physically, this was near Harvard Square, and all of us -- it was mostly Douglas Frame, Leonard Muellner, myself, and sometimes walk-ons — I think that would be the way to describe it — and then one person who's not with us any more, Richard Shannon — and then what we would do is talk shop. I think “talking shop” is the way to say it. And talking shop was not concentrating on professional anxieties. It was about what we were reading, what we were thinking, why we were committed to the study of the ancient world, how it connects to studying today's world, and in that context besides a lot of beer there was a lot of thinking.

LEONARD MUELLNER: I think we were all writing stuff ... for me, it was writing my thesis at that point, right?

GREGORY NAGY: And now you're supposed to say “dissertation”!

LEONARD MUELLNER: Dissertation — OK!

GREGORY NAGY: [inaudible] still say “thesis” but in the United States they now say dissertation: it's very hard for me! But the thing is, we were working on different projects, or stuck on different projects, sometimes it was being stuck

LEONARD MUELLNER: Yes.

GREGORY NAGY: And one thing that would happen is somebody would say something and suddenly the rest of us would think differently about that something, and Lenny has a special gift for that kind of thing. Every time I think I've figured something out and I try it out on Lenny, there's a whole new world that opens up and that's what makes things so exciting.

LEONARD MUELLNER: That's what you do to me.

GREGORY NAGY: But we were doing this kind of thing with each other, and my big take-away is that sometimes after these Thursday meetings where we would talk shop about Homeric epic, archaic lyric, tragedy, prose, whatever, and how they relate to things that we see in the modern world or overall living experiences, when we were finished talking about things like this we'd either go home and go to bed and go to sleep, or you might want to stay up all night and write, and write, and write. And when I say "write" it's not the usual way of thinking about writing because who were we writing for? It wasn't writing for your career, it wasn't because, oh, Lenny has to hand in his dissertation so he's writing for that reason. We were all writing for each other. And I think that's the big take-away. And that's what this beautiful Hour 25 is re-creating. And it just warms my old heart to see...

LEONARD MUELLNER: ...this kind of collaborative work.

GREGORY NAGY: Collaborative work.

LEONARD MUELLNER: It's such a beautiful thing.

GREGORY NAGY: And where you work and think in order to contribute to a community.

LEONARD MUELLNER: Yeah. Right, and you help each other in a generous way. And that was our mantra, right. We all knew that we had something to contribute.

GREGORY NAGY: Yes!

LEONARD MUELLNER: We were not trying to undercut each other, we were not competing. We had the feeling there was so much to do that there was no ... that each of us had a lot to contribute

GREGORY NAGY: Yes.

LEONARD MUELLNER: That we had this - the same kind of spirit that I see in these people, too.

GREGORY NAGY: Oh, yes,

LEONARD MUELLNER: And that everyone's boosting everybody else.

GREGORY NAGY: So it's such a delight to meet Sarah in person, to meet Janet in person, and I hope we can also meet live at some point, but even if we don't the beauty of this whole community is that it's dynamic, it keeps going, it's never the same, and that's how Plato defines what is poikilon. Poikilon is something that is never ἀπλόον (haploon) — never simple.

LEONARD MUELLNER: Never one-ply.

GREGORY NAGY: Never one-ply, every time you return to it, it's something different. So one thing I'd really enjoy hearing is Sarah and Janet telling their stories about how they form community, and whichever one of you starts, it'll give I'm sure both Lenny and me such a delight.

SARAH SCOTT: Well, it's about listening to what other people are saying about the things they're reading, and also, as you were talking about, finding something in a passage and then seeing how that makes a connection to something, and sharing it — and just the sheer delight of that! And then seeing other people's responses, and they have maybe a different take on it, or they take a different point of departure, if you will, and that is just so exciting. I really love it. And I think we've taken so much inspiration from you guys, that we're ... doing the same thing — I hope!

LEONARD MUELLNER: Exactly. That's exactly what we were..

GREGORY NAGY: That's it. And so what is this? This is continuity. And I love the way Platonists — I don't like to call them neo-Platonists any more — they're just Platonists, keep it right there, 5th century CE, and they liked to call each other διάδοχος (diadokhos), which is not so much successors, but continuators.

LEONARD MUELLNER: Uh-huh. And so you're a piece in a chain, right?

GREGORY NAGY: It's a chain, and it's a chain that keeps on growing, and it's intergenerational, and it not only won't stop, but it'll keep changing.

LEONARD MUELLNER: I think it's ... one of the things I keep thinking about is that the context this all started in is that of a massive open online ... whatever we're going to call it! — which has a spirit of idealism about it, and that really, you know, leads directly to this kind of thing, I think, at its best, right?

GREGORY NAGY: Oh, I agree.

LEONARD MUELLNER: And this is what the internet really has done for us is to enable this kind of community to happen in a spontaneous way and for it to continue. We don't have to do it just on Thursday night when we had to extricate ourselves from our families and other things to make this kind of commitment. I remember going home and doing exactly what you said. At one point I lived in Waltham, and we had an apartment and the top floor in the attic was where I had my office, or study, and that was where I wrote my thesis. I would go home, and climb upstairs to the attice where quietly while everyone was asleep I'd be working.

GREGORY NAGY: You know, what you just said about M.O.O.C. where we started thinking of it as “massive open online course” but then we started talking about “massive open online

content” and then — and I think of it as a trivector — not just “content” but also “conversation”, and “community”. So: content, conversation, community.

LEONARD MUELLNER: All these things come together in this [inaudible] way.

GREGORY NAGY: I had this thrilling moment when, just a couple of days ago, where I was lucky enough to be at a dinner that was also attended by Susan Hockfield, who was the President of MIT at the time that original press conference happened where edX announced its mission.

LEONARD MUELLNER: [inaudible]

GREGORY NAGY: And you know, whatever the growing pains of edX might be, I love the idealism.

LEONARD MUELLNER: Yes.

GREGORY NAGY: Of reaching out to so many people of different socio-economic groups, of nationalities, and generations.

LEONARD MUELLNER: And generations, yes.

GREGORY NAGY: And so that's when I started really getting into the three Cs, and, just to repeat — I hope you like this! — so not just course, but also content, conversation, and community.

LEONARD MUELLNER: That has it. [?]

GREGORY NAGY: And now, I'd like to hear more stories. More stories about community. So ...

JANET OZSOLAK: We have a wonderful community. Everybody is so generous in sharing. And we are sharing our passion — passion for learning about the song culture, ancient Greek song culture, and passion of encouraging each other. We are happy for each other's learning, and it is every day — not every Thursday! — we have the opportunity for conversation. And our content is very inviting, we are very energetic, everybody is chiming in; you know our Friday Cafe, Myrmidon is doing a great job with that, and our Book Club is growing, we have new faces every day, and more scholars are coming. We are discussing Homer every day! So I am loving it, and thank you for the opportunity.

GREGORY NAGY: Well this is down to you. Without you what would we be? Just two geriatrics just talking to each other!

LEONARD MUELLNER: In our [?], yes.

JANET OZSOLAK: Sarah and I are learning Homeric Greek, and we know what “geriatric” is coming from!

GREGORY NAGY: This is a very, very, very serious plan, a very serious plan. And another plan that Lenny and I are working on is some kind of module for transmission, a help to study transmission. And I mentioned, for example, the fact that people in the Academy of Plato would think of themselves as diadokhoi, not successors but continuators, and what's beautiful about that is that it does involve getting together and then generating further thinking. And that further thinking can have as its point of departure — and I think Janet used the term “point of departure” so beautifully — that point of departure in one way is simply a continuation of previous points of departure. But each time, there's a new angle on Homeric poetry, or on whatever other piece of poetry or prose that people are contemplating.

LEONARD MUELLNER: So here's a thing that concerns me a little bit, is that we need to do something to preserve these beautiful things, and to concentrate them, and make them accessible. You know, the model from antiquity for the transmission of things, at least in Homer, is commentary.

GREGORY NAGY: Yes.

LEONARD MUELLNER: And I've been thinking about that as a means of getting people... .. anchoring observations to a text, right?

GREGORY NAGY: Yes, “anchoring” is such a key word, Lenny.

LEONARD MUELLNER: And we now have these two guys who've been working for us for a while on annotation tools, and I know that Daniel Cebrián has really got something working both on images and on texts, and it might be a beautiful thing to try out with this group, and then they can share, and we can — in a way we can preserve as well. And one of the virtues of their tools is that they're standards-compliant, and so observations that are entered into a system like this would be available to other people.

GREGORY NAGY: I know exactly what Lenny means when he says anchoring, and — may I give an anecdote? — people like Lenny and me have been at it so long that oftentimes even we don't remember what we said where. And one experiment we've been playing with is to take, for example, a book that Lenny has produced on the Anger of Achilles, and turn it inside out. And by inside out, I mean put it in commentary form, and I'm not now using the old-fashioned way of thinking of commentary that Aristarchus, the great Homerist, who flourished around 150 BCE, the way he was thinking about commentary, or ὑπόμνημα (hupomnēma) which is an interesting concept itself, because it's to do with mnemonics, or somehow remembering. And it's one thing for Aristarchus to show off that he was at the garden of the Muses in Alexandria, and he could cite passages from this, or that, or the other, verse of Homeric poetry, but the thing

wasn't even numbering the lines. He was just remembering. We have to number the lines as it were, and so here's where Sarah, you, and Janet, you, come into the picture. And that is, when Lenny says anchoring, what that means is that what we're thinking about: one way of organising it is to key it to a given verse. Give it a number. And a given rhapsody, of course, we have a number for that. And by the time the day is done you see not only wonderful thoughts about this system that we're studying, but also you actually can find them. And when Lenny talked about preserving, well, actually, it's really connecting, that's the problem, and we have similar problems. And I wish we could recruit Sarah and Janet for something like that. And that is, we have so much video photography that it's humanly impossible for the people here at the Center in Washington to do any kind of editing work on it. But when I think of the week, for example, that a travel study group that happened to have me on board, spent looking at all the sites in western Crete, in central Crete, that we happened to see. And this is a commentary...

LEONARD MUELLNER: ... this is our... At the Center these days we're working on this goal-setting exercise.

GREGORY NAGY: Yes.

LEONARD MUELLNER: And this is what I've been thinking about as a goal: a really comprehensive solution to these things. And maybe what we could do is bring some of these people to CHS, and have them work on this.

GREGORY NAGY: Shall we start with Sarah and Janet?

LEONARD MUELLNER: Sounds awesome.

JANET OZSOLAK: I'll come right away!

GREGORY NAGY: And then the idea would be to proliferate, and to have volunteers for example work on the passage in Pausanias, in Pausanias where he's going on the sacred way and going higher and higher towards the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi, and at every step he looks left, or he looks right, or he looks straight ahead, and he talks about these amazing sites, and the thing is: we should be having commentaries on that as well as the path of words that we work through when we read Herodotus, or even when we read Homeric verse. And the thing is, this shouldn't be the turf of anybody, this should be something that everybody gets in on, and everybody can contribute different aspects to, for example, what happens along the way, and we could follow the trajectory of Pausanias, just as we follow the plot of the Iliad by going from verse 1 to verse 2 to verse 3, all the way to 15,000-plus verses later, to the end of Iliad XXIV. It's to key it in to dialogues, in such a way that they're — may I say it this way? — that they're capable of being reactivated, and re-energized.

LEONARD MUELLNER: Yeah, exactly, yes. That's the idea. So you know, I've been looking at Homer papyri for a weird reason ...

GREGORY NAGY: I'm sure very good reasons!

LEONARD MUELLNER: And I found some photographs, which are very hard to find, on the Hawara Homer, which is a second-century thing[?] of books, volume II it has, of the Iliad, and it was discovered by this British archaeologist named William Flinders Petrie, in 1888. They used papyri as cartonnage — it was like papier maché for mummies — and so here's this Homer papyrus, and what you have is three or four sheets and it's broken up into pieces because they cut them up and pasted them together. Anyhow, so I'm looking at this, and what Mr Flinders Petrie did was he numbered all the lines himself. So you see this beautiful handwriting from the second century BCE, and then line number 700, and so on... and it helped him know what he was looking at. And ... I don't think archaeologists would do that now!

GREGORY NAGY: No, they wouldn't look kindly on that now.

LEONARD MUELLNER: But the other thing is that the Bankes Papyrus didn't get this treatment done to it. But what they did was put in the margins of the text who was speaking, at various points. Like it says "Priamos" or "Akhilleus", so it's like... like a point of a pen, so I can find this speech because it's Achilles' speech to Priam.

GREGORY NAGY: Yes, yes.

LEONARD MUELLNER: So it was marked: that was their way of finding their places, I think.

GREGORY NAGY: It didn't go very far.

LEONARD MUELLNER: But it got them somewhere.

GREGORY NAGY: But it got them somewhere, and if Sarah and Janet are interested we could send some of the work we've done on both the Hawara Homer and the Bankes Homer. Because they also have wonderful accentuations, which are not really accentuations, but they're markings of the high points of the melodic contour of hexameters, as they were recited. As in the second century CE.

LEONARD MUELLNER: It's not about accent. They don't have accents that we all learned in school to put on Greek words. They just have a couple of accents a line that's about how to sing it.

GREGORY NAGY: So it's kind of like a pronunciation aid. So many wonderful things. But again, there's such a lack of man and woman power.

LEONARD MUELLNER: I think the video is a huge thing. But I think what we need — and we should really work on this, and plan quickly — is setting up, we now have these texts, these translations, and now there's time to generate new ones,

GREGORY NAGY: Yes.

LEONARD MUELLNER: And there are these beautiful conversations that are going on. What we need is to set up the system so that these wonderful people can start to attach their observations to the text and hand them on to the next generation.

GREGORY NAGY: To use Lenny's earlier word: anchoring. And anchoring would be, in the case of Homeric poetry, it would be the so-called book number, and then the verse number. And in the case of things that, let's say, we discuss, I could see author stamp and date stamp.

LEONARD MUELLNER: That would be part of that, yes.

GREGORY NAGY: And so on, and so forth. But the one thing that's missing in this picture is the voice of Claudia.

LEONARD MUELLNER: Which brings us all together.

GREGORY NAGY: Yes! And Claudia brings us all together, and she is the energizing force, and she is the person that Lenny and I can be grateful to for finding the Sarahs and the Janetts of the world, and organizing their obviously boundless energies, and that really excites me. So, Claudia?

CF: Sure. Well, I guess I just want to say that we really appreciate getting to talk to you about the community, and you know we're just so excited that we recently passed 25,000 views in this last few days, and we have a lot of work that we're looking forward to doing, but we've already accomplished a lot in just a few months. And I just want to echo one of the things that actually Janet was saying before we got on — we had a little sort of pre-conversation conversation — she was talking about how important Hour 25 is for a lot of people because when you, and Sarah too, we were talking about this: when you are excited about a passage, now, or you're excited about a reading, Homer or otherwise, that people have an intellectual community where they can go and share that passion and excitement, no matter where you are, right? This is an online community you can get connected, and HeroesX was an open project, and so anyone who has participated in that is welcome to join the conversation. And so it's such a beautiful, open conversation. And the other thing that I would just highlight is something I think we've all touched on a little bit, but more so you, Lenny and Greg, have been hitting on it, which is this idea that the work that we can all do together as a community will invite us to build all sorts of skills. You know, reading Greek, learning Greek, learning to read, annotation, but also technical skills, right? And I think that's something that has been very exciting and invigorating for the Hour 25 community to date, because they see that they're developing all sorts of skills.

WordPress skills, online skills, using online tools to collaborate. So it's just ... it's fun, it's fun. The people are beautiful, we're thinking about beautiful things, you know every day we get up and — what can I say? It's a joy!

LEONARD MUELLNER: Yes, it's a wonderful thing, it really is, that urge, that intellectual idealism, and digital technology, and wonderful, wonderful content, and people are really passionate, and can do things with what they are learning. It's just great.

GREGORY NAGY: And one of the challenges ... and generous...

LEONARD MUELLNER: Their generosity, yes. That ideology is something that has always been part of our interactions.

GREGORY NAGY: And one of the ways I would love to see this conversation link with conversations in the future is, if Sarah and Janet and Claudia agree, is maybe to bring back Sherry Turkle to the discussion. Sarah and Janet, you might not have heard about our contacts with Sherry, but she is somebody who is very interested in the dangers to conversation that can happen with MOOCs, and similar innovations, and for her conversation is the big word. And we're Platonists, and I guess we would say dialogue, the dialogic principle. But I would love to see Sherry actually talking with people like Sarah and Janet, if that's possible. And since Claudia has already interviewed Sherry before, and Sherry has interviewed Claudia, that might be another interesting followup. And Sherry is working on a new book that would be very much about both the delights and the sorrows of MOOC, and I think she would love to hear the kind of things we were talking about.

LEONARD MUELLNER: To see what's going on. I think that would be interesting.

CF: You know, speaking of generosity, you've been very generous with your time, and I know we're fitting in our conversations probably where we have a lot... many other tasks to get to. So we should probably sign off, but I hope we can have more conversations like this very soon. I really appreciate your time.

GREGORY NAGY: And by popular demand we must bring back Sarah and Janet, and hopefully also bring them to the Center in Washington.

LEONARD MUELLNER: Exactly. We'll work on a plan.

GREGORY NAGY: Great.

(ALL:) Thank you, bye