



A PLACE AT THE TABLE

IN A TIME OF DIVISIVE "FAKE NEWS" AND METASTASIZING POLITICAL POLARIZATION, THE RELENTLESS SEARCH FOR TRUTH THAT TAKES PLACE AT THE HARKNESS TABLE MATTERS MORE THAN EVER.

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Since 1936, Lawrenceville has embraced the tenets of Harkness education to help students discuss critical issues in a manner that leads to thoughtful deliberation. In recent years, Lawrenceville has charted a course for the 21st century. We have renewed our dedication to inquiry – fearless and unflinching – and to purposeful sharing of information around the table by faculty and students. The goal is to provide students with the necessary skill set to think broadly, pragmatically and deeply in a democratic environment.

"Learned Institutions ought to be favorite objects with every free people," wrote President James Madison in 1822. "They throw that light over the public mind which is the best security against crafty & dangerous encroachments on the public liberty."

Democracy, in Madison's analysis, could work in the long run only if the knowledge base of its citizens could combat ignorance, the principles of civility stem the tide of unruly discourse, and reason overcome prejudice and bias. Today Madison's conception of democracy is under assault.

A recent poll – conducted by the George W. Bush Institute, the University of Pennsylvania's Biden Center, and Freedom House under the umbrella of the newly constituted Democracy Project – revealed that over 55 percent of Americans currently see "democracy" as weak and under threat. In a statement, President George W. Bush maintained "the health of the democratic spirit itself is at issue. And the renewal of that spirit is the urgent task at hand." The study confirms the widespread degradation of our civil discourse that has seemingly become a mainstay of our politics threatens the vitality of our democratic society. Conflict and hostility have always been a part of our political system, but the increasing lack of respect and consideration that has become so commonplace is something new, a sea change in the way citizens interact with each other. Vitriol, caustic racial and sexual comments, and the dissemination of gross misinformation and outright falsehoods have become all too frequent.

Though modern technology has on one hand helped to bridge gaps in American society, social media platforms in particular have tended only to bolster communication *between like-minded citizens* and to inflame partisan political differences. To borrow a phrase from Thomas Paine, a "new era for politics" is now upon us. However, Paine would likely not argue that a "new method of thinking has arisen" in American political culture. He would surely like to see more "common sense" in our politics achieved through collective endeavors.

Through Harkness, Lawrenceville masters strive to create a culture in which inquiry is embraced not because it is easy or comforting, but because it is demanding – and, because of the hard work it requires, responsibly enlightening. The demands of critical, dialogical inquiry are worthwhile because they have the potential to deliver us from what might otherwise be a chronic state of conflict into diagnoses and prescriptions on which reasonable parties can agree. Political and societal differences, tempered and clarified by deliberation, are hallmarks of truly democratic politics and are often key components of the experience around a Harkness table.

Day in and day out, Lawrenceville teachers continually strive to help students to engage differences of opinion productively, to discuss challenging issues *with* each other, not to talk past one another, and, most important, to discuss challenging issues collectively so that we can all build together toward higher, fuller, deeper – truer – understanding. Harkness has helped to reinforce and maintain the fundamentals of civility and of responsible information gathering and publication.

A TRUE HARKNESS DISCUSSION IS FAR MORE PRODUCTIVE AND SATISFYING – DRAMATICALLY EXPANDING VISION AND UNDERSTANDING

Students are encouraged to bring attitudes of "responsibility" to what is a public and collective role around the table, rather than a perspective formed by words like "desire" or "self-interest."

Young people who are not yet disciplined intellectuals – who are not yet committed to going wherever the evidence might take them, especially when it is forcing them to abandon some of their most cherished ideas – are prone to fall into "conversation" rather than "discussion" around the Harkness table. The former means, at its most basic level, just going back and forth: *You state your position, I state mine.*

A true Harkness discussion is far more productive and satisfying – dramatically expanding vision and understanding – because it prioritizes listening and considering, opening up to ideas that one has not previously experienced, and, instead of rejecting them, doing everything in one's power to venture into them. Discussion does not mean that one has to believe everything one hears. It means, however, that one does have to try to believe – through a reasonable degree of openness. And to try not *just* to believe but to subject all new ideas to a rigorous, methodical process of testing with and against evidence.

The same process of critical review is crucial to reading well. Once students, especially younger ones, have put serious time and energy into forming a preliminary sense of a homework reading, they have a strong tendency to attach – not just intellectually, but emotionally – to their first inklings. Sometimes when they arrive for class, less experienced students put tremendous energy into defending even their most hastily formed initial impressions about what they have read. That is one of the chief reasons why it is so important for classes to discuss challenging texts at a Harkness table. The process of critical dialogue – of listening as our discussion colleagues alert us to details we have overlooked, of recognizing and considering previously unrecognized connections – helps students to read more thoroughly. It helps both teachers and students to understand more fully. Perhaps most important, this process helps participants to change their minds.

The Harkness classroom can at times be best thought of as a laboratory, a space where teachers and students experiment openly and freely, to try new ideas in order to fully explore issues of contemporary importance. In fall 2017, as our nation once again was grappling with issues of race and trying to come to grips with the original sin of slavery and its legacy, we decided to create situations in our History and English classrooms for students to critically engage with material that had a direct bearing on the America we are living in.

In summer 2017, the Honors U.S. History teaching team had to grapple with how to address the intense battle that was being waged in the media and on the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia, and on the campus of the University of Virginia. A rally was organized in opposition to a plan by local officials to remove a statue of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee from Emancipation Park. Lines were drawn in the sand as citizens debated the meaning of the Civil War and America's ongoing struggle with the meaning of liberty and equality. The ghost of Robert Penn Warren hung over the debate.



In a classic essay published in 1961 on the legacy of the Civil War, Warren, reflecting as well about the civil rights struggles of his day, declared firmly that the United States had "not yet achieved justice. We have not yet created a Union which is, in the deepest sense, a community. We have not yet resolved our deep dubieties or self-deceptions. In other words, we are sadly human, and in our contemplation of the Civil War we see a dramatization of our humanity." Sixty years later not much had changed.

For white nationalists and neo-Confederates, the statue of Lee took on, as the writer Tony Horwitz noted in his classic work *Confederates in the Attic*, a symbolic status as a "talisman" against the forces of liberalism and modernity. On August 12, James Alex Fields Jr., a 20-year-old white nationalist, drove his car into a crowd in the streets of Charlottesville, killing a woman and injuring nineteen others. (Fields was sentenced to life in prison in December for this crime.) The night before this tragedy, a large crowd of white nationalists under the banner of "Unite the Right" circled the statue of Thomas Jefferson on the University of Virginia campus and raised their torches high. Did they believe that Jefferson was on their side? Were Jefferson and the immortal creed that he penned in 1776 now the rallying cry for those who believed the white race to be superior? The fact that the founding members of the Confederacy specifically repudiated Jefferson and the ideals embedded in his 1776 Declaration of Independence was likely lost on the white nationalists in attendance.

Tragically, as Americans with a wide range of agendas converged on Charlottesville, only a modest percentage of these people arrived with the purpose of congregating *with* one another. To a dangerous degree, many people arrived with their minds made up about what ought to happen. Recognizing the urgent importance of studying the history of Lee and his era as well as examining the forces still shaping the energies turned loose by the Civil War, we made sure to provide opportunities for Lawrentians to study these things with the necessary calm, patience, and discipline.

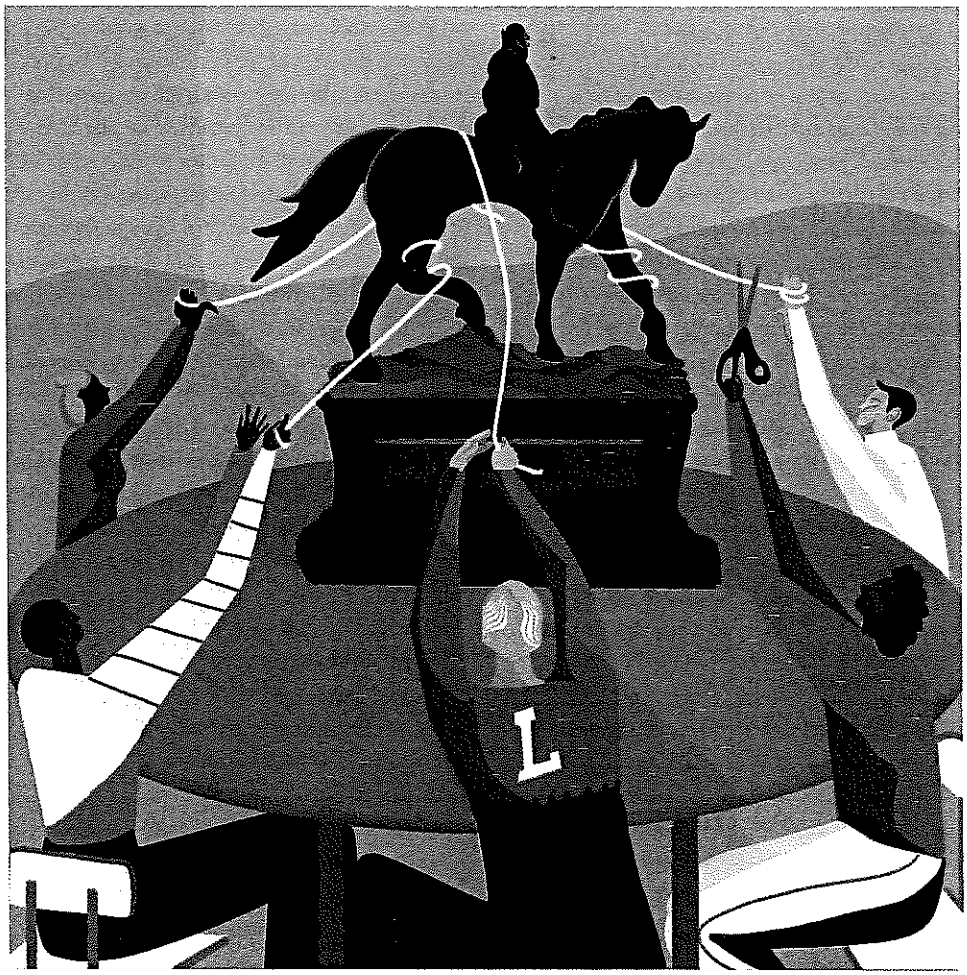
For some, the monuments in question symbolized the bravery of Confederate veterans who had fought and died for the House of Dixie in an epic struggle against an oppressive federal government. For others, the monuments represented a distorted view of history, one predicated on notions of white

supremacy and the Lost Cause tradition that has remained remarkably popular despite decades of historical scholarship that has exposed its falsehoods. The Lost Cause has been used in service of preserving American innocence – a notion that America has remained pure and has been driven by notions of progress throughout its history. And for some adherents to the faith, the Lost Cause was never genuinely *lost at all*. It would rise again from the ashes when the time was ripe. For these Americans, Charlottesville was an attempt to reignite the embers.

The "Unite the Right" clan, a party of fear with defiantly populist overtones, likely clung to Jefferson's belief in individual liberty and autonomy – and fear of an overarching government – to justify their "you will not replace us" chants.

Keen observers at the time, most notably historian Jon Meacham, pointed out that the white-nationalist rhetoric at UVA bore a striking resemblance to the rhetoric of Sen. Strom Thurmond and the Dixiecrats. In 1948, ironically on UVA's campus and in response to President Harry S. Truman's civil rights program, Thurmond maintained that a federal program aimed at promoting racial justice and equality "would undermine the American way of life and outrage the Bill of Rights."

At that time, counter-protesters encircled Jefferson's statue in order to remind America that what the Sage of Monticello had promoted in the Declaration was, first of all, the proposition that "all men are created equal" and, flowing from that, the notion that every one of us, of whatever background, is entitled to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."



In a news conference just days after the deadly rally in Charlottesville, President Donald Trump, to the dismay of many, declared that there was blame on both sides. He asked whether, if the statue of Lee were to be removed, statues of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson would have to be removed as well, because they too were slave owners. The president warned that by removing monuments, communities around the country would be "changing history." How would Lawrenceville students see the issue?

The Honors U.S. History teaching team felt that they had before them a powerful opportunity, in the form of the moment's challenging questions, to reinforce the grand traditions of Harkness learning. Students skillfully took on real-life issues and used their complexity and even their explosiveness to draw one another into genuine dialogical inquiry and close critical scrutiny of whatever responses their discussions might produce.

A preliminary discussion with students inside the Noyes History Building revealed the passion that existed around the tables. Students were ready to dive deep. They were interested in the past but also in the present, in the ways in which citizens in the nation at large and on Lawrenceville's campus were engaging issues of paramount concern, for the debate in Charlottesville raised a multitude of questions about race in America: What type of society do we want to live in? How can we make sense of the past? And how should the past inform the future? As Warren noted in *The Legacy of the Civil War*, an examination of the Civil War gave students an "awareness of the cost of having a history."

Both students and teachers, following Warren's lead, demanded a lot of themselves. The classroom work required a trio of essential commitments: first, looking at a complex event from a variety of perspectives; second, engaging in close

crutiny of essential evidence; and, third, vorking together in order to form a common rticulation of the essential dimensions of he situation. Disagreements were welcomed nd encouraged, as there cannot be much lialogue without the confluence of a wide ariety of perspectives and prevailing ersonal premises.

As a primer, a reading and lecture by Yale Jniversity historian David Blight, who was lready scheduled to come to campus later n the fall as part of the prestigious Weeden ecture Series, was assigned. Blight has vritten extensively on the Civil War era, in articular on the ways in which Americans ave sought to remember and memorialize he war. Which version of the past best erves the needs of the present is something hat Blight focused on in two groundbreaking vorks, *Race and Reunion* and *American Oracle*.

Blight's works helped to provide students vith the historical context for the creation f many of the Confederate monuments. tudents also had a chance to engage with cholarship on the causes of the Civil War nd the formation of the Confederacy. As excerpts from historians Charles Dew nd Chandra Manning made clear, the ornerstone of the Confederacy was slavery. ure and simple. As one southern white Confederate soldier stated bluntly in 1862, [A]ny man who pretends to believe that his is not a war for the emancipation of he blacks ... is either a fool or a liar." A uick read through a small sampling of outhern secession documents revealed that Confederates did not mince words when it ame to stating their intentions in 1860-61.

Contrary to many media reports, these nonuments were actually constructed in he early 20th century, rather than in the mmediate aftermath of the war. The statues, argely funded through private donations pearheaded by the United Daughters of he Confederacy, went up not with the Confederate battle flag flapping in the vind but with the Stars and Stripes flying verhead. They were part of the Jim Crow ra, an era that witnessed a resurgence of he Ku Klux Klan and directly connected to a

FOR SOME, THE MONUMENTS IN QUESTION SYMBOLIZED THE BRAVERY OF CONFEDERATE VETERANS WHO HAD FOUGHT AND DIED FOR THE HOUSE OF DIXIE IN AN EPIC STRUGGLE AGAINST AN OPPRESSIVE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT.

deliberate creation of public memorials to the Lost Cause understanding of the Civil War, a tradition predicated on whitewashing the actual history of slavery and of related issues of race. The notion that the Confederacy was led by men who organized a government to maintain a system of slavery and to destroy the American union was not part of this narrative. Over the summer, students had read Frederick Douglass's powerful 1845 slave narrative and, consequently, had a deep understanding of what slavery was truly like in the 19th century.

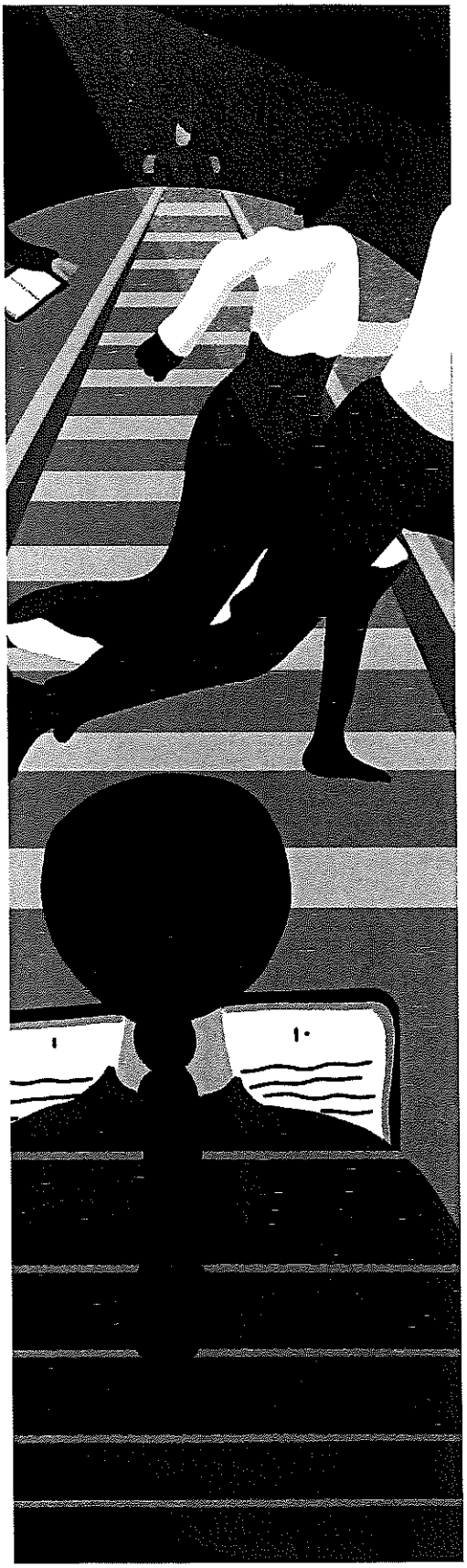
By the end of the 19th century, white southerners struggled to explain the role of slavery in causing the war. Over time, a growing chorus of voices began to proclaim that the true issue at hand was a constitutional struggle to maintain state control – a rehashing of the debate between Jefferson and Hamilton in early America over federal power. This understanding has had remarkable endurance. Indeed, in a 2011 study, the Pew Research Foundation found that just 38 percent of Americans believe that the Civil War was fought over slavery.

It was clear that students wanted to learn more about the era in which these Confederate statues were created and who was behind the fundraising efforts to build them. Once they had done so, they could share what they had found and debate the merits of removal. They shared newspaper coverage they uncovered. They read local and national papers to get a fuller perspective. They worked hard to understand what white southerners meant by "heritage and honor."

Then came the tough part. Should the statues come down? Or should they be preserved and moved to a new location? Multiple perspectives were offered on how to handle the problem.

Many students argued that the statues should serve as a reminder of an era to which, as a nation, we should not return and of past sins that needed to be kept in the forefront of our collective memory. There was apprehension about removing the statues because, students feared, removal could lead to a purposeful forgetting of the past and, thereby, perhaps to future problems. Students arrived at this conclusion from a perspective prioritizing careful thinking about civic life. They recognized that the statues conjured hurtful memories that could indeed distract from the public good, but in their minds, it was a greater danger to change the historical landscape.

Others argued that the statues should be destroyed and replaced with others honoring the service of African Americans during the Civil War. As a nation we have removed vestiges of segregation, such as "white-only signs," so why not remove statues of Confederate leaders? If the statues were meant to perpetuate white supremacy,



then replace them with symbols honoring those who worked to effect an end to the slave system. Still others advocated for the relocation of Confederate statues to battlefield sites where they could become part of a park's explanatory narrative.

The path forward was not clear at first, but through careful discussion, students began to see merits in each of the proposed solutions. New statues and plaques honoring the service of African Americans in the Civil War could both easily be added to public spaces. Testimonies to the lives of the enslaved men and women in the South were discussed as necessary to the public landscape. New parks designed to preserve the history of the Confederacy could also be set up and old statutes relocated to such locales. The full story of the construction of these statues could then be told, recognizing Confederate soldiers in terms of military exploits, but also to afford an opportunity to explain how statue construction was part of the process of cementing the era of Jim Crow in the early 20th century.

While students were grappling with the tragic events in Charlottesville and trying to make sense of slavery's legacy in modern America, students of literature were inside Woods Memorial Hall, engaging with acclaimed author Colson Whitehead's 2016 novel, *The Underground Railroad*. This Pulitzer Prize-winning work forced our students to think about the nation's original sin and the shared history of freedom and bondage with which Americans in the 21st century need to reckon. As one reviewer so aptly put it, Whitehead's work "disrupts our settled sense of the past and stretches the ligaments of history right into our own era."

Through fiction, Whitehead's book forces students to confront one of the most pervasive myths of the Lost Cause tradition – that slaves were content and generally accepting of their bonded state. The history of clandestine escapes, of long, heroic treks to the North under the cover of darkness, of slave-catchers and their hounds, does not coincide with the idyllic image of southern culture created by many writers and journalists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The Underground Railroad required the students embarking on an examination of this massive lake of a book to cast long lines down into its shadowy depths and complicated currents. The little stretch of discussion quoted below emerged during an effort to determine what was happening in one tricky scene involving two young women. The first character is Cora, a young mid-19th-century African American woman on the run from vicious slave-catchers working feverishly to return her to the plantation she fled. For Cora, escaping a life so brutal, so unremittingly dominated by degradation and torture, left her little choice but to flee. In doing so, she understood she'd be exposed to the risk of being literally ripped apart by hounds or attacked by lethal snakes while taking flight through the neighboring swamp.

The second young woman involved in the scene is Ethel, a young white woman who has taken an interest in Cora, taking steps to help Cora recover from a bout of illness. The key question: Why? What exactly motivates Ethel as she interacts with Cora?

Student W: *"Even though Ethel is taking care of Cora for her own reasons, doesn't she, in a practical sense, help Cora to get better?"*

Student X: *"I would agree with you. Ethel is quite forward-thinking. Her parents tell her it's not the job of white people 'to go into deepest, darkest Africa,' but that's her goal anyway."*

Student Y: *"Hmmm ... I don't know. Ethel does want to help people, and yet she wants to do so in a way that is patronizing, amplifying her own superiority."*

Student Z: *"I also disagree that she was directly looking to help. I believe that there's a level of sincerity there, but I also think that what Ethel*

is sincere about is her search for personal glory. She was kind of worn down into her marriage. He parents didn't let her do what she wanted. But now Ethel has discovered an opportunity to do something big. She pictures herself being 'a white savior.' She is helping Cora in a way that is actually about advancing herself. After all, the text shows Ethel picturing a future in which 'the n------ lift her to the sky, praising her name: Ethel, Ethel' (191)."

This discussion went on for considerably longer than the quick stretch of dialogue represented above, and involved all of the other students in the room. However, a quick reading of just these four contributions reveals the students directing themselves effectively according to the essential principles of constructive critical discourse. Student W asked a question that stimulated exchange. Y answered substantively, pointing out how, in a pre-Civil-War America not widely interested in life in Africa, Ethel doesn't just think about the place in some vague way, but, in fact, yearns to go there – establishing Ethel as, in some respects, quite authentically "forward-thinking" (or, at least, "thinking outside the box").

Student Y then took the crucial step of complementing – and complicating – X's take on what was happening, expressing the sense that Ethel's motivation was perhaps not as outward-looking or altruistic as at first it seems. And Z did the essential work of connecting Y's more complicated assessment of what Ethel was doing, outwardly, to what Ethel was thinking, privately, which did indeed suggest that her ultimate aim might not be Cora's well-being but her own glorification. And, of course, what Ethel was thinking included the explicit use of the odious N-word, her use of which suggests strongly that this character does not see the imaginary Africans by whom she envisions being elevated as people moving through life with the same degree of humanity or possibility that she sees in herself.

What is the bigger picture here, the deeper process at work? Consultative, evidence-driven discussion. The students involved were welcomed to say whatever they genuinely believed. The teacher did not "police" the discussion, except to teach them that the ultimate arbiter of what is right or wrong is the evidence within a class's common text. The students working together in a course all must read from the same book. Their inquiry into the book is open-ended – but not utterly wide open. As they venture various interpretive hypotheses and test them with and against the evidence of the text, as they find instances in which the evidence before them will not in fact uphold their first impressions, then they learn to let those impressions go and replace them with updated understandings that align with the facts before the group's eyes.

THE ULTIMATE PURPOSE OF SUCH DIALOGICAL INTERCHANGE IS REALLY TO LISTEN.

People often refer casually to Harkness education as a system in which all students get to speak up in order to share their opinions. But the ultimate purpose of this mode of learning (which Edward Harkness, the visionary philanthropist who helped to institute what he called "The Conference Method") is not to say something; that is merely where the system starts. The ultimate purpose of such dialogical interchange is really to listen. After all, at a table with roughly a dozen students and a teacher, one should be listening well over 90 percent of the time. And, then, to think together – to confer in order to subject a wide range of possibilities to close, critical consideration.

What Harkness amounts to, really, is a system of collective critical thinking – a method by which we first work together to form a preliminary understanding of something complicated, then confer in order to identify the holes and errors in that first attempt at explaining. Finally, we keep conferring in order to arrive at an understanding that more fully, finely approximates the big, messy truth.

The Conference Method ultimately allows us to take advantage of the natural inclination of any group of people to see things from a wide variety of perspectives; to use those viewpoints to scrutinize evidence from a range of angles; to test those angles against evidence to see which can be confirmed. It is a way of learning that helps us to live up to our national motto: *E pluribus unum*, or, "from many, one." It is a system that leads us past bias by consulting one another to identify the errors in our preferred ways of seeing things and then to replace our illusions with more carefully constructed explanations of the facts. It is, in short, the spirit of democracy in action. It is a method of getting as close to the truth as we possibly can by practicing "common sense."

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