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Enquiry and 2020

By CASIMIR ZABLOTSKI
EDITOR-IN CHIEF

2020 has been an unusually eventful year. Wildfires in Australia, Kobe Bryant's death in a helicopter accident, and the impeachment of President Trump dominated the headlines before even the first day of spring. Allegations of Hunter Biden benefiting from corruption in Ukraine and

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rumors of Kim Jong-un's imperiled health have persisted for months. Black Lives Matter protests swept the nation, and chants of "ACAB" ("all cops are bastards") engulfed popular culture following the murder or wrongful death of George Floyd, with some cities experiencing protracted protests and riots. Last weekend, Supreme Court justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died after 27 years of highly visible service on the court, prompting a battle over the nomination of her successor that complicates an already most contentious election year.

And of course, there is the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which in addition to claiming so many American lives affected Hamilton students by displacing us and nullifying a semester's grades. The shift to a credit/no credit grading scale was especially disorienting to Hamilton students as no one - students or those reviewing a transcript - can discern what grades one deserved for that semester.

These are uncertain times, perhaps remarkably uncertain. Some have been quick to dub 2020 as one of the worst years in recorded history, though it would probably take a lot more death - on the scale of smallpox when it was uncontrolled, or even the Holocaust - for it to clearly bear that distinction. But many people are consumed by anxiety right now.

The world feels as if it is ever-changing in major ways, with a new tragedy or outrage creeping into our purview every day. Hamilton students, under the stress that is to be expected from studying at a rigorous academic institution, must also consider the possibility that a sudden outbreak could send everyone back home in a rush, and jeopardize our grades again. And on campus, there is an incessant sparring among ideologues, further complicating our delicately balanced social life.

What is the best outlet for these stresses and anxieties? Where should disparate opinions interact with each other in a proper and respectful

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manner? As I have told many of my friends, with varying degrees of agreement from them, the answer is *Enquiry*. It is worth remembering that *Enquiry* was founded not for a dogmatic pursuit of ideology, but for "free thought and discourse." A cursory look at our paper edition or a visit to the publication's website confirms this,

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COVID and Reading

By DR. DAVID FRISK
GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

Living under all the pandemic restrictions forces students to make many adjustments—some of them, perhaps, still being discovered in these early weeks, others not fully expected when you returned to the Hill. The loss of so many activities and interactions should lead to an especially keen focus on reading, on "your books," what you are assigned. Doing all of the reading, and more intensively. Some of this may be involuntary. But much of it's up to you.

There are differing opinions about what is most fundamental in a class. But in many fields, a good case can be made that the readings are the heart of the course. This year is an especially good time to take that possibility more seriously—and, as a result, to begin a lifetime's habit of consistently careful reading. Which would also be likely to improve, and continue to improve, your writing.

But careful reading can be a discussion too - even though it's the most socially distanced kind imaginable.

Truly careful reading must generally be slow. And, especially in college, with a sophisticated dictionary immediately available—which you're willing to use at any doubtful point. When Alexis de Tocqueville says, in *Democracy in America*, that he sought "the society of priests" in order to learn more about religious life in this country, he doesn't mean that he got in touch with an association of them. He means that he associated with clergymen, talked with them.

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with that powerful motto emblazoned across the top. And this ideal is true not only in theory, but also in practice.

Our staff writers are at various places on the political spectrum, but respect each other and often “agree to disagree” on weighty issues that otherwise split Hamilton’s campus.

Our contributors share this in common: a belief in the power of discourse. *Enquiry* exists not to declare but to discuss, not to condemn but to converse. Each piece represents the views not of *Enquiry* or the Alexander Hamilton Institute, but the individual writer who thoughtfully constructed

the short essay, book review, or cultural commentary. By publishing it, we simply say that we believe it meets a certain standard of written and intellectual quality, regardless of its political viewpoint (if any). And *Enquiry* is not a battleground for ad hominem attacks by or against anybody, including our writers. Rather, it is an intellectual forum where we encourage those who disagree to challenge an idea, not criticize its author.

To that end, and especially under my leadership of *Enquiry*, I encourage everyone to start friendly, well-grounded debates that reflect not so much the troubling times we live

in, and the acrobatic partisanship that many engage in, but rather the beauty of free speech at its best.

In this strange year, especially as we are driven indoors by cold weather and inside our minds by stress, I hope we will make a conscious effort to engage in meaningful dialogue with each other. Begin a discussion with a definition, thoughtfully examine the troubling issues of our time, and put your thoughts into words in *Enquiry*. All are welcome.

COVID AND READING . . . cont.

Such examples of possible misinterpretation in college-level reading are endless. Even simple words will often have two or more wholly different meanings, even in current books. The importance of this verbal complexity in a liberal

Books are, after all, the work of actual people, usually one person. The author is often somebody about whom a book (or parts of a book) or articles have been written, or at least an interview, or a speech or talk, published or recorded. The book probably also

as not just words, but consciously as speech on a page by a real human being. And indeed, in many cases, strongly felt speech, even if the style is moderate and controlled. To which you can, of course, and sometimes should, respond silently

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arts education, as both a challenge and an opportunity to grow your understanding, is hard to overstate.

For a long time in undergraduate education, it has been a commonplace, even something like an orthodoxy, to say “you learn so much from discussion” with other students. Probably all of us have learned much from discussion, from those around us in classes and elsewhere. If it’s done right, with patient, conscientious listening, it’s essential. But careful reading can be a discussion too—even though it’s the most socially distanced kind imaginable.

has a preface or introduction, and may well have an acknowledgements section, with personal material. You can, therefore, get to know the author to a meaningful extent without much extra effort. And the book, or much of it, is often saying what this usually dedicated and talented person wants most to say. In addition, it’s often what they have prepared for decades to say, investing many years in acquiring the knowledge, and ability, to make their books or articles professionally credible.

It is therefore reasonable, and may be quite intellectually enabling and quite motivating, to regard your books

as you read. Responding, though, as if the author hears you—and can agree or disagree with your comments. No masks required.

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CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

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ENQUIRY
vol. VIII

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