Drinking Deep at Black Mountain College

Southern Cultures, Vol. 19, No. 4: Winter 2013

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11/21/11
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Black Mountain College, near Asheville, North Carolina, was an icon of progressive education during its short life, from the late 1930's to 1956. When I was there, from 1946 to 1948, there were from 60 to 80 students and about 20 faculty. There were few formal academic requirements, no required courses, no grades, limited resources, but an amazing abundance of creative students and faculty. Students in my two years included such notables as the writer Jose Yglesias, director Arthur Penn, painter Kenneth Noble, sculptor Ruth Asawa. The summer art institute in 1948 had John Cage and Merce Cunningham, Elaine and Willem de Kooning, Buckminster Fuller, Ronald Lippold. The regular faculty had as its star the abstract painter Josef Albers, and many notables in painting, mathematics, chemistry, weaving, and music, for example, Ira Bolotowsky, Max Dehn, Natalie Goldowski, Annie Albers, Irwin Bodky and Edward Lowinsky. The rest of the faculty included lesser known but often distinguished writers, philosophers, musicians, historians, and a progressive psychologist.

The college was always a dynamic, explosive, self-destructive hothouse. Since its beginning it had been a hotel for progressive ideas in American education, the arts and the social sciences. Isolated in the Smokies of North Carolina, it was one of the very few accommodations in the country that was open to experimentation. A busload of new faculty and students arrived yearly, welcomed and feared by those who had been there a year or two. Some tried to renovate it in their own image, some simply basked in the hotel's tolerance and idealism. The most authentic of the guests were seeking to feed deeply on its vibrant flesh. The authentic student or faculty members immersed themselves in the unique experience and drank deeply of all its contradictions. All but a few moved on after a year or two, gratified or rejected, and a new busload arrived. Very few students stayed more than two or three years. A small core of the faculty stayed, providing some continuity and every three or four years wearily congratulating themselves on staving off another educational challenge and on disposing of the disruptive faculty and students who sought renovations (and sometimes achieved a few). The core faculty sullenly cleaned up and tried again to square the circle, to create stability and security while proclaiming innovation. My

busload, I believe, was quintessential.

Waves of post-war American history seem now, over fifty years later, to have been concentrated in the two dynamic years I spent there. With the end of the war and fascism, the college exaggerated America's intensification of the democratic urge, the bursting of culture, and the sexual revolution. History is all retrospective judgments; no one can lay claim to any "true account," and mine will be faulty, because my memory is not just poor, it is self-interested and very selective. But though my details may be array, Black Mountain was certainly a hologram of the nation's pending concern with democratic governance, cultural innovations, and sexual freedom. However distorted my account, it was a wild time, despairing and hilarious, and worth an interpretive reconstruction.

Almost everyone there at this period was a poster-child of some sorts, representing a fragment of our culture. My poster was being about the only student from the West Coast (most were from the Northeast, particularly New York City); about being the only one without parents and siblings who had attended college (most students, but certainly not all, were from a well educated upper middle class, or intellectual elite class); and being one of the few, I suppose, who had had little contact with Jewish people. BMC, in my retrospective judgment, was predominately a Jewish culture. Tacoma Washington had a few Jews, one was a friend, and some of my army friends were probably Jews, but I never thought much of it, and none told Jewish jokes putting on heavy accents. My acquaintance with Jewish culture was so limited that even after I left BMC and went to live on the lower east side of New York City (east 6th and Avenue A), it struck me as very strange, as I walked in my neighborhood (overwhelmingly Jewish in 1948-49), that all the people chatting on the front steps spent their time telling Jewish jokes. I finally realized that it was the only context in which I had heard those accents. Wonderful jokes with theatrical accents were told at BMC.

I was probably one of the few that had no conscious intellectual pretensions; a C+ student in high school, I was slated for a career as an electrician, simply because I had to work when in high school and had a job with an electrical contractor. (I had two older brothers, and the oldest raised the two of us after I was

nine.) I was glad to get out of Tacoma though, when I turned 18 and was drafted into the army, so there must have been some itch to be other than an electrician in Tacoma. Three years as an infantry soldier did little for my intellectual development but it did make me aware that I did not want to live the kind of life my fellow soldiers had lived. The life of a college student, financed by the GI Bill, looked much more attractive than returning to the electrician's shop. Only in that sense did the army prepare me for college.

In high school I had written some poetry and wallowed in romantic classical music, read in an undirected, undisciplined way, and I continued this in the army. Free, "GI issue" paperbacks unaccountably included the novels of Thomas Wolfe, from North Carolina, and he spoke to my self-absorption. An older and quite sophisticated soldier took an interest, pressing me to read army paperbacks of Plato and Aristotle, which I couldn't. I guess he was a communist of sorts, and talked grandly of a new society without injustice, and got into trouble with his superiors. The army's current events reading material was slim and "safe," so even communists might be reduced to reading the ubiquitous *Reader's Digest*. He did, and an issue of the Reader's Digest "changed my life," as we are supposed to say. We had arrived in Japan, from combat duty in the Philippines, to occupy Nagoya. (The atomic bomb saved my division, the 25,th saved from mounting a bloody invasion of Tokyo.) He saw a little story in the *Digest* about an experimental college that made it sound lovely. "Black Mountain is where you must go when you get discharged; take the GI bill and run."

Instead, I hitch-hiked, in June of '46, after one quarter at the U. of Washington, where I was lonely and miserable and could only register as a home economic student since all other majors were filled. I had little money and few possessions, and hitchhiking was commonplace in those years. I didn't enjoy it, and got roughed up by police and frightened by gay men. When I finally arrived about 8 days later at the campus, to check it out and make an application, I must have been something of a sight and smell. A small summer session was underway, devoted mostly to the arts (including Jean Varda, Leo Amino, and Walter Gropius, none of whom I had heard of), so after cleaning up and getting some decent sleep, I

wandered thru art and music classes in a daze. Most of the summer students did not know much about the regular program, but their enthusiasm was tremendous, and I tried my best to make a good impression at the interviews with faculty and administrators that I had. (I was told later that I was considered charming – a naive, unschooled veteran who looked to be 17 instead of 21, and was struggling with Djuna Barns and Rilke, and not only came from a place called Tacoma – who in Tacoma struggled with *Nightwood* – but half walked from there to get to North Carolina.) How I had come across Djuna Barns is a mystery to me now.

After three days at the college I hitch-hiked on to New England to find a summer job, and waited eagerly to see if I was to be accepted. Of course I was; I had the G.I. bill, and the college was blooming because of the arrangement they made with the government: we got about $25 a month allowance from the Veterans Administration, and the college received payment for about half of the $1,400 or $1,600 tuition and fees. There were many veterans among the 80 students, and the college loved us. Accepted, I hitched back (two or three days; one does not stop to sleep).

The intellectual post-war ferment roiled the college; the social issues were burning, and the arts were avant guard, and there were not many academic hotels that would tolerate travelers with controversial baggage. We were the only college in the South that was integrated. Initially there were four Afro-American students, but only one survived their first year. It was tough on them. Gas stations would not serve cars with blacks and whites; they could not sit with white students in the bus to Asheville (and the whites could not sit in the back of the bus); any degree they received would be meaningless in the employment market. A black student would do far better at a black college. One "liberal" lawyer from Asheville resigned his position as the college counsel when the first black student was admitted.

We had one defrocked communist teaching economics. As the Party apparently had, the faculty regretfully found him unbearable (as did I) and he was pushed out amidst much controversy and protest. We could not, as a liberal institution, be against the right of a communist to teach, and even proselytize, the

students argued. The core faculty was certainly anti-communist, but they had hired him knowingly – the hotel should have at least one fellow-traveler – so I do not think his politics were the main issue. Instead, I feel that he did not want to feed off of the experience, drink deeply and suck up the brew of community chaos and invention. Instead, he wanted to convert it and establish a base for communism in higher education. Those who wanted to capture, rather than embrace and be suckled by the community, always had to leave. I had roomed with one of the three or four students he brought with him, and finally asked him what was this "historical materialism" all about, of which they talked incessantly? He gravely gave me two books to read, both of them weighty. I did not get beyond the titles. *The 18th Brumaire* indeed! What was it? If the theory could not be summarized in five minutes I would have none of it.

We practiced circumspect "free love" with delight, this in the Bible Belt. Though few from the surrounding communities ever ventured on to the campus to witness our sins, they were vaguely aware that they surrounded us. We took our support for Henry Wallace's presidential candidacy into bucolic, benighted Bunscombe county, but instantly retreated under fire. An attempt to support a strike at a Lucky Strike plant fizzled. We made a distressing, unnerving attempt at registering the Black vote, an effort that was almost instantly abandoned when the core faculty became worried and the surrounding community outraged.

The split in 1948 that led to nearly half the students and half the faculty departing prefigured the nation's culture wars. One side, I will label them the "conservatives," wanted the plastic and performing arts to rule, and social sciences and philosophy to be reduced or abandoned. (The social sciences and even history were "anti-life," declared the most powerful figure in the community, Josef Albers.) They wanted to cut student scholarships, pay faculty according to length of service, end the work program, and spend money on painting fences. The other side (the "liberals") wanted to keep the social sciences and philosophy, continue with scholarships based on need, continue the program where everyone worked a few hours a week, and continue to pay faculty salaries that were based on the size of the family. The refugees were overwhelmingly on the first side, so the

overtones were national (Germany vs. America, or, from the conservatives perspective, European standards versus American indulgences) and nasty (fascists versus democrats, or as the conservatives put it, democrats versus communists). The former won, but the victory was phyric. With half the students and half the faculty gone, most in protest, there were few new students (because of no scholarships, and declining veteran enrollment, I suppose) to replace them. The head of the winners, Josef Albers, left for Yale two years later and the other power, Theodore Drier, was forced out. The poet Charles Olsen arrived and held on to the college as best as he could with his exuberant, extravagant and bulky character. Literature (the so-called Black Mountain School of Poetry) won out over painting and weaving, until all crumbled, and quietly passed away in 1956.

Making the Community Work

Progressive colleges always have an intensified governance problem– how shall they be run? At BMC no foundation owned the place, the faculty did. There was no rich and interested Board of Trustees watching benignly from afar. There was only the faculty and a student representative. The ideology was participative and democratic, and this attracted young faculty and idealistic students. But it was essentially run by "old" men, the core faculty from the 1930's and early 1940's: Theodore Drier and Josep Albers were the key ones. They forced the resignation of the visionary founder, John Rice; the feisty, disrespectful, Eric Bentley; a student wrongfully charged with prostitution (she was hitchhiking) and grievously mistreated by the State Police (she "embarrassed" the college); and a gay faculty member, the Rector at the time, whose behavior was beyond reproach on campus but who was arrested (set up, some said) in Asheville. (The rulers could be cruel, and often were. Drier arranged to have the charges dropped, but the Rector was told to return to the campus after midnight and be gone forever by breakfast. No further contact was made with him and he drifted into California, reinventing himself as a postman, according to rumor, and disappeared.)

Another conflict was between the official ideology, that held that community was to be the focus, versus the operating spirit of libertarianism – making each flower bloom bigger and brighter than any others, as Eric Bentley jeeringly

referred to it. Making matters worse, some blooms *were* big and bright. The creativity of the members was large and cherished, but the egos were larger still. Living in a crowded cocoon cloistered in the Bible Belt, preaching community ideals with a faint whiff of communism, with out-sized faculty and student egos, one may be surprised the college lasted as long as it did. Only the incessant comings and goings of the travelers renewed it.

One issue that highlighted the dilemma of the participative governance of strong wills was the plight of refugees in the torn skein of Europe. Half of the faculty were refugees from Europe (Germany primarily, but also Russia), and the plight of war torn Europe was the front page of many dining hall discussions. It precipitated our own war, dubbed the "mush war." Significantly it was not a refugee who finally put the topic on the community agenda, but one of the farmers, an upright, dour, hardworking man. (He was one of the few who refused to be interviewed by Martin Duberman for his excellent book on BMC, which I draw from occasionally.) He felt that the community was too isolated from the rest of the world, and it should get involved and send regular CARE packages to refugee organizations in Europe. One could hardly be against this, especially if you had many refugees in the faculty itself. But the students themselves did not have much money – veterans – though some were from wealthy families, the faculty was barely paid, and the college itself seemed always in threatening debt.

The farmer proposed, at the weekly community meeting where all sorts of issues were brought up, that we needed to sacrifice, give up something, to match the sufferings of the refugees in Europe. He proposed, as an example, that people should give up cigarettes for one day a week and send the money to CARE, only to catch himself in confusion, realizing that he didn't smoke. Recovering, he announced, "I will give up milk." The issue was discussed for a couple of weeks, with guilt running high; indeed, it was a guilt-edged issue tailor made for us. Was our self-indulgent individualism compatible with community responsibilities? We thought so, and ended up voting to eat only mush for three meals on one day a week, and send the savings to Europe.

Opposition was probably substantial, despite the vote, but it could not be

overt. We had to sign a pledge, and initially, only a small minority refused. A significant refusal was my favorite professor, Albert William Levi ("Bill"). He announced that he and his wife, Mary Caroline Richards ("M.C.," a lovely writer) were already sending regular donations. ("How can we tell?" asked the mushers, "Have we seen receipts?") On Wednesday the anti-mushers were asked to eat their breakfast, lunch and dinners at separate tables, were there would be the appropriate condiments and settings. They marched from the cafeteria line to their tables in a corner, belligerent and perhaps a bit ashamed. Some elderly members of the families of refugee faculty were clearly bewildered, and were non-mushers. At the mush tables we made self-satisfied arguments about joining in the sorrows of the rest of the world rather than wallowing in our own self-indulgent introspection. Why were the refugee faculty not in front in the mush war, we asked. Some even were non-mushers. The sacrifice was all for the likes of them. But was the sacrifice even genuine? Some wanted the little community store, with cheese and crackers and candy bars, closed on Wednesday so people could not surreptitiously stock up; even close it from Tuesday afternoon until Thursday. Was it legitimate to buy your way out and not go hungry, or did you have to suffer? (Suffer, was the consensus.) The number of non-mushers grew, from perhaps 10% to 30%. Non-mushers organized a CARE package program and claimed they did more than the mushers and moreover it was truly voluntary. Mushers, they said, were intimidated; it was not really as voluntary as sending money to CARE, but an instance of "fascist" pressure. (Anything evil in 1946 was marked as fascistic; we had just fought a war against this evil. A decade later communism served as the nation's evil totem.)

Providentially, the kitchen staff and the business manger gave the community a way out. The business manager said that not much was being saved. We had a farm that supplied much of our meat and vegetables (working on it was one of the options of the compulsory work program for all community members). The two cooks complained about the uncertainty of how many non-mushers would show up; it made meal planning difficult. Not so privately they thought it absurd to eat mush all day. (They were much admired and respected, as cooks tend to be in

total communities. The head cook, Mallory was uncommonly tolerant of the sexual activity of the students – she knew who showed up with whom at breakfast – and if Central Casting got a call for a beloved Black cook on the plantation, she would be the first pick.) Another stormy community meeting was held. The program received an ignominious vote of no confidence and the community sustained another wound.

Along with the wounds, the meetings were many. There was little for this isolated community of about 120 souls to do in the evening. Asheville had the closest movie house and was far away, and even visiting the one roadhouse within 10 miles was difficult since few people had cars. The alternative to hanging out in a crowded, dingy dormitory, where most students lived, was either your private study, or a meeting in the communitydining hall. At such meetings you would learn that people did not put in the required 3 or so hours of voluntary labor on the farm, the kitchen, the business office, or work programs that cleaned up the grounds, or fixed shutters and leaky roofs. The work program was chaotic and some simply refused to contribute. An ambitious effort to organize it by a faculty member, John Wallen, and his students was met with the charge of "taking over the community."

We needed more books for the tiny library, but the pianos needed fixing, and the fences painting, and these conflicts were endlessly discussed. Individual study rooms, in the stunning –for the 1940's U.S. – Bauhaus-style building were being illegally customized with unalterable changes. (Some devoted many hours and considerable private resources in this appropriately artistic effort of decorating; the inventiveness was amazing to me.) Silent hours had to be imposed for evening study in the building to put a stop to loud coffee klatches and loud discussions. (Everyone had hotplates, even toasters.) Vague dress codes were repeatedly debated, passed and ignored. (Albers argued against cut-off jeans, saying he was not a prude, he just had an aesthetic objection to women's jeans cut off just below the knee because the ugliest part of the leg was exposed.) Bare feet were not to be allowed in the dining room. The maintenance people from the farm, when they had a chance at community meetings, routinely complained that large quantities of

condoms were clogging the plumbing of the study hall. It appeared that less sex as well as finding other means of disposal was being recommended. (Alcohol abuse was very rare; there were no binges or drunken parties. I knew of no illegal drugs; they were just beginning to be widespread in Greenwich Village, I learned after I moved there in the fall of 1948. But smoking was widespread.) The democratic free-for-all meetings were so unregulated and endless that people stayed away as the semester wore on, despite the lack of alternative amusements, and only the "organized minority" would show up and vote policies that could not be enforced.

When tensions seemed to be near the breaking point, the Rector and the Board of Fellows (one student and 3 or 4 faculty members, all elected) might call an "interlude." This could last for 4 - 7 days, and all classes were cancelled, and students and faculty were enjoined to do a project that was completely different from what they had been studying or teaching. The wave of euphoria was instant, and trips to Asheville, hiking in the surrounding mountains, swimming in the little lake, building rafts, painting if you were in literature, intense reading if you were a painter, and cooking on your study hot plate filled the days. One or two of these were necessary each semester, and they cooled the hothouse.

But for a few, something better in the way of Roberts Rules of Order at either stormy or sparse community meetings was needed. While some of the "fascists" (or democrats as they called themselves) wanted a more centralized and bureaucratic regime that would efficiently take care of all such problems, and pushed for a more powerful Board of Fellows, some of the "democrats" (or communists, as they were called by the other side) saw a new model on the horizon: self-governing through small groups set up to represent diverse views and diverse statuses. The ideal group would have new and old students, faculty from different specialties, a business staff member, a farmer. A leader would be elected from each of six or eight groups and the leaders would find the common ground and a solution and report back to the community for discussion and implementation.

It is hard to think of this now common device as novel; it is a mainstay of academic and business conferences and community meetings. But in 1947 I think

it was fairly novel. Certainly many in the community though it was novel, and some found it not only time consuming but quite dangerous. The instigator was a quiet, unassuming, but determined and covertly charismatic psychology professor, John Wallen, who had studied with the leader of "group process," Carl Rogers while at the University of Chicago. We got copies of Roger's latest book, and an important but neglected precursor, *The Dynamics of Learning*, by Nathaniel Cantor. A few students, myself included, treated Roger's work as biblical, and under Wallen's tutelage, convinced the community that this was the new form of governance. The consensus that would emerge from the group leaders' meeting would be given to the Board of Fellows for implementation. It lasted for a few stormy, exhausting months, adding a burden to a libertine community that did not want any governance, but just believed that if each did their own thing "democracy" would result.

I was unwittingly near the center of the movement. Three of my closest student friends – Arthur Penn, Jesse Dawes Green, and Mervin Lane, and our girl friends were known as Wallen's acolytes, and my friends got me elected as the student representative, the "Student Moderator," an ambiguous title. It was an ominous election; for the first time the candidate was not informally selected and agreed upon ahead of time by key faculty members. The Albers faction, hearing of the move by "Wallen's boys," nominated an art student, who lost badly.

The Board of Fellows, where I represented the students, was, for me, awesome. My most beloved professor, William Levi, a philosopher from the University of Chicago, was there, but so were two of the old-line faculty who were close to the two or three wealthy easterners who bailed the college out every now and then, and a representative of the real power on campus, Josef Albers. (At the beginning of my term he was on leave.) I have the agonizing memory of Levi asking me at one crucial juncture to speak up for the students. I couldn't. They seemed as divided as the faculty, and I was too baffled to know what I believed. In the face of the powerful arguments of powerful people, I whimped, and let Wallen and Levi and my friends down. There were no Mario Savio speeches from me. Would the 1960's culture of speaking out have made a difference? Radical

innovations and controversy were a BMC tradition, but in defense of my wimpery, the suffusion of the oxymoronic community ideal of a "libertine consensus" seemed to smother my groping dissent. I kept looking for Wallen's consensus. Levi battled Albers without effective support from me.

But something important happened to me in that connection, which did shape my subsequent life, and while reflecting a banal eternal dilemma, the subsequent shift in American culture has given it a precocious urgency. The dilemma was individual self-interest, ascendant today, versus community interest, BMC's official ideology. But more deeply, the issue was the existence of evil. BMC was a place where the injunction was to make every individual flower bloom bigger and brighter than the others, where the competition for recognition was intense and "privatized," we would say now. But it was also an isolated community of volunteer members that needed to maximize "other-regarding" behavior. Were intelligent and creative individuals able to come together, or was this doomed by inescapable human evil. Portentous as this sounds, it was something that gripped us.

John Wallen's group process solution certainly seemed appropriate. He argued in his teachings and community activity that the conflicts were on the surface. Those who wanted to spend precious resources on painting and beautifying our humble surroundings (a proposed mile of handsome, white fencing on the roads and paths was the major icon) had legitimate concerns. So did those of us who wanted to enlarge the library and get another second-hand grand piano. (Books were a key resource for those in literature, philosophy, history and the social sciences. They were prized and fondled and hidden away from incessant borrowers. Two copies of a new treatise by an important German philosopher, Karl Jaspers, *Man in the Modern World*, were passed about in two hour intervals. The crazy treatise of William Reich on orgone therapy was always "missing" from the small room designated the library, which had only "open shelves.") If we only sat down together, Wallen argued, we could dig below this conflict and find out what people "really" wanted, and reach a point where the interests of each could be served. Not a simple compromise, good enough itself for our conflicts, but an

understanding of the conflicting interests that would lead to a redefinition of those interests and a respect for each other. Two, three, four levels of soundings might be needed before we discovered the common ground, but it was bound to be there. (This was a community, after all, and we were all in it together. Man is good.)

In its first application it worked strikingly well: Art Penn, a fellow student, had produced a stunning production of the new Sartre play, *No Exit*, and Board of Fellows wanted it given again for "important" visitors (donors) who would be coming. The lead in the play quixotically refused; the acting class Penn taught (yes, students taught, and faculty sometimes were students) had done it for the experience, not for fund raising. (Unanimous consent, like the Quaker "sense of the meeting," was always being tested in our deliberations, and here the principle held. But so did the culture of the lone individual drawing his life blood from the community.) Wallen's techniques found a brilliant solution: a dramatization of the process of producing the drama (drink deep), repeating just one act at the end to illustrate the product.

Art, Dawes, Dick Spahn and I pondered the group process technique at length as it was used for some months. Initially enthusiastic, we became suspicious, because it increasingly did not work. My Board of Fellows experience finally led me to the obvious rebuttal, and a break with Wallen. Some people did not want a solution, I decided. They simply detested so much about their opponents that they wanted them defeated, humiliated, driven out. It had happened twice before when the founder Rice was expelled, and when Erich Bentley and other young faculty resigned in disgust at the tactics of Albers and Theodore Drier. This was a transparent community; one could not curse in private and make the best of things, and look out for oneself. Curses oozed out in the dining hall at breakfast, lunch or dinner, or in coffees in the study hall; curses were seen as implicit in your choice of dining tables and your pairing off on the lovely walk up the hillside by the lake to the study building. There was "no exit," all entrances and exits were noted. Psychology or philosophy had to abut and rub painting and weaving. They confronted each other in the mush wars and many others; getting to the dining hall a bit late meant you had to eat at a table where those others were.

It was a realization that "evil," after all, existed.

We had read the masters of optimism, such as the wonderful sermons of Mary Parker Follett, a brilliant political scientist of the 1920's who was a forerunner of the group dynamics movement, and Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom*, in Wallen's class. But in Levi's, we had Karl Jaspers' nearly unintelligible *Man in the Modern World* (poor translations, said Levi, as he helped us with it), and against Wallen's assignment of a striking new work by Karen Horney, *The Neurotic Personality in Our Time*, sweetly undermining Freud's pessimism, Levi had us tackle Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*. (Not many first year undergraduates were reading and debating such materials in other colleges I expect.) Some people (like the Nazis or the communists) were simply bad, and no democratic processes could reach their evil.

In perhaps faulty retrospect, this realization shaped my future life and career. I became, after failing to write a great American novel or even a publishable short story, the kind of sociologist who emphasizes the overriding importance of power and interests in society, rather than the kind that emphasizes nurture, culture, or common humanity. (The latter are ascendant today in sociology.) We must devise structures, I argue, such as organizational forms, laws, and taken-for-granted institutions, that will bring out the other-regarding sentiments of people, and not activate the self-interested sentiments. The latter favor privatization, deregulation, and "free" markets that corporations control. Context shapes behavior, but the temptation to self-interested behavior is always there and must be fought. It is the "evil" in humans.

BMC at this time, and probably at other times as well, was divided. On the one hand was the idea of community, and democratic governance, announced in the BMC catalogue, but really espoused for the first time in its history by the young idealist John Wallen. On the other hand was the idea of artistic, aesthetic achievement that would make problems of governance take care of themselves, that is to say, those who achieved the ideal would be the authorities. At a deeper level, I felt that the emerging split concerned human nature, and could not be resolved either by Wallen's group process techniques or Albers' unconscious

authoritarianism, and soon I was to resign my post.

I was already near resignation when we had an explosive faculty meeting on the issue of fences versus pianos. (Meetings had become so stressful that powerful tranquilizers – a rather new thing – were taken by some female faculty members prior to the faculty meetings.) Levi was Rector, and in the chair, in favor of pianos, and he won by one vote. A recess was called, and he and some supporters left the room. Albers, second in command, reconvened the meeting amidst cries of illegality, including mine, and took a new vote and won. When Levi and his supporters returned they in effect said that if Albers and Drier and their supporters wanted the college that bad, it was not worth saving. The hotel was almost half emptied at the end of the semester as students and faculty moved on. The fences were painted and new ones went up the next fall. Faculty salaries were raised and longer service rewarded, the social sciences were almost abandoned, tuition raised and fellowships cut, and new faculty members were to have no say in governance for their first year. I resolved to not return in the fall, and my bitterness was enough to lead me to steal two books from the precious library, in anger, rationalizing that no one next year would ever again check out the beautiful *Permanence and Change*, by Kenneth Burke, or the latest book by the insane psychologist, Wilhelm Reich, on orgone therapy.

But I had the G.I. bill and nowhere to go, so I stayed on for the incredible summer session, which was to have the de Koonings, Cage and Cunningham, Richard Lippold, Buckminster Fuller, the young novelist Isaac Rosenfeld, who tragically died a few years later, and others that were subsequently to contribute to Black Mountain's growing fame. Fuller rambled through tedious 4 hour evening lectures, but always struck sparks nevertheless. Rosenfeld's course on Tolstoy was stunning, though he himself hated Black Mountain. Cage opened the closets of the heretofore chaste homosexuals and played all the works of Eric Satie, declaring that Beethoven had no sense of rhythm. Pianist Erwin Bodky returned the favor with all the sonatas of Beethoven. I loved them both. Arthur Penn staged more plays, including Satie's *The Ruse of Medusa*, its second performance anywhere. Buckminster Fuller played the clown, and Elaine deKooning glided waif-like and

entrancingly through the role first played by Mrs. Darius Milhaud in France. She continued to flit like an alluring butterfly through the sex lives of some students and faculty members. Her husband, the painter Willem deKooning, and the sculptor Ronald Lippold left us incredulous and baffled. All this was a glitter that made the basic conflicts of the regular season suddenly seem superficial in that glorious summer.

SEX

American society in the late 1940's was still very much a family society. Divorce was still rare, there was no TV to sell the young on profit-yielding (and dangerous) new life styles, volunteer work and charitable groups were approaching their peak, and one of the few national scandals concerned a vicuna coat accepted President Truman, rather than a presidential stain on a dress. The sexual revolution and the pill were far off. But BMC was experimenting, and the sewer line from the study hall was clogging. I think the sexual activity had as much to do with the sheer joy of existence, drinking deeply, and exploring life that most of us felt at the college, as it did with normal biological urges. The intimacy of the community was intense, and part of the philosophy was to open one's self up to life. Even reserved, misogynous Albers made his greatest contribution by teaching students how to see, and touch, and mold the simplest of objects. He hated imitation, rewarded openness in art, notwithstanding his own art which might be mistaken for just rigid, colored rectangles. (Only years later did I learn how to see and appreciate his art.) The sense of discovery was palpable in the community. At meal times a friend would rush up to your table with her tray to tell everyone about a book she came across, or a new project in the woodworking shop, or a Shakespeare sonnet she was reading with M.C. Richards. Or show up with a new love in tow.

The exploration and discovery extended to physical intimacy. Relationships were serious. Two deviant cases will make my point. The first involved a girl who was an isolate, and a group of students that had come down with the communist economics teacher. It was rumored that she slept with them in turn, over a short time, and gossiped about it. She was asked to leave. Casual, serial

mating was strongly disapproved of, and talking about it even more so. That was not what was meant by drinking deeply of the community. The second case involved myself. A good friend, who was not particularly attractive and did not have a boy friend, approached me in one of the times when I was unattached. It would be good for both of us, she said, if we had sex, but with no strings attached; it would be purely physical, and we were both hard up. We were unable to sustain the relationship; it was out of keeping with the norm of responsible sex.

I would expect that well over half of the student body had steady mates at one time or another. It was a joke, but with much substance to it, that every two or three months there would be a major reshuffling of partners, a short sorting-out period, and then a settling down for two or three months. Given the extent of sexual activity and the small size of the student body, such reorganization periods were to be expected. And some, I know, did without for two or three months, since liaisons were far from random and people chose carefully.

The reason they did was that after a night on a mattress on the floor in your study in the study building – all studies had mattresses for sitting about – you would have breakfast together, then lunch, and then dinner. Furtive flings or casual sex were discouraged by the living, especially dining, arrangements, the small size of the community, and its transparency. It would have been hard to deceive the community when the two of you were watched, from the dining room porch, as you left the study building the first thing in the morning to strole down the road by the lake to breakfast, your dorm beds unoccupied. The relationship had to be serious, according to the norms, and its depth was judged by frequent observations at meals and community events. There was no escaping. It was not possible to avoid seeing someone you did not want to see. When a breakup occurred, the community knew instantly. If it was two particularly attractive people, and other relationships had been stable for a couple of months, odds were given that a major reshuffling was likely to take place. Students were experimenting. Everything was intense at BMC, and this included their love relationships; experiments can be intense even if lasting “only” a month or two. (At BMC, a month was of such intensity in all respects, that it seemed like

semester in a conventional college.)

What did the faculty think? They were not, as a body, able to cast the first stone. Liaisons between faculty and students did take place, but other than in the summer sessions, no liaisons that I knew of between faculty, other than a lesbian one. Officially they disapproved and cited, each year, the Fire Marshall's ruling that it would violate code if anyone slept over night in their study. After I left the college I heard two unexplained absences explained; the girls had gone north to have abortions, and the faculty knew of it and allowed them to return. It was not always so broad-minded, as in the wallflower case I mentioned above, but the issue there, I believe, was the violation of the norms against casual and certainly serial sex and gossiping about it. In other cases, before my time and after it, the faculty was occasionally destructive and punitive, but these were isolated cases. Liaisons could not be hidden, and it would have violated so many tenets of the community to seriously forbid and police them, and taken so many resources, that they had to be at least tolerated. I believe that for a majority of the faculty they were looked upon as a part of the education. Certainly some faculty gave informal counseling to students whose love affairs proved devastating, and of course we students counseled each other interminably.

I though I was in love more than once at the college, and not all of these led to sexual intimacy, but most did. One affair was truly deep, and for three months or so "Susan," I will call her, and I were together constantly. I was so happy that I typed a little note, cut it out in a narrow strip, and pinned it to the bulletin board in the study building: "Susan and Chick are happy." It was like a public announcement of an engagement, and people loved it. Unfortunately, the girl's parents did not, and when she went home for the Christmas vacation she was told to break the affair off, and she never returned. I was devastated She later married properly: a Jewish psychiatrist.