

## On the Occasion of my Retirement from Renison University College

May 24, 2007

Thank you, thank you. It is a bit embarrassing, mostly untrue, but much appreciated.

I am a child of borders. The Bryant farm in North Dakota is on the Canadian border. My larger than life Bryant grandfather married (his third) a Canadian. My father was English & Scot, my mother Finnish: I was a product of their border crossing. My early life crossed the borders of farm and town, and Indian and Christian through Old Bill McGillis, son of a Metchif woman who went on the last Buffalo hunt in 1867, and worked on the farm at harvest time. I felt obliged to continue something my cousin Charles had begun, but did not finish due to a plane crash: to go to college. Now I crossed a border when no Bryant had been. Then it was on to that non-denominational Divinity School as Harvard where I crossed the border into an ecumenical Christianity and an awareness of world religions. I came to Canada forty years ago to teach and I've crossed many borders since, none more important than when I went to India in 1986-87.

1973 was a very big year for me: I met Susan and later that year I got a teaching position at Renison College as a Professor of Religion & Culture. Susan gave me my life back, Renison gave me a vocation. Who knew I would remain for thirty-four years? On September 11, 1973, September 11, 1973, Salvador Allende died during the coup in Santiago, Chile. (I had organized events for a World Encounter of Lutheran Youth in 1969-70 and I had been to almost every Latin American country and was still passionate about that world.) I organized an event in Modern Languages: it was my first act as a Renison Professor.

Over the next 34 years I have had this remarkable opportunity to teach and to spend my life in the company of the great thinkers of humankind from Augustine to Anselm and Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy to Sakyamuni (the Awakened One, the Buddha), Confucius, and Lao Tzu and Shinran, to

teach young students, to encounter and know people of diverse cultures who became my global friends, to build bridges of understanding, to cross borders and then at the end of each month to get paid for doing what I loved. You can't beat that.

I did once try to leave – it was in the early years. But then a new Principal came to town and in our first meeting he said, 'Now, Professor Bryant, what can the College do to help you achieve your scholarly goals?' I was stunned. I'd had several years of teaching then and mostly battled with administrators, lost two jobs, and wondered if the academy was the place for me – and tears came to my eyes. I finally managed to mumble something like thanks, but from then on this has been a wonderful place. Thank you, Ian. I am immensely grateful to Ian, then to Gail Cuthbert-Brandt and the current Principal, John, for their exemplary leadership of the College.

And then there were my colleagues: Michael Bird, he welcomed me as did Hugh and Judith Miller. We worked together in rich and wonderful ways. Then there was Mark and a host of others like Barbara Checketts and Jean Hertzog who have enriched my life here at Renison. I am grateful to all of you too as well as to my colleagues in Religious Studies, especially Jim Reimer and David Seljak. They honoured me with a day of discussion of my work last week and I missed people like Rod Sawatsky and Russell Legge. Some others had fortunately gone away. But this has been a wonderful Department and I am grateful to them as well.

And now to the heart of it: there is Susan, my wonder, my love, my partner, and friend. In your love I regained myself and you have been the constant sweetness in my life. With Ben and Jessica and Lucas and Emma we have created a family that continues to enrich my life.

Finally, this retirement marks the end of my life as a Professor here at the College...but I won't quite disappear. The College has agreed to let me establish a Centre for Dialogue and Spirituality in the World Religions. This Centre will focus on public education and seek to cross those borders of ignorance, antagonism, and violence that have been too much with us in

the religious life of humankind. And instead we will seek to build bridges of understanding and relationships of mutual respect and friendship. I have been able to enlist the support of a remarkable international board of scholars, including Huston Smith and Ursula King, and religious leaders like Shrivatsa Goswami and Dr. S. A. Ali who will advise me in this project.

Thank you all for coming. It means a great deal to me.