

Summer 2006

## This Humane Man of Letters

Barbara Seidman  
*Linfield College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/linfield\\_magazine](https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/linfield_magazine)

---

### Recommended Citation

Seidman, Barbara (2006) "This Humane Man of Letters," *Linfield Magazine*: Vol. 3 : No. 1 , Article 7.  
Available at: [https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/linfield\\_magazine/vol3/iss1/7](https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/linfield_magazine/vol3/iss1/7)

This article is brought to you for free via open access, courtesy of DigitalCommons@Linfield. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@linfield.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@linfield.edu).

# This humane *man of letters*

*I* remember it vividly. During my first conversation with Dr. Marvin Henberg, candidate to become Linfield's new dean of faculty, I found myself talking about the philosophic bonafides of 19th century British novelist George Eliot (nee Mary Ann Evans). As a longtime member of the English Department, I hardly regarded such a foray into literature in the midst of a job interview digressive, but what I didn't know at the time was that I was thus being initiated into a defining characteristic of Marv's subsequent deanship: the breadth and depth of his passion for the life of the mind, in all its variousness. Over the 12 years since, I have never stopped learning from Marv Henberg – most recently through his eloquent reflection on the interplay between author and audience that served as prelude to a talk by his longtime friend – and nationally distinguished writer – David Quammen. That conversation about George Eliot in May of 1994 was clearly no flash in the pan.

I am by no means the only beneficiary of Marv's generous mentorship in his tenure as senior college administrator. In six years as associate dean for academic affairs, and now again as interim dean of faculty, I have relied on him ceaselessly for guidance. His philosopher's training has equipped him to take the long view in the face of problems that seem impossible of resolution: More than once he has advised me to accept the humbling fact that perfect justice is out of our limited human reach, so we should at least strive to do as little harm as possible as we wrestle with conflicting needs. And while a confessed skeptic, he has also conceded an essentially optimistic view of human nature – if reason itself does not always win the day, then he draws comfort from believing at least that defensible motives propel all sides in a disagreement and are worthy of engagement. This doesn't surprise me in a man who has spent his life immersed in great literature, whose primary lesson may indeed be the cultivation of such capacity for empathy.

In partnership with President Emerita Vivian Bull, Marv has achieved great things for the college during his academic vice presidency, and they need only a brief glossing here: the opening of a long-awaited new library; the flowering of the Keck Campus into a vibrant new hub for

the arts; the hiring of some 60 faculty members on both campuses; the inauguration of collaborative research opportunities that enrich the professional aspirations of students and faculty alike; the launching of an environmental studies program that models the integrative thinking that will be essential to solving the problems of the 21st century both regionally and globally. In each of these ways Marv's efforts have fostered the cooperative synergies that have made the Linfield College of 2006 a center of visionary education in the Northwest. It was only fitting, then, that the Board of Trustees asked him to assume the mantle of interim president at a crucial moment of transition in the life of the institution.

But my thoughts about Dean and President Henberg's contributions to Linfield keep returning to the humane man of letters I am now watching re-immense himself in his faculty roots. As he resumes the mantle of full-time professor of philosophy (one soon to be on a well-deserved sabbatical), he is enthusiastically spending hours in the college archives preparing to write about Linfield's past as prologue to its future as part of the college's 2008 sesquicentennial celebration. After a dozen years doing Linfield's business, Marv sees his future in terms of the sheer delight of inquiry and synthesis that define the life of the mind I saw on display in that 1994 interview when our association began. His example in these weeks and months to come may prove to be the most long-lasting of all the powerful influences he has had on my own life.

— Barbara Seidman  
Interim Dean of Faculty

Marvin Henberg, right, with Bill Apel, professor of religious studies, left, and Huston Smith, one of the world's foremost religious scholars, who gave the Frazee Lecture this spring.

