

## **INTRODUCTION**

Few college courses generate as much public attention and controversy as the one that led to this book. The *New York Times* called the course Idealism 101, and *Boston Magazine* wrote: “If Harvard’s most popular course, Economics 10, prepares econ majors to become employee-axing, environment-wrecking CEOs, its *second* most popular course (and largest elective) . . . goes the other way, leading its students toward St. Francis–style sainthood.” The course, the magazine continued, is “taught by the slim, wispy-voiced, and vaguely monkish Brian Palmer.”

How did a course in the religion program, led by someone *Slate* magazine correctly described as an “obscure lecturer,” attract international media coverage and as many as six hundred students per semester? To understand that turn of events, one can begin four years ago at a tent city that appeared in Harvard Yard.

During the neoliberal 1990s, Harvard subcontracted jobs and paid miserly wages to the people who mowed the lawns, mopped the floors, and cooked the potatoes. An employee at the world’s wealthiest university could work full-time and be homeless at night.

Many students pleaded on these workers’ behalf, but to no avail. Then, in April 2001, fifty students stormed into the Harvard president’s office. They carried backpacks full of food and cell phones and announced that they would occupy the office until an adequate “Living Wage” was paid to the janitors and cooks.

The campus was electrified. Daily demonstrations took place outside the president’s office, and dining-hall workers delivered

free pizzas to the occupiers through the windows. Dozens of people began camping in tents in Harvard Yard, ready to bear witness at any hour if the police tried to remove the protesters by force.

Harvard's manicured lawns became a space of human connection as never before, complete with signs renaming the walkways after such figures as Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela. Coming home from my office in the evening, I would often encounter groups of students and workers discussing strategies or singing protest songs.

This went on for three weeks. The university's power holders—known as the Harvard Corporation—were increasingly embarrassed by the media coverage they received, with stories spotlighting the gap between golden-parachuted money managers and hard-knocks janitors. On Day 21, the corporation agreed to a process that would establish a Living Wage for the workers who sustain this preparatory school for tomorrow's elites. The alliance of workers, students, and teachers had won an astonishing victory.

In that atmosphere of engagement and hope, my students and I began to notice the injuries of inequality that secured our affluence. We interviewed cooks and cleaners and security guards. In a university fed by the donations of billionaires, we read Barbara Ehrenreich's words about a different kind of philanthropy. The working poor, she wrote, are "the major philanthropists of our society. They neglect their own children so that the children of others will be cared for; they live in substandard housing so that other homes will be shiny and perfect; they endure privation so that inflation will be low and stock prices will be high. To be a member of the working poor is

to be an anonymous donor, a nameless benefactor, to everyone else.”

These concerns became the central theme of my courses and thereby of this book: How are we to live in a world of gaping inequalities? What are we to do when other people are being hurt? What are the obligations of those who are comfortable to those who suffer?

The Living Wage struggle had prompted me and many of my students to examine what the late Susan Sontag called “the inadequacy of our response to the simultaneity of wildly contrasting human fates.” She remembered the philosopher Voltaire: “Hearing the news of the earthquake that leveled Lisbon on Nov. 1, 1755 . . . the great Voltaire was struck by our inveterate inability to take in what happened elsewhere. ‘Lisbon lies in ruins,’ Voltaire wrote, ‘and here in Paris we dance.’” Or here in Harvard Square.

One of my graduate students, Kate Holbrook, and I planned a new course to address how one might live in such a world. What does it mean to live deliberately, as Henry David Thoreau once put it? How can one “make a difference”? The course was to be called Personal Choice and Global Transformation, and it was set to begin on September 12, 2001.

On September 11, as my mother’s kitchen rattled when the second plane struck the World Trade Center and my brother-in-law evacuated a day-care center at the Pentagon, I wondered what my students needed to hear and what I was capable of saying at a time when we all felt overwhelmed and heartbroken.

The next day, I organized my lecture around a diary entry by the former UN secretary general Dag Hammarskjöld: “God has a use for you, even though what He asks doesn’t happen to suit

you at the moment.” On that day of smoldering ashes, many of us felt that the world might have a use for us, the world might need our services, in ways that we did not intend or wish for.

Just then, students in fields ranging from computer science to botany to law shared a common interest in influencing a world gone wrong. As enrollment in my course swelled during the following days, we had to move the class four times to larger and larger lecture halls.

My teaching philosophy began with the recognition that neither I nor anyone else had definitive answers to the ethical and political questions we were exploring. Before each semester, Kate and I scheduled a dozen or more individuals to visit the course for in-class interviews. These persons ranged from janitors to billionaires, from professors to corporate CEOs to nuns. They shared only a seriousness about the need to confront the world’s violence and injustice.

Our guests did not give any lectures. Instead, the students read work by or about them (*lecture* in French means “reading”). Groups of students prepared questions in advance and posed them during the interviews. Kate and I trotted about the auditorium with portable microphones, periodically intervening with comments and questions of our own.

Students found this format enlivening. They often sought to press our guests—to take up difficult issues that seemed to have been overlooked or evaded in the articles we read. At other times the focus was on the preparation and thought that had enabled our visitors to make difficult personal choices, such as the decision to become a whistle-blower or to work in a war zone. Student reflections continued after each interview, in discussion sections, daily writing assignments, Web-based exchanges, and weekly class dinners in Harvard dining halls.

For the guests, the experience of being grilled by a group of energetic young people was often profound and vivifying. One guest, Robert Reich, credits his course visit with tipping the scales for his decision—made later the same day—to run for governor of Massachusetts. (To the disappointment of students who flocked to his campaign, he didn't get the job.)

Some interviews moved students and guests alike to tears, as when a Harvard dining-hall worker spoke of the love she feels toward the people she serves. Other days were tragicomic: a seminude guest from an animal-rights organization staged an antifur protest in Harvard Square, only to miss his interview while under arrest for indecent exposure. And interviews could occasionally become tense, as when Harvard's president, Lawrence Summers, bristled at a student's question about why the college gives an automatic advantage in admissions to the children of its alumni.

In selecting interviews for inclusion in the pages that follow, my coeditors and I looked for material of enduring significance, beyond the particular place and time of the course. Some discussions were left out because they were tied to specific moments, such as the run-up to the invasion of Iraq. Others were too Harvard-centric to be of broader interest. And some guests did not want their interviews to be published.

What remains is a set of sixteen conversations, each one full of idiosyncratic formulations as students and guests struggle to say what they mean. It is that rough-hewn quality that makes the texts captivating. Lacking professional caution and PR polish, these interviews have an openhearted quality, admitting weaknesses and suggesting that the conversation is not finished.

As the thirteenth-century saint Albertus Magnus put it, "The

greatest of all human pleasures is to seek the truth in conversation.” My colleagues and I hope that the conversations in this book will spark many others.

BRIAN C. W. PALMER

*Stockholm, Sweden*

*June 2005*