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***Philosophy at Large***  
**Keynote Remarks**  
**Philosophy in the Valley: Undergraduate Philosophy Conference**  
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**Bill Vitek**

My topic tonight is philosophy at large. “At large” is a phrase that means both ‘as a whole or in general;’ and ‘at liberty, or not yet captured.’ Both describe the sense of philosophy I would like to articulate tonight, with some brief stories and anecdotes about my life in and with philosophy; and with a bit of, well, philosophizing about my current book project, tentatively titled: *The Perennial Imagination: Hard Wired for Eternity*. I think it’s all connected. I hope you find that it is.

But when my remarks are concluded in about 40 minutes or less, let’s have a conversation; let’s do some philosophizing. Perhaps discuss books/authors that woke us up or what brought us to philosophy, and what has it done **to** us, **for** us and **with** us? Who are our favorite philosophers and why? How can we share our enthusiasms for Kant or Foucault without boring our friends and family, or having them make jokes at our expense? What are philosophy’s risks and hazards? We already know its joys and delights.

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Depending on how one counts, I've spent about 50 years in conversation with philosophy. I'm hoping I'm just hitting my stride. I don't have any sage insights to share with you this evening, so much as some of my experiences-reflected-upon.

Let's start with the one thing we all have in common in this room. We're not normal.

We're not interested in the normal, the norm, or at least not at its face value.

We likewise share a common belief that the solutions to most problems will come from thinking more deeply about them. That takes time, and in a world in which time is perceived as racing and as a premium not to be wasted, there is little patience for slow thinking. But not just in our time. Most of Socrates' interlocutors, after they were bested or simply confused by his questions, hurried off to their next destination.

Philosophers have spent millennia trying to slow folks down.

I would also venture that all of us in this room share with the great philosophers an unease and dissatisfaction with the status quo, or we are curious to explore alternatives that speak to our own experiences. Like them we are well-educated in a worldview and in socio-cultural norms that we feel the urge to reject or reconsider by holding up to the light. And like them, if we persist, we might rethink these norms and offer alternatives; to think our way out and toward something new. The pre-Socratics, Confucius and Buddha, Plato, the Hellenistic philosophers, Descartes, Kant, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Whitehead, among so many were all doing something akin to this. And I would include folks like Galileo, Newton, Darwin and Einstein too, who were not doing

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philosophy per se, but whose works were deeply philosophical, and required the philosophers of their day to fire up the speculative engines and reconfigure the conceptual landscape.

All of us in this room have become animated (literally 'made alive') by philosophy, by what Whitehead calls the "Adventures of Ideas" and Heidegger "The Craft of Thinking." The very word 'philosophy' says it all: the love of wisdom. And I think we all know what it's like to fall in love. It begins with a fall. And with desire. We've been smitten by this thing we call philosophy. And like any long-term relationship founded on love, we have to learn to live with each other, to learn from each other. We change, and sometimes by our work philosophy changes, too, even if only a little bit; it is, after all, a lot older than we are. Together we quarrel, grow, and sometimes have a falling out. It helps me to think about my philosophical journeys in these relational terms.

Why aren't there more of us? Every newborn enters the world a philosopher; Aristotle's first line in *Metaphysics*: "All humans by nature desire to know as evidenced by the delights we take in our senses." A toddlers' relentless questioning; her joys (and pains) of discovery; that first glimpse of self-consciousness in a mirror. I wish I could remember my first glimpse in the mirror of self-recognition. But for so many, life becomes normalized, routinized, grooved. We're animals after all, and repetition and routine are good things (our beating hearts, for example; the seasons; the daily 1,000 mph rotation of the earth; oatmeal for breakfast; DNA replication). But we're thinking

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animals too (and certainly not the only ones), and some of us take the thinking part more seriously than others. Here we are, for example, on a Saturday night taking some pleasure in thinking, and talking about thinking.

Why do we love philosophy so much or feel we have to do it, despite the quizzical looks from friends and family, and the stern looks from parents when questions about employment come up?

My hunch is that there has to be some inherent disposition towards philosophy, a refusal to quit the questioning despite the caricatures others form of us. This caricaturing has a long history going back to the story of Thales falling into a well while gazing upward at the stars, ridiculed for not keeping his mind on earthly matters; or Aristophanes' portrayal of Socrates as head of the *Thinkery*, a quasi-think-tank which has, among other things, come up with a new unit of measurement: the distance jumped by a flea. The play is titled "The Clouds" for obvious reasons.

We respond that philosophy's values are more intrinsic than instrumental, and indeed essential for the more or less hidden conceptual work that lies behind cultures and communities. It's not that philosophers always provide the concepts, but we do help discover them, articulate and analyze them. This work can end badly for those who are thought to go too far. When ridiculing and ignoring us don't work, harassment, banishment, torture and hemlock are brought in.

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These days' philosophy is mostly ridiculed and ignored. I confess, there's a bit of safety in obscurity, with our heads safely in books; and I'd rather not have my life or my family's life threatened. But the work of philosophy is never only in the halls of the academy. There continues to be radical thinking going on around the world that chips away at outmoded, unsound and unjust foundational ideas. Peter Singer and the animal rights movement; the environmental movement; the LGBTQ and trans movements, and issues of race, gender, religious freedom....it's a long list. Philosophy might lead to the early demise of some its practitioners, but it is far from dead or dying. And it is most vital when it lives in the hearts and minds of a thinking community; when together we engage and examine the world and ourselves, looking for clues about structure and order, underlying assumptions, outward and inward perspectives, and alternatives. It may be impossible to get fully outside of ourselves or to penetrate to some deep ontological, epistemological or ethical insights while occupying a living body that is swarmed by living things in and on our bodies, and with living things all around us doing their living things.

And yet we try. We strive, we desire, we imagine, we create connections between ideas, we make something new. Take any basic concept in philosophy: you will find it connected to an earlier idea. Philosophers are like craftspeople. They work with what they have, but they create something new with it. And not just for the masses or for future generations, but for themselves. We have to imagine Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus,

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Descartes and all the rest thinking their ideas not only for others, but for themselves.

We don't need to be a big name in philosophy to be a successful philosopher.

Individually we can take the joy and applications in it for ourselves. And please, don't forget the joy. If you find yourself continually depressed by doing philosophy, take a break from it, find something else to do. It's OK to be challenged and frustrated by it, but if it becomes for you a weapon that you turn on yourself or others, it may end up doing more harm than good. Yes, engage people in dialogue and conversation in good Socratic fashion. Use philosophy to fight for social justice and environmental sustainability. Just remember that philosophy can be dangerous to handle.

Here's my philosophical journey in a nutshell:

Neither my dad, an engineer, nor my mom, a homemaker, nor my two older brothers had any interest or contact with philosophy. They were practical and hardworking people. My dad loved math and inventing things (talking mailbox, key holder, variable speed windshield wipers). I was bad at both. He told me once that I asked philosophical questions as a very young child, more than most, I guess, or at least more than did my brothers. I don't remember what they were, unfortunately, and my dad never told me what they were. We were Catholic. That's a big part of my story. I spent a lot of time with priests and seminarians talking about theology and philosophy in my early teens. In 10<sup>th</sup> grade my Social Studies teacher, Mr. Bydiark, gave me Will Durant's *The Story of Philosophy*. That's kind of the official beginning for me. After reading it I'm all in, having

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to explain constantly why I was reading such dense books, or to answer the question: “Isn’t philosophy a lot like psychology?” I began to question my Catholic faith. The priests, to my surprise, welcomed it and we had many fruitful discussions. Then in the summer of 10<sup>th</sup> grade I read Nietzsche, particularly *The Genealogy of Morals* and *The Antichrist*. My Catholic head exploded. Full of anger and Nietzschean rhetoric, I nevertheless still remained a Catholic and attended Catholic University of America after high school, where I finally renounced my faith. (How’s that for ironic? My dad was not pleased.) But not before spending a year with the great Thomist philosopher John Whipple, studying Aquinas and Aristotle, where I fell in love with philosophy’s penchant for building systems. I ended up at Union College where two teachers, Linda Patrik and Richard Taylor, introduced me respectively to the philosophies of Asia and to a more plain-spoken style of philosophy. I read David Hume, too, and warmed to his insistence that we focus on the common life, and his reminder that when in our study or in the library the philosophical going gets tough, we should go out with friends and have a drink and play backgammon...Chill. Well, that helped me mellow a bit. Put down those Nietzschean hammers, and put philosophy into a conversation with friends and community....and some beer. Do something useful with it.

That practical turn probably had a lot to do with my being surrounded by engineers, carpenters, plumbers, electricians, (and my argument-hating mother—it stressed her out to hear people arguing), who was a great cook, a great friend, and an all-around

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forward-looking and practical person). I loved and admired them all and what they were able to do with their hands, even if I was a left-handed klutz. But they tolerated me and I've become a pretty good helper over the years. I hold a mean flashlight.

I ran away from philosophy after graduating from college and pursued a music career working at it full-time in New York's Capital Region for a few years, but never losing the urge to philosophize, even if it was inspired more by peyote and mushrooms than Kant and Hegel. But I returned to graduate school after meeting a former philosophy professor in a jazz club. It was in graduate school where I became involved in what was then called the "applied turn" in philosophy, first with medical ethics and then environmental ethics. My first full time job was across the river at Clarkson 31 years ago, where I was asked to teach environmental ethics. Not knowing where to start I asked a Clarkson colleague, a literature professor, Jan Wojcik. He handed me his worn copy of Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*. Another explosion in my head. Though not trained as a philosopher, the forester and ecologist Aldo Leopold was doing philosophy through-and-through his unassuming masterpiece. It set me on my path to environmental, ecological and ecospheric philosophy, and I guess what I would call my life's work, although that sounds pretentious. I just mean it's what I think and write and talk and teach about every day. I think that last sentence is 99% true.

I discovered Leopold 30 years ago. It led me to Wes Jackson, a plant geneticist, but steeped in philosophy, history, poetry and theology. He was one of the founders of the

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modern environmental movement in the early 70s. But he was frustrated with its inertial pace in the halls of the academy, and he left a tenured full professorship at Sacramento State U in California, and returned to his native Kansas where he started a school of his own that was part classroom, part homesteading. He named it The Land Institute. That was in 1976.

It was on a field trip with students to the Konza tallgrass prairie near Manhattan, Kansas that Jackson was “set off” on what he calls solving the 10,000 year problem of agriculture. On that field trip a student asked him why there weren’t perennial varieties of the major grain crops. (explain)

Jackson didn’t know for sure, but he knew the scientific answers would say it wasn’t productive or even possible (his science colleagues and teachers told him along the way that he was crazy, and worse.) But that didn’t stop him. He saw in the tallgrass prairie an inspiration to think differently about solving the problems **in** agriculture including soil erosion, chemical inputs, and loss of ecological integrities in living the soil that made all those inputs necessary.

The Land Institute slowly evolved into a plant science research center for developing perennial polycultures, a method that was eventually named Natural Systems Agriculture. It’s been a slow and steady work that Jackson predicted would take 50-100 years. But they’re ahead of schedule, with Kernza, a domesticated variety of perennial intermediate wheat grass now being planted in scientific plots around the world, and

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also in production. It's the first perennial grain in history, and the first new production grain crop in 4200 years. You can drink it, eat it, and you'll see it increasingly on the landscape in the coming years. But not just in monocultures, but in bi-cultures and polycultures, mimicking grassland ecosystems, "nature's genius and wisdom," Jackson calls it; requiring less soil disruption, less irrigation, fewer nutrient inputs, and fewer chemical and biological pest controls. The work is spreading internationally, with a perennial upland rice now developed in China, with The Land Institute's help. (the banner)

What does this have to do with philosophy? I know nothing about plant science, but I have been working alongside Jackson for almost 30 years now, adding philosophical speculation to the mix. Jackson believes we need to do more than just change how we grow food; we need to change how and what we think about food. It's a dream come true for me to put philosophy to work, albeit in an agricultural transformation, first on the landscape and then, potentially, in how we think about the landscape and ourselves. It's an example of new thinking building upon old thinking. It's philosophy at large. Completely unpredictable and unimaginable when I first became involved with philosophy. "Roots" in perennial plants and in perennial thinking. A powerful metaphor connecting food and thought, farming and philosophy. I'm resigning my position at Clarkson next summer to pursue this work full time.

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Let me mention one more book and experience. As I mentioned earlier, I was raised a Catholic and was all in for a time. Then I was all out, grumpy, opinionated and vindictive. Then I replaced my love-hate relationship with religion with my environmental journey seeking places to participate in communities of life, ecology, philosophy, and even a theology of sorts. I was reading broadly in Buddhist and Hindu philosophy, and one summer read the Bhagavad Gita, a Hindu spiritual classic. Again: Boom! In chapter 11 the god Krishna, who is discovered to be the god he is and not just the charioteer for the great warrior king Arjuna, who is about to begin a great battle that will require him to slaughter members of his own extended family—Krishna is asked by Arjuna for a glimpse of the universe the way a god experiences it. That's a dangerous request. Krishna doesn't hold back. First comes all the beauty and majesty, then the terror and misery. Arjuna can't handle it and looks away. But it's the universe the way a god sees it, and well, it **is** awesome. Full of goodness and evil. All of it.

I didn't know what to make of it, but it called out a unity I was always looking for in philosophy, and what, I think, attracted me to philosophy and religion in the first place. Albert Einstein, who with Yogi Berra, apparently said everything that was worth quoting, purportedly said something to the effect that the most important decision you have to make in your life is to decide for yourself whether or not the universe is a friendly place. Except for a few dark spots in my life, I have always answered affirmatively to that question. And the Gita brought me back to my Catholic upbringing in a circuitous way. I

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had been a rusted Catholic up until then. I couldn't move around in that space. But the meaning of the word "catholic" (small 'c') means 'all embracing.' I think philosophy tries to be all embracing in its scope and depth. It may not succeed, but there's little harm in trying. I'm still a lousy Catholic (big 'C'), but I can listen now more deeply and intently. It's another philosophical voice that again can speak to me. In other words, you may close some philosophical doors and open others in your life, but if you choose to lock some up for a time, use a hook and eye, not a lock with a key that you are likely to lose. You just never know.

Just to complete the journey, I'm reading Whitehead these days, following his advice to see in the pursuit of ideas an adventure. Heidegger, too, is a welcome new addition to my book pile. Which is to say, philosophy, once started, can run on its own and you can go along for the ride. I wish for you an adventure of mind and heart. That you see how philosophy can be put to use in your own lives and the lives of others; including our other-than-human neighbors and whatever notion of greater-than-human you imagine.

I have come to believe that philosophy is an improvisation, a riff on the perennial imagination that plays eternally (or at least for the last 14 billion years) throughout the entire universe; that **is** the universe. (And now for a bit of my own current work.)

Epicurus via Lucretius, called it the "swerve." Whitehead calls it "the creative advance" and theoretical biologist Stuart Kauffman calls the creative power of the universe "god."

This creativity formed the elements, gases, stars, planets, water, molecules, cells,

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organs, organisms, ecosystems, the ecosphere. Life has become conscious and self-conscious, giving voices, meanings and sense to the whole world. It all seems to suggest a universe full of creativity and emergency (a word that comes from the Latin and means “to arise, to bring to light”). In other words, a kind of agency all the way down and all the way up. Philosophy (and not just philosophy) mimics this cosmological imagination, creating various forms and formats, schools of thought, concepts like ‘being,’ ‘substance,’ ‘property’ and the ‘self’ that change cultural landscapes. Philosophy at large, philosophy writ large. What a grand story to be part of!

The life of the mind, Aristotle says, is close to the divine, and that the divine mind is responsible “for the heavens and the world of nature” (Metaphysics, BK XII, chapter 7). For Aristotle it’s as if the divine being thinks the world into existence. But so do philosophers and artists, and cells and bacteria. Spinoza, Whitehead and Bergson, among many others, call us to attend to this possibility: that thought or something akin to thought (the imagination? agency in all things? desire?) thinks the world into existence. And now scientists are on to it. Bacteria, according to the most recent study, are as numerous as your cells, and live in communities that talk among themselves and make decisions. It’s true. Scientists have changed the behavior of mice by changing their gut bacteria. And if some mushrooms help us to hallucinate, just imagine what that mind-altering power does to the mushrooms themselves and to their own communities of life and communications in the soils below. Nature’s internet, one

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scientist calls it. Above ground new scientific evidence gives credence to the mental capacities of birds and the ability of plants to count. Philosophy, I believe, is just a wonderful extension of this creative doing of things, like a living chess board. With it we are co-creative. Philosophy constrains and enables our options. We become creative in its midst. And the game never ends. It changes, too.

It's the same imagination, the same creative power that brings things into and out of existence, including myriad varieties of art, literature, philosophy, architecture, craft; varieties of music, dogs, cats, species, wine, beer, cheese, religions, social arrangements, art, clothing, customs, mores, elements, stars, galaxies. Yes, there are law-like behaviors and stability in those arrangements. But that stability is itself an imaginative form made real, existent, persistent by the physical system or the human person or society that creates it. In other words, I think the laws and stability have to be imagined into existence as well. Creativity is the origin of the structures, laws, forms. It is creativity that is propelled to create structures, laws and forms.

To say that the entire universe in the instant before the big bang was contained in an infinitely small container is to admit that creativity is powerful, nearly instantaneous and able to create its own conditions for existence. In the instant after the big bang there is a co-creative dance with the heat of desire in full form ('desire' is a word that even physicists use to describe sub-atomic attractions and repulsions). The Hindu Vedic Hymn #129 speaks poetically to this moment in the creation of being and the universe. We

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don't have the language (at least I don't) to go "before" the big bang, but I'm tempted to say that in addition to Einstein's advice, we have to decide for ourselves if actuality can spring from potentiality or if you have to assume an eternal actuality before you can get anything potentially. If I read Aristotle correctly I think he sides with actuality existing before potentiality since, as Lucretius argues after him, you can't get something from nothing. At least in this universe, actuality appears to be the norm.

The Dali Lama likes to say that he believes in the big bang so long as we imagine it as big bangs, a kind of eternal, universal respiration of being, non-being, being. But no single actuality or "thing" is ever entirely alone since it is always somewhere and somewhen in relationship with its environment. And in that thing's present time and space between the actual (the past) and the potential (the future), what Whitehead calls the actual occasion's "pulse" between its past and future, there is possibility, a creative potentiality. Most of the time the future ends up resembling the past: cobalt and nickel atoms, for example, have nearly identical atomic weights, but they each stubbornly remain what they are; as does the speed of light, and our cranky brother's views on politics. But to get the world we currently experience, and to know that this world has existed for nearly 14 billion years, I think we have to imagine the countless "swerves" to something new. "Swervy" creative pulses: partially lawless, surprising, an emergency, but not just the scary kinds. Charlie Parker's solo on a gig in the 1940s that came to be identified as the birth of be-bop jazz; Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony that broke a number of

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symphonic rules; the creation of monotheism; the periodic table coming into existence over a long stretch of time. If you need a divine being out in front of it all, let it at least be surprised by its creation.

Philosophy at large. It's where, when, however you are, we are. More fun when it's done with others, but pretty spectacular in its solitary confines, too. Philosophy brings ideas and thinking to life, and then lets that life live in the only way it can: in its own way. I think of philosophizing as a performance. Do it, let it go. Do it again. Plato was right to worry about this new thing called script and the dangers of freezing the act of philosophizing by writing it down. The philosophizing might stop; thinking for ourselves might stop. Perhaps this is why he wrote in dialogue form and why those dialogues almost never come to any real conclusions. A way to keep them going, in each of our own lives.

Well, this is a good reminder to put the written word aside. Let's do some philosophy!