



“SING IN ME, MUSE:” AN IMAGINATIVE CONVERSATION WITH W. WINSTON ELLIOTT III, BOARD MEMBER

WYOMING CATHOLIC COLLEGE: Tell us about your website, *The Imaginative Conservative*.

WINSTON ELLIOTT: *The Imaginative Conservative* is a journal of culture, the arts, liberal learning, faith, and politics. Our primary interest is in holding high the standard for liberal learning and cultural renewal. Instead of politicizing culture we encourage our readers to look beyond politics to the arts, education, the family and local community.



Our imaginative conservatism is for living, thinking, loving, human persons. We draw from the great minds of the past, and we are often inspired by them. Sometimes we are perplexed by them, and frequently we are appalled by them. Truly the greatest inspiration for our work is found in the, *continuing*, great conversation of our tradition. To paraphrase the historian Will Durant: We study great books as an encouraging remembrance of generative souls, a celestial city, a spacious country of the mind, wherein a thousand saints, statesmen, inventors, scientists, poets, artists, musicians, lovers, and philosophers still live and speak, teach, carve and sing.

I hope our readers, *The Imaginative Conservative* world wide online community, will be inspired to seek the true, the good, and the beautiful. Since 2010 *The Imaginative Conservative* has been read over eleven million times. We have published 5000 essays by 600 authors. As the Russell Kirk, the father of modern American conservatism, said: “I hope, our conservatism will be not merely a conservatism of timidity, but instead a conservatism of imagination, generous and charitable. I hope it will not be a clumsy muddling through our national problems, in contempt of principle, but on the contrary a conservatism illuminated by the wisdom of our ancestors and inspired by a revived consciousness of the moral nature of society.”

WCC: *The Imaginative Conservative* has a robust liberal arts and Great Books component. How is this vision for the website connected to your interest in Wyoming Catholic College?

ELLIOTT: Like Wyoming Catholic College, *The Imaginative Conservative* is committed to liberal learning and the great books of the western tradition. We have been privileged to publish the writings of several of WCC's wonderful Catholic scholars in our journal. It is an honor to be associated with a, very young, Catholic college with high standards of academic excellence and a rich spiritual life well grounded in the teachings of the Church. Like all new institutions we face many challenges, it will not be easy. However with dedication, prayer and hope we will well serve our community of learning, our families, and the Church. We are on a journey which honors our Creator with our minds, our hearts, and our spirits.

Perhaps there are four questions worthy of our consideration: What is sacred? Of what is the spirit made? What is worth living for, and what is worth dying for? The answer to each is the same: Love. Let us do all things for Love. The Love that created us asks only this.

WCC: As a Board member, you were instrumental in launching our Catholic Scholars Advisory Board. What is it, and what do you feel it adds to the college?

ELLIOTT: I am pleased that seventeen respected Catholic scholars from around the country have agreed to join the Wyoming Catholic College community as members of the Catholic Scholars Advisory Board. The Board will provide advice and assistance in support of the WCC academic mission. As Dr. Arbery said: "Our new Catholic Scholars Advisory Board brings some of the best Catholic minds around the world into conversation with our College and its friends."

The support of these distinguished scholars demonstrates that although we are a young college, we are not an isolated institution, but one fully integrated into the community of Catholic higher learning and scholarship. While WCC is geographically far from many of our friends we wish to remain connected with like minded scholars and gain the benefit of their wisdom and experience. We also hope that members will share the WCC story with colleagues and friends.

As President Arbery expressed beautifully in his inaugural address: "Our calling, our charge as a college, is to ennoble our students, to prepare them for the heroism and humility they will need in order

to bear witness to the truth." I pray that the Catholic Scholars Advisory Board may, in unity and humility, put before Our Mother our boldest hopes and desires for Wyoming Catholic College. By her intercession, through the divine grace of her Son, the College will do great things for God.

WCC: What is your favorite work of literature, and why is it your favorite?

ELLIOTT: "Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story of that man skilled in all ways of contending, the wanderer, harried for years on end, after he plundered the stronghold on the proud height of Troy." So begins Homer's *Odyssey*. Long ago I launched my ship in pursuit of the true, the good, and the beautiful. Often, I seemed to be crashing into the rock of Clint Eastwood's the good, the bad, and the ugly.

I have been blessed to spend many hours with Homer's *Odyssey*. I have also had the pleasure of listening to it read aloud, a similar experience to audiences for hundreds of years after Homer's time. In this great epic, and in my life, I have seen that life can be thrilling, fulfilling, and heartbreaking. It can be filled with the joys of love, family, and fruitful career. Sometimes this joy turns into pain.

Occasionally, I have wished to join the land of the Lotus-eaters: those who avoid reality and seek escape. I have more than once found myself imprisoned by a Cyclops, an opponent of great strength and narrow vision. I have shared my story with friendly Phaeacians, who, moved by my weeping for lost friends and homesickness, offered to take me on a fast ship to the home that is my Ithaca. I have found my Penelope, and I am grateful. Homer, creator and poet, inspires me.





My friend Eva Brann left Berlin in 1941 on a sealed train with her mother—the last train with Jews that the Nazis allowed to leave Germany. She was driven away by a hideous regime of book burners. Eventually, in 1957, she found her new home, St. John's College, a great books college—there is a certain poetic justice in this journey.

She writes in *Homeric Moments: Clues to Delight in Reading the Odyssey and the Iliad*: "Reading Homer's poems is one of the purest, most inexhaustible pleasures life has to offer—a secret somewhat too well kept in our time."

We live in a 140-character world. We are often distracted. We may find it difficult to remember to listen. It would be wise to listen to the greatest stories of our tradition. Robert Fitzgerald, poet and translator of the *Odyssey*, shares a poignant moment he experienced while translating Homer's *Odyssey*. He was visiting a cove where "they say the Phaeacians put Odysseus ashore in his sleep."

A local man came to him and said: "You know, *we* say that he never died. *We* say that he still turns up now and then, looking like a soldier or a sea captain... or... just a stranger." He paused and looked serenely at me. And there in the burning sun I shivered from head to foot. I could not say a word. I bowed my head and walked on... that is how the gods used to appear to mortals out of the radiant Aegean air, or how the messengers of heaven appeared to men in another mythical landscape, and can we be so sure that these were dreams or fantasies?

Openness of expectation we can encourage in

ourselves and in one another, so that the mysterious gifts of experience, strange exhilarations and wonders, gifts from we know not where, will not be lost on us." The joy of liberal learning is that it opens us to the gifts from we know not where. Liberal learning is a life-long adventure, an odyssey of the mind, and the spirit. It is not meant only to prepare us to earn a living, but to assist us as we create an exceptional life.

Homer's *Odyssey* is a gift.

WCC: What else would you encourage every American Catholic to read,?

ELLIOTT: I would suggest *The Return of the Prodigal Son* by Henri Nouwen. Fr. Nouwen shows us the way home to the Father who loves us. In retelling this poignant story he reminds us of the great blessing we have in the gift that is our Creation. The book guides us to the home we so desperately need.

I conclude by offering words from the great book of Wisdom where Truth, Love and Beauty are always to be found. I believe they may be taken as the credo for a Catholic who is continually aware of the created nature of man and committed to respect the dignity of the human person in all thoughts and deeds: "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things." (Philippians 4:8)

