

Conversations

Some Reflections on the Life & Breath of Prosser Gifford

On the Occasion of the [Online Family Memorial Service](#)

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[Yale Class of '68](#) & ["First Class 5-er"](#)



"Marley was dead, to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail...."

"There is no doubt that Marley was dead. This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate. If we were not perfectly convinced that Hamlet's Father died before the play began, there would be nothing more remarkable in his taking a stroll at night, in an easterly wind, upon his own ramparts, than there would be in any other middle-aged gentleman rashly turning out after dark in a breezy spot...."

Charles Dickens,
A Christmas Carol.



[As any school teacher of English might ask their eager young students....] "Yet, if Marley was dead, why did Marley's conversations with Scrooge continue? ... What use were they? What good could they have possibly have been for Scrooge?... or anyone else, for that matter? What conversation did Marley regret *not* having had with Scrooge in his living years?

"Now, boys and girls," the teacher might well continue, "What conversations should we be attending to in the living years? According to Marley, what was Scrooge's *real* "business?" What *should* it have been?]

Prosser was an English major, to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. His many achievements and awards at Hotchkiss, then at Yale, and then in Oxford and beyond proved that fact again and again. Any dispute about whether Prosser was at heart a poet or an administrator is as dead as a door-nail.

The debate is dead because the full span of Prosser's life was not an "either/or" proposition. Prosser's talents were legendary, and his succession of distinguished careers was rich and varied. Moreover, he will be remembered simultaneously as a model local *and* global citizen and a generous benefactor to all he came to know in Woods Hole and the world over.

The key to understanding all of Prosser's capacities and achievements was that in his core Prosser embraced the enduring importance of conversations. From his life-long engagement with literature Prosser realized that all we can retain of one another and from history itself is, in reality, a

sequence of ongoing and overlapping conversations – conversations we have had with one another, conversations with vivid characters from the pages of novels, poems or plays, or more extensively from conversations with all those we have come to know through our understanding of history. Life itself, is, in short, a series of conversations – some of which *actually happened*, others of which we *wish* had happened (or fervently wish *had not* happened), and still others *we wish we could recall* as our memories fail. It may well be that our recollection of specific conversations remains sadly incomplete, but we *know for a fact* that they occurred. The *facticity* of a conversation outlasts the memory of its content.

My own conversations with Prosser began over fifty years ago when I first encountered him as a Professor of African history at Yale. He was the first member of Yale’s History Department to teach a full-time course on African history, and a few of us were fortunate to catch him at the very beginning of his teaching career.

One of the memories that stuck in my mind was that he really didn’t (yet) have much of a lecture style. He seemed ill-at-ease (as one might imagine a beginning professor might be). As I recall he often stared out the window of the WLH classroom while he rambled on about some person or another that we were all supposed to have already learned about in the assigned reading for any given class session. It was as if he were having a private conversation with a figure we *should have* (and, no doubt, *would have*) known about, if only we had done the reading....

For those of us who were chronically behind in the readings for the course, the exercise we were engaged in was one of having constantly to “catch up” to an ongoing conversation Prosser was enjoying with some historical figure who seemed to be just outside the classroom windowpane. This took some imagination on our part, as you might well understand. But, on some level, this was probably Prosser’s larger point. The life of an historian consists of trying to “catch up” with the ongoing conversations that key figures in the past were having with one another that you were privileged, *at that very moment*, to have burst in upon and witnessed through encountering the documentary traces they left behind. Thus it was that we came to understand from Prosser, that “doing historical research” amounted to learning how to break into, decipher and summarize conversations that were only partially documented or that we know *must have taken place* in the past even though there may be no scrap of evidence to support this as fact.

Beyond the history class with Prosser, there were many other conversations. Like several others from the Yale Class of 1968 I was interviewed by Prosser, Ken Keniston and John Wilkinson, as part of a selection process for the first ever [“Yale 5-Year BA Program.”](#) An interview, after all, is a “conversation” of sorts – albeit a fairly one-sided conversation where we were asked questions and “the selection committee” listened to the answers.

Several things are worth comment about this interview/conversation. First, I don't recall anything about what was said. Secondly, though no content of the conversation remains in my memory, nevertheless, *I remain quite sure it took place*. Further, I would love to find out whatever can be retrieved or reconstructed about that conversation from whomever (or whatever) may be recalled by others present for it. Finally, I suspect that whatever it was, that interview/conversation most certainly spawned other conversations – at the very least, no doubt, amongst the members of the selection committee themselves. These, too, would be of interest to me to learn more about.

I suspect I am not alone in this. It was the experience of many of the other 11 students who were chosen as well in this [“First Class” of “5-ers”](#) – as we came to be known at Yale and after. Ask any of the [“First-Class Fivers”](#) what they remember about their experience, and they will respond almost invariably with something about a *conversation* – usually with Prosser himself or perhaps someone else with whom Prosser arranged for us to meet at Yale or during our time abroad. In the “field,” I recall an occasion where he arranged for the two of us to meet at the home of one of his school “chums” on the Island of Ikoyi in the bay of Lagos, Nigeria. Prosser’s “chums” were invariably well connected. In this case, I believe, the gentleman who hosted our brief stay was a senior operative in Nigeria, for either the *Palmolive Company* or for its rival, *Proctor & Gamble*. In any case, Prosser and I were both the beneficiaries of his kind hospitality, and we engaged in endless conversation over the course of Prosser’s brief “field visit” to me as one of the 5-ers working in Africa. After meeting me in this manner in Nigeria Prosser went on to meet with Randy Paulsen at the Schweitzer Hospital in Lambarene, Gabon, where other conversations no doubt ensued.

It should be remembered that for the Yale Class of 1968, rational conversation was in short supply. Just talking with Prosser was a gift in itself. In the [Class of 1968](#) we were both confused and scared. As seniors in high-school we had witnessed the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and in college we lived under the threat of the Military Draft whereby if we took “time off” at any point in our four year march toward graduation we would lose our “II-S” Draft Classification and could be subject to being drafted immediately for military service in [a war we had come to hate in Vietnam](#). For both Prosser Gifford and the Yale President, Kingman Brewster, Jr., this seemed unjust and irrational in part because it was fomenting massive unrest and occasional death on college campuses across the country. In effect, [Prosser and Kingman co-conspired to create a brand-new program](#) that would allow us to go to work and live in a Third World country without having to shoot someone. This program proved to be Yale’s biggest success during the Vietnam era. As things turned out, this program went a long way to assuring that Yale was an exception to the long list of college campuses whose administrative buildings were “occupied” by student protesters across the country in the late 1960s and 1970s.

It is important to understand that as the founding Director of the **5-Year BA Program** Prosser did *not* provide us with a ready-made narrative for rational behavior in the Vietnam war era. Rather, he provided us the opportunity and gave us the confidence to discover and elaborate *our own narratives for a rational way forward* in the face of what we saw as a global tragic mistake. By the time the Yale Class of 1968 proceeded to graduate we also witnessed the assassination of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and that of Robert F. Kennedy as well. Had it not been for the manner that Prosser allowed all of us as **5-ers** to craft our own narratives in our year of life and thought away from the U.S., it is not clear that any of us would have learned the value of conversation with “the other” that Prosser had taught us through this exceptional program.

In my own case, several further conversations ensued with Prosser well beyond his two years of teaching at Yale. Some of the most vivid conversations I was privileged to witness I was really not a “party” to, in a strict sense. Consider, for example, the conversations I heard and “overheard” between Prosser and his long-time friend and fellow teacher, [Wm. Roger Louis](#). These two young professors jointly convened a series of international meetings which [became known as the first](#) and the [best conferences](#) ever held on the rise, duration and demise of [European colonial empires and their ensuing legacies for the modern world](#). I was not part of the conversations between the two of them – except as I overheard them talking to each other – punctuated by Prosser’s occasional booming, trade-mark cackle-of-a-laugh from across the room. In effect, I was the “gopher” at conferences like these – seeing to it that the ash trays were emptied [yes, people used to smoke in these conferences], that there was sufficient coffee available in the “breaks” and that participants could be led around the Hall of Graduate Studies (HGS) at Yale to the appropriate room to hear the next presentation.... Although not “a party” to the key conversations, I learned a lot from what I heard and overheard – enough, in fact, to inspire my own graduate work in this realm and motivate my curiosity for the last fifty years.

Over the decades since New Haven, I had conversations with Prosser in New Hampshire, Williamstown, New York, Washington, Boston, Woods Hole and Amherst, etc. We did not meet often nor at great length in any one instance, but the act and fact of our ongoing conversations was crucially important in my life. We each found that we could resume the conversation, as it were, wherever we had last left-off. You, too, may have had this experience with close friends as well. It is as if we felt we could complete each other’s sentences or guess what the other was going to say before they would utter a word.

I started to recognize this peculiar quality of our on-going conversations when – in his absence -- I would catch myself posing the question (just to myself at first, or sometimes out loud to others)

that had the effect of saying: “*If he were here, I wonder what Prosser Gifford would say....*[about this or that...]?”

This rumination evolved over time. Years after one of our conversations had taken place, say, for example, here in Woods Hole, I would notice myself thinking and sometimes saying something like: “*If he were here, I bet Prosser Gifford would say....*[this or that...].”

After a few more years, of course, this habit of my mind and heart evolved into the phrase: “*As Prosser Gifford used to say... [this or that.]*” or, more emphatically, “*As Prosser Gifford **pointed out years ago,**...*[this or that].”

Actually, as you might suspect, over time, I noticed that Prosser had gained considerable personal wisdom and maturity of perspective from our ongoing exchange as conversation partners. Even on points where we had initially disagreed substantially, he showed clear signs of coming around more and more over time to my way of thinking. He showed great promise in this regard. Who knows? -- perhaps, he thought I showed promise as well. At least at one point more than fifty years ago, I think he thought that *we all* had great promise as [the Yale “First Class 5-ers.”](#) That confidence in us expressed so long ago was enough to enable us each to make meaningful choices and life-long commitments over the past half century.

In the last few years, Prosser and I had not seen much of each other, but this did not slow down the evolution of our conversations in my mind’s eye. Conversations, after all, are the essence of what makes us human. In evolutionary terms, our conversation is what distinguishes us from our hominid relatives and perhaps all other creatures on this precarious and precious blue planet – the only life-supporting planet in the known universe. We have come to learn, as paleontologists and ecologists have taught us, that eternal life is not really an option in the world as we now know it, but conversations and our memories of them (or what they *could* have been or *should* have been) form the substance of what humans call immortality. This was the essence, after all, of what Marley came back to say to Scrooge, was it not? “No matter what you *think* your “business” is, *attend to the conversations that surround you -- in the living years! -- before it is too late.*”

For all of us now our conversations with Prosser in the living years have come to an end. But I, for one, have not lost my cherished conversation partner. You may not have lost yours either.

A brief, clear word of remembrance, then, is in order. As Shakespeare once had the brooding Dane observe to his friend, Horatio, in speaking of his most dear and ever-present conversation partner, so, too, we can repeat to one another about Prosser something that can be put quite simply:

*“He was a man, take him for all in all,
I shall not look upon his like again.”*



In memory of & personal tribute to

Prosser Gifford

(1929 – 2020)



The first professor to teach courses in
African History

in the

Department of History

Yale University

(1965 – 1967)



* * *

Prosser Gifford



Advisor to many, kind friend to many, many more...

**Rhodes Scholar, African historian, innovative
administrator, global enabler,
towering intellect and
“gentle giant” of world historical understanding.**