

“In Landlessness Alone Resides the Highest Truth”; or, At Sea with the UHP

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Along with many of you, I’m sure, I spent much of the summer with my attention turned to the Gulf of Mexico. We all must have responded to the live underwater video feed of millions of gallons of oil spewing into the ocean and to images of oil-soaked wildlife, coastlines, and marshlands with a similar sense of outrage, and our collective sympathy for the people whose livelihoods this disaster threatens was heightened by our shared memories of Hurricane Katrina. At the same time, our individual responses are shaped by personal associations—such as relatives living in the Gulf, memories of a beach vacation, or a fondness for Gulf shrimp. As students and teachers, we also can’t help but view such events through our disciplines, our majors and minors, the books we read, and the courses we take and teach. I imagine the oil spill has already become a reference point in classes ranging from Microbiology and Environmental Studies to Economics and Public Relations.

As an English professor specializing in American Literature and possessing a passion (often approaching obsession) for one nineteenth-century American novel in particular, I was thrilled when an article titled “The Ahab Parallax: ‘Moby Dick’ and the Spill” appeared in the *New York Times*. It identifies striking parallels between the disaster at BP’s Deepwater Horizon rig and Herman Melville’s 1851 fictional account of the death and destruction at sea that befalls the crew of the *Pequod* as it hunts for whale oil, a

valuable commodity on which nineteenth-century Americans were as dependent as we are on petroleum today. These echoes, Randy Kennedy writes, are “painfully illuminating as the spill becomes a daily reminder of the limitations, even now, of man’s ability to harness nature for his needs.” A former student e-mailed me as soon as he saw the article: “Melville always seems to get the last laugh somehow,” he wrote. One reason I love to teach *Moby-Dick* is the seemingly limitless ways in which it speaks to human actions and events in our own age. Melville’s novel has been used, for example, to comment on the rise of fascism, the War on Drugs, the War on Terror, and debates over Social Security and national health care. “Each age, one may predict, will find its own symbols in *Moby-Dick*,” a Melville biographer wrote in 1929. “Over the ocean the clouds will pass and change, and the ocean itself will mirror back those changes from its own depths.”

In each instance I just listed, as in the recent *New York Times* article, the novel’s enduring relevance is anchored in Ahab’s overwhelming and self-destructive desire for revenge. Obsessed with destroying Moby Dick, the white whale that maimed him, the captain only destroys himself, his ship, and almost everyone on board. A fertile and pliable symbol, the character of Ahab has become a cultural touchstone; most of you probably know the peg-legged captain even if you have never read *Moby-Dick*. But few who haven’t studied the novel can tell us anything about Melville’s narrator beyond his famous opening line: “Call me Ishmael.” Perhaps the most inspired and enduring aspect of *Moby-Dick*, however, is not its warning of the self-destruction wrought by humanity’s Ahab-like propensity for dominance and revenge but the alternative embodied by Ishmael, the *Pequod*’s sole survivor. I will return to the oil spill later, but for now I want to test this hypothesis by sticking to the local, to this moment and this occasion. I will call

*you* Ishmael. The forces that attracted you to the University Honors Program, I believe, are those that draw Melville's Ishmael to the sea. And the qualities that ensure Ishmael's survival are ones that will lead you to success in the program and beyond.

The comparison might not seem very appealing at first glance. Ishmael in the opening pages of *Moby-Dick* is penniless, directionless, depressed and suicidal, and the portents of doom are unmistakable as soon as he sets sail: the gloomy *Pequod*, Melville writes, "blindly plunged like fate into the lone Atlantic." Of the ocean's awesome power he observes: "however baby man may brag of his science and skill . . . for ever and ever, to the crack of doom, the sea will insult and murder him." I doubt very many of you would have joined the University Honors Program if the invitation promised the kind of voyage Melville describes, and as stressful as the first few weeks of the semester might have been, I hope none of you feel as down and out as Ishmael does at the beginning of *Moby-Dick*. But if I'm right about what draws you to the UHP, you seek the "mystical vibration" Ishmael experiences as soon as he is "out of sight of land": "*in landlessness alone resides the highest truth*," he proclaims.

Ishmael fleshes out the meaning of landlessness: "all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore." The real danger, in other words, is not the openness and violence of the unknown sea, which Melville aligns with "deep, earnest thinking," but the illusory sense of safety and comfort promised by the shore, or by our traditional, accepted ways of living and thinking. The challenge is to resist those winds—be they generated by fear, practicality, parents, social norms, or self-doubt—that conspire to push us back to the known world of dry, stable

ground. Any honest attempt to apply Melville's imagery to the Honors Program must acknowledge that the program tends to attract some of the university's most *grounded* and goal-oriented students. Fear of the C—here I mean that dreaded letter grade—sometimes prevents such students from taking risks. But even if its practical benefits first drew you to the UHP—it can steer you toward the right graduate program or help you land that ideal job—you must admit that it would be much easier and in a sense more practical to hug the shore, to concentrate solely on your majors and your minors rather than taking on the extra work of additional requirements and more challenging courses. What then compels you to go sea with the UHP?

“You must have plenty of sea-room to tell the Truth in,” Melville wrote in praise of Nathaniel Hawthorne's work. In praise of Ralph Waldo Emerson, another nineteenth-century iconoclast, Melville proclaimed: “I love all men who *dive*.” The UHP curriculum invites you to dive deep and provides the “sea-room” in which to do so. Although its curriculum is designed to complement a student's major course of study, the University Honors Program exists outside of all disciplines, departments, colleges, majors, and minors. It surrounds them like the ocean surrounds islands and continents. Also like the ocean, it has the potential to dramatically enhance the value of land it touches—transforming your majors and minors, if you will, into beachfront property. With Ishmael's journey in mind, perhaps it is more fruitful to conceive of the Honors Program not as the sea itself but as the vessel that carries us out to sea, out of our elements, away from familiar landmarks and reference points, and into the realm of landlessness.

When Ishmael signs on for a whaling voyage he casts his lot with one of his era's lowliest, dirtiest, and most dangerous occupations. But as he describes it, “a whale-ship

was my Yale College and my Harvard.” The fact that Ishmael spends most of his time at sea not *hunting* whales, exactly, but *thinking about* them, *deeply*, transforms the *Pequod* into a floating ivy-league campus. Like most nineteenth-century Americans back on shore, his crewmates see the whale only as a commodity, as something to be exploited for profit and convenience. For Ishmael, however, the whale becomes what one literary critic calls “a test of the imagination.” Ishmael strives to comprehend the whale, its individual parts—its flukes, its flippers, its blowhole, its blubber—as well as its total being. Because this gigantic mammal is constantly in motion (John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* describes whales as “moving land”), and because neither a whale’s corpse nor a whale’s skeleton can ever approximate the reality of a living, breathing whale as it exists in the ocean, its meaning proves slippery. To grasp it, Ishmael must try out a range of approaches, traditions, and perspectives. He examines the whale in art, in literature, and in astronomy. He applies the tenets of science, archaeology (taking a “fossiliferous . . . point of view”), legal history, religion, and philosophy (which Ludwig Wittgenstein appropriately describes as “a leaky boat which must be repaired while at sea”). As he struggles to comprehend the mighty leviathan, Ishmael’s mind grows in proportion to his subject. “Such, and so magnifying, is the virtue of a large and liberal theme!” he proclaims. “We expand to its bulk.”

Ishmael approaches the whale—which comes to embody all mysteries of life, time, and the universe—just as you might approach such “large and liberal themes” as Truth, Beauty, Ethics, Revolution, and Science and Religion in the interdisciplinary first-year Honors seminar. For students as well as for the teams of professors who teach the seminar, taking an interdisciplinary approach to big questions encourages and rewards a

sea-faring flexibility of mind and a propensity for deep-diving thought. Our goal is to reach a deeper, more nuanced and multifaceted understanding of the seminar topic by semester's end, but its ultimate meaning should elude our grasp. We should remain at sea, skeptical of anyone who claims to stand on firm ground with a definition of true Beauty or with one timeless and universal Truth. Melville, after all, manages to fill the 600-plus pages of his novel with more disciplines, traditions, and approaches than we might even begin to consider in a fourteen-week semester, and still Ishmael's knowledge of the whale remains incomplete. "Dissect him how I may," he confesses, "I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will."

Ishmael's words might sound like an admission of defeat but they articulate a central theme of *Moby-Dick*. They also express the wisdom behind the UHP's interdisciplinary first-year and senior capstone seminars. You should commit yourselves to your majors and minors as you work to master their particular assumptions, values, and methodologies; a solid grounding is essential to success in graduate school or in your chosen profession. At the same time, the Honors curriculum encourages you to remain open to other approaches and to alternative perspectives. This fluidity, this embrace of landlessness, enables Ishmael to survive when the *Pequod* splinters and sinks. I don't have room to explain it fully here, but Ishmael's relationship with a crewmate nurtures the flexibility of mind we see in his approach to the whale; although he initially shrinks in fear from this tattooed stranger whom he assumes to be a heathenish savage (and possibly a cannibal), Ishmael grows to love and respect Queequeg. He learns to get out of his own skin, to question his cultural assumptions and prejudices through Queequeg's eyes. At

novel's end, Queequeg's coffin, on which his mysteriously symbolic tattoos have been etched, becomes Ishmael's life raft.

If Ishmael represents the potentially life-preserving power of a fluid and flexible mind, then Ahab illustrates the danger of becoming so committed to one way of seeing the world that your mind precludes all other possibilities. The goal of a whaling voyage, of course, is to hunt as many whales as possible; Ahab, however, is obsessed with tracking and destroying just one particular whale, which he insists on defining in only one way: he sees the white whale as a malevolent affront to his own power and independence. Ahab's "monomania," as Melville calls it, is manifested physically in his literal inability to stray from course: carved into the ship's deck at regular intervals are holes to accommodate the captain's peg leg; like a plastic figure in a Lego play set, he remains rigidly anchored in place. Ahab goes to sea, we might say, but he is never really *at sea* (just as one might *go to* college but never really be *in* college). Unlike Ishmael, therefore, Ahab will never discover anything about the whale, the world, or himself. Melville even dares to imply that one of America's most revered heroes, at least in the nineteenth century, approached his mission of exploration and discovery with a perspective as narrow as Ahab's: "we know the sea to be an everlasting terra incognita," Melville writes, "so that Columbus sailed over numberless unknown worlds to discover his one superficial western one." Fixated on finding land and gold, Columbus skimmed over—without even considering—the undiscovered universes below him, worlds we still have barely fathomed.

"The only true voyage," Marcel Proust suggests, "would be found not in traveling to strange lands but in having different eyes, in seeing the universe with the eyes of

another person, of a hundred others, and seeing the hundred universes each of them sees, which each of them is.” A sperm whale’s eyes are situated on two separate sides of its head, notes Ishmael. He therefore assumes that the whale “must see one distinct picture on this side, and another distinct picture on that side.” “[I]s his brain so much more comprehensive, combining, and subtle than man’s,” he wonders, “that he can at the same moment of time attentively examine two distinct prospects, one on the one side of him, and the other in an exactly opposite direction?” The placement of a human’s eyes, after all, makes “it . . . impossible for him, attentively, and completely, to examine any two things . . . at one and the same instant of time; never mind if they lie side by side and touch each other.” The closest humans can come to achieving this is in groups, be it on a whale ship—“with look-outs at the mast-heads, eagerly scanning the wide expanse around them,” Melville writes, a whale ship has “a totally different air from those engaged in a regular voyage”—or in the small, discussion-based classes of the UHP.

*Moby-Dick* celebrates the fact that a typical whaling voyage brought together for a common purpose individuals from such radically different backgrounds—not only in terms of craft but also in terms of language, culture, nationality, region, religion, and race—that similarly diverse collectives would be impossible to find on land. The classroom is a diverse environment in less obvious ways, not just in terms of disciplines, majors, and minors (this is especially so in General Education and interdisciplinary courses) but also in terms of backgrounds, experiences, values, and beliefs. Equally important, the discussion-based format of Honors courses fosters a level of engagement with competing perspectives increasingly rare in our society. While Ishmael’s mind glides with ease from perspective to perspective, Ahab steadfastly refuses to consider any

perspective but his own. Something similar occurs when characters interpret images on a gold doubloon Ahab nails to the masthead as a reward for the first to spy Moby Dick. Each sailor discovers a different meaning in the coin but they never discuss their interpretations with each other (as one would in a seminar). Might the crew of the *Pequod* have been able to challenge their captain's authority, we must wonder—and to chart an alternative course for their voyage—if their search for meaning had been not a solitary, individual act but a communal one?

In *Common as Air: Revolution, Art, and Ownership*, philosopher and poet Lewis Hyde worries that market values have turned certain ideas, discoveries, and creative productions into private property when they should be considered property we all hold “in common.” An alternative value system founded on the ideal of a “cultural commons,” he argues, encourages us to recognize how “the creative self” is not “solitary and self-made” but “collective, common and interdependent.” Just as your training in an individual major is strengthened by interdisciplinary work, Hyde's thesis suggests that the discussion-based classroom offers us the opportunity to do much more than plumb the depths of our individual subjectivities. Such an environment encourages us to discover and embrace a state of *intersubjectivity*—an ever-evolving identity defined not in isolation but always in relation to others. The contrast between Ishmael and Ahab again proves instructive: Ahab curses what he calls our “mortal interindebtedness,” even as the ship's carpenter crafts him a new leg, while Ishmael, who at one point is literally tied to Queequeg as his companion dangles precariously over shark-infested waters, learns to embrace the reality that our fates—indeed our very identities—are inescapably intertwined. While Ishmael's mind expands to accommodate his “large and liberal

theme,” therefore, his identity simultaneously becomes as fluid, open, and expansive as the whale’s.

Recent work in neuroscience suggests that our brains are indeed malleable, that even a mature brain changes according to environment, stimulus, and use. Similar discoveries in the field of epigenetics posit that our “[g]enes and the environment are as inseparable as letters in a word.” “Every day in every way,” David Shenk explains in *The Genius in All of Us*, “you are helping to shape which genes become active.” Such theories are at once startling and reassuring. Shenk’s survey of world history, after all, identifies as many “achievement black holes” as “achievement clusters,” all fostered, he believes, by cultural landscapes. Focusing on our present culture, Nicholas Carr argues in *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* that our brains are being rewired by the internet in ways that make it more difficult for us to think deeply and at length about subjects—to ponder the whale, for example, or to read *Moby-Dick*. “Once I was a scuba diver in a sea of words,” Carr confesses, but “[n]ow I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski.” Carr’s critics emphasize the treasure trove of information now at our fingertips and suggest that multitasking and social networking might be reshaping our brains in beneficial ways. Author and entrepreneur Steven Johnson highlights these benefits in his critique of *The Shallows*, which appeared in the *New York Times* alongside a wonderful illustration of a big-brained octopus smiling broadly and grasping a different electronic gadget in each of its tentacles. (I won’t dare wade into this debate, but I doubt if any of us will spy a pod of whales—or a multitasking octopus—if we’re up in the mast-heads texting our friends back on shore; that said, I will disclose that the former student who sent me the article that inspired my talk did so via his iPhone.)

Working with Honors students and seeing the kind of work they produce not just in interdisciplinary seminars but also in courses like Culture Connection and in their thesis projects, it is easy to have hope for the future no matter what Google might be doing to our brains. Epigenetic research and theories of neuroplasticity suggest that in joining the UHP and completing its requirements, you aren't simply accumulating knowledge and strengthening your transcripts, you are selecting an environment that might literally alter the landscape (or seascape) of your minds. Even more important, perhaps, such theories highlight the responsibility of those with the power to do so—program directors, department heads, deans, administrators, and legislators—to create and sustain environments that foster excellence, that nurture “achievement clusters.” The real challenge is to maintain hope even when we survey the more expansive and daunting sea into which you will sail after graduation, the one facing environmental disasters and economic calamities beyond even Dr. Maguire's control.

With history and Herman Melville as our guides, we can discover reasons to be hopeful even in these uncertain times. Melville could never have written *Moby-Dick* if not for his grueling experiences at sea, laboring on a whale ship and learning to question the values and assumptions of his society back on land. And he never would have become a common sailor if his wealthy family had not lost its fortune. The literal definition of “landlessness” is “not possessing land” or “having no landed property.” To be “landless” is to be broke. As much as I dislike attempts to categorize your generation (the kind of thing to which you are often subjected at graduation ceremonies and gatherings like this one), studies comparing the impact of the Great Depression with that of our current economic crisis suggest generational patterns that reinforce the wisdom behind Melville's

brilliant riff on the word landlessness. Sociologist Glen H. Elder argues that the youngest children affected by the Great Depression grew up to fear change and risk; as students, they were described as “docile notetakers.” But their older siblings proved, like Melville and Ishmael, more creative and flexible in navigating a world in which traditional assumptions and expectations could no longer be taken for granted. Our Great Recession, some believe, has already produced similar trends, with your generation becoming more civic-minded, more creative, and more willing to take risks. A proposed name for the generation to follow yours, the one comparable to the risk-averse youngest children of the Great Depression, is “homelanders,” a label rooted in the age of homeland security but acquiring deeper resonance in the context of Melville’s evocative contrasting of land and sea.

However the current economic crisis might influence our personalities, mindsets, and actions in the future, the Gulf oil spill has already brought a greater sense of urgency to the search for alternative energy sources. To our modern sensibilities, it is difficult to imagine a more brutal and disturbing business than the hunt and slaughter of whales, but the words of a nineteenth-century whaling captain suggest that we might well view the source of much of today’s energy and many of our consumer products in a similar light. Explaining the title of a poem in which she re-imagines Ishmael as the sole survivor of an explosion on a modern-day offshore oil rig, Elizabeth Schultz recounts the captain’s words when he witnessed the gush from one of the first land-based oil wells: “By God, they’ve harpooned Mother Earth.” Unlike Ahab, this captain apparently learned to see the natural world with new eyes while at sea; like Ishmael, he came to see the world in a whale. A similar worldview is behind a recent breakthrough in green technology: inspired

by the bumps on a humpback whale’s flippers—a source of awe and wonder for Ishmael—a Canadian-based company named WhalePower has developed a more efficient design for wind and hydroelectric turbines. These kinds of innovations are more likely to originate with thinkers who cross disciplines and embrace collaboration. Equally important, they follow the principles science writer Janine Benyus laid out more than a decade ago in *Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired by Nature*. We must study the natural world not in order to see “what we can *extract* from” it, she urged, but rather to see “what we can *learn* from it.” Such a shift in perspective demands the courage to question traditional assumptions and the creativity to imagine alternatives. It requires us to approach the world, its problems, and its mysteries as Melville encourages us to—not by clinging to the “slavish shore” but by heading out to sea.

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