

University Thinking

IN A YEAR that saw the passing of Todd Britsch, one of the College of Humanities' most influential voices, it is fitting to pause and recognize the recent retirement of three faculty—John Tanner, Debbie Harrison, and John Rosenberg—who epitomized what Britsch called “university thinkers.” By this he meant professors who were “engaged in the life of the university beyond their own classrooms and their own departments,” Tanner says, even as they remained master teachers. As a professor of humanities and academic vice president, Todd Britsch had an outsized contribution to the life of the university (see page 27 for his bio). In some ways his vision of university thinking seems inspired by the humanities; it suggests that the disciplines of the humanities cultivate a breadth of thought that naturally seeds the ground of inquiry and work beyond the sometimes-narrowing bounds of individual scholarship.

This is certainly true of Professors Tanner, Harrison, and Rosenberg. As their service comes to a close, these three leave a legacy worthy of recognition and emulation.

John S. Tanner: Leader and Humanist

by Frank Christianson (19th-Century Transatlantic Literature)

John Tanner's humanities scholarship built a foundation for his lifelong leadership and service to BYU.

“How can we love neighbors as ourselves whom we do not understand? The humanities deepens our understanding of neighbor.”

In reflecting on a 40-year career that took him far beyond the confines of the English Department, Professor John S. Tanner (Early Modern and Milton Studies) is emphatic that “the humanities informed all phases of my career. They are an inextricable part of who I am.”

From when he arrived as an assistant professor in 1980, Tanner's career took a number of surprising turns as he was called upon early and often to serve the university outside the immediate scope of his teaching and research obligations. First as associate academic vice president, then as English Department chair, academic vice president, and, most recently, as president of BYU-Hawaii, Tanner found himself pulled repeatedly from his first love of teaching for nearly three-quarters of his career. Even so, he found rewarding service in grounding his work on three loves he termed his Professional Pyramid: love of Savior (Church service), love of subject (professional and scholarly work), and love of student (university service). A renowned Miltonist, Tanner enhanced the English Department's reputa-

tion through his substantive body of Renaissance literary studies. Beyond his scholarship, Tanner has been a prolific speaker and writer of essays, hymns, and poetry.

Freedom and Faith

As Tanner took on new and unexpected roles and challenges, he saw the value of his humanities training in everything he did. Perhaps nothing demonstrates the humanities-inflected nature of Tanner's service than his work as primary author of BYU's Academic Freedom Policy and the Mission & Aims of BYU. Recalling that effort, former Seventy and BYU provost, Elder Bruce C. Hafen, called Tanner BYU's Thomas Jefferson, a wordsmith who personally embodied “the educated, mature, well-disciplined liberty he was raised up to describe.”¹ Of his work on the Academic Freedom Policy, Tanner “felt a growing conviction that maybe, just maybe, this was work I was supposed to do. Perhaps, unknown to me, this is why I studied Milton and Kierkegaard, two ardent advocates for liberty and faith.” These accomplishments underscore the truth that

enduring university *thinking* requires inspired and masterful university *writing*. BYU would only have turned to the humanities and the wordsmithery of a genuine disciple-scholar to create some of the most foundational and far-reaching representations of its institutional identity.

Master Communicator

In their years working together, Tanner also came to remind Elder Hafen of another master communicator, Elder Neal A. Maxwell. Observing that both men shared an “intuitive confidence in gospel premises as the best foundation for sound reasoning,” Elder Hafen praised Tanner’s “high degree of awareness about cultural context; equally fluent, even native tongued, in both the language of the scriptures and the language of liberal education.”² Perhaps nowhere is this bilingualism more apparent than in essay collections *Notes from an Amateur* and *Learning in the Light*. Drawn from talks and essays shared with students and faculty over several decades, this work demonstrates Tanner’s commitment to use writing to explore and reflect on the responsibilities and rewards that come with teaching and learning at the university.

His annual University Conference addresses, described as “masterfully sculpted scholarly sermons” by colleague Justin

Collings, reminded BYU faculty how words can inspire us to see our work as vocation, motivated by a sense of calling to a greater purpose. “Scholarly sermons” is an apt description of this body of work that is, as Tanner acknowledges when asked about humanities influence, “shot through with literary references” that are “far from ornamental.” Tanner’s public expressions are steeped in the tradition of Western letters, but their unique capacity to inspire goes beyond the specific allusions. As he says, the humanities were always “supplying the contours of how I approach my work.” The humanist’s model of leadership that Tanner has embodied constantly sought new ways of seeing and understanding our shared purpose and the ways and means of fulfilling it.

Living as a Disciple

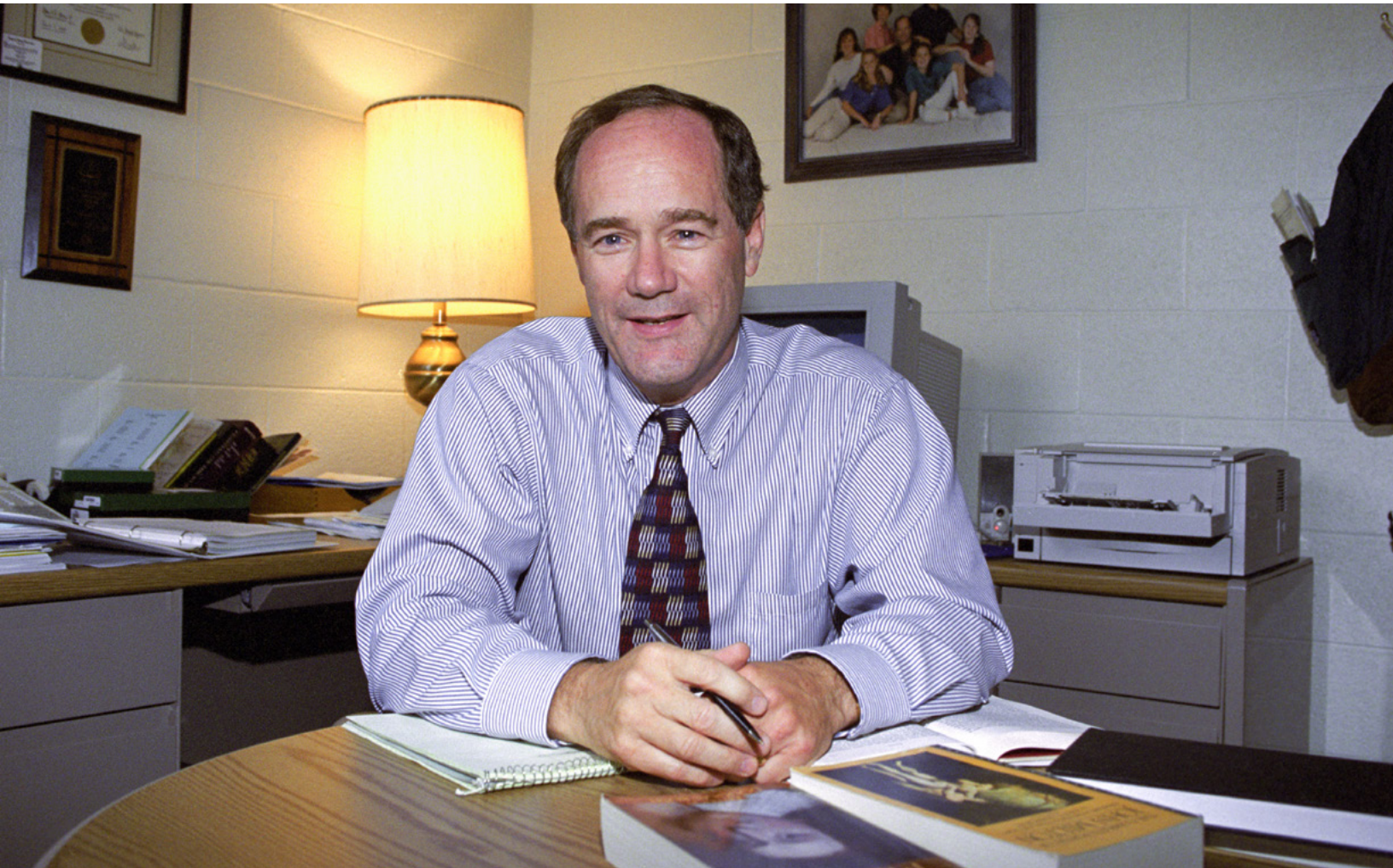
Central to Tanner’s vocational vision is a notion of discipleship that encompasses scholarly discipline. In his essay “A Gospel Ground for the Humanities,” he expresses the conviction that “we are called to love God with all our minds. Love of God should inform all other loves. It is the first and greatest commandment. We are expected to be disciples in our disciplines. We are also expected to love our neighbor, the second commandment. The humanities comes in rather directly here, for how

can we love neighbors as ourselves whom we do not understand? The humanities deepens our understanding of neighbor.”³ The second commandment includes a cultural dimension for Tanner, it “implies a responsibility to care about our neighborhoods, . . . where God is either glorified or despised, . . . living as disciples of Christ pertains not just to prayer, evangelism, and Bible study, but also our enjoyment of literature and music, our use of tools and machines, our eating and drinking, our views of government and economics, and so on.”⁴

This integrated vision of work and service and discipleship is Tanner’s legacy to the BYU community. His willingness to yield his individual course to serve the greater interests of the university and the Church is the most concrete example of that integrity, and he has played an integral role in shaping BYU for the better over the past 40 years.

1. Bruce C. Hafen, “Envisioning Brigham Young University,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2017): 4, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol56/iss1/10>.
2. Hafen, “Envisioning Brigham Young University,” 7.
3. John Tanner, *Learning in the Light*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 2017), “A Gospel Ground for the Humanities,” Overdrive.
4. Tanner, *Learning in the Light*, “A Gospel Ground for the Humanities.”

Photo by Mark Philbrick/BYU Photo



Deborah L. Harrison: Clear, Clean, Compelling

by Leslee Thorne-Murphy (Associate Dean, British Literature)

Adjunct faculty play a crucial role in the College of Humanities, none more so than Debbie Harrison.

In the spring of 2022, Adjunct Faculty Deborah L. Harrison (Writing and Editing) retired after her 46th year of teaching university-level writing and editing courses. She began teaching at BYU as a graduate student, spent 21 years teaching at Whitworth College in Washington state, then returned to teach 22 more years at BYU. Even after so many years, Debbie never tired of teaching writing, editing, and usage. She says, “Every semester you get new students, and you know that what you’re teaching them is going to matter when they go on because they need to know how to write and research well.”

Debbie taught her students how to research their topics, understand conflicting views, reason through those views carefully, develop their own convictions, and express those convictions with confidence and grace.

A Teacher at Heart

Professor Harrison, or Debbie as her colleagues know her, always aspired to be a teacher. As she puts it, when she was in elementary school, she wanted to be an elementary school teacher; when she was in junior high, she wanted to be a junior high teacher; when she was in high school, she wanted to be a high school teacher. But it was when she taught writing as a graduate student that she knew she had found her calling: teaching university students.

While at BYU, Debbie earned a BA in English and Spanish, with a secondary education teaching certificate, then continued on to pursue an MA in humanities so she could combine the study of literature, art, and history. It was in graduate school that she met her husband. After they both graduated with their master’s degrees and had started their family, they moved to Spokane, Washington. There she found work at Whitworth College (now Whitworth University), a private Presbyterian liberal arts school where she says both faculty and staff “were amazing and devoted Christians” who created a caring atmosphere for work and study. While her family expanded to include six children, Debbie continued to teach a range of classes from freshman composition to the Structure and Development of the English Language.

It was at Whitworth that Debbie discovered her love of teaching language usage, the study of how people actually use written and spoken language. This was a love that she continued to nurture and share when she returned to BYU and eventually undertook teaching English Language 322: Modern American Usage for 19 years. As she explains, she taught her students “the guidelines for determining whether something would be appropriate or not in both writing and speaking.” Understanding how to make these determinations,

“[Professor Harrison] revitalized for me a life perspective that reminds me to treat others with kindness, without judgement.”

she says, gives students confidence in their language choices and the freedom to develop and practice their own voice.

Inspiring Students

BYU student Leanne Chun (Editing and Publishing ’22) says she learned confidence combined with respect while studying under and working with Professor Harrison. Leanne recalls walking into a modern usage class “red pen in hand,” envisioning herself as “a big shot editor.” Debbie, on the other hand, taught students that “all language, regardless of dialect or idiolect, is valuable in its own right.” Leanne muses, “While Professor Harrison taught me to appreciate all language, she was teaching me to appreciate all people, and she revitalized for me a life perspective that reminds me to treat others with kindness, without judgment.” In addition, Leanne says that Debbie “taught me to be confident about my beliefs (e.g., what I know to be true of *lay* and *lie*) and to communicate those beliefs with polite firmness (but not without mediation), regardless of the outcome.” This is a skill set, Leanne explains, that she implements not only in her editing work but also in her personal life.

Another student, Maren Johnson (Communications: Public Relations ’20), comments, “I really do feel like I owe a lot of where I am today to her guidance, encouragement, love, and lessons.” Maren took Debbie’s Writing 150 class, a freshman composition course meant to introduce students to the writing and research skills they need to thrive in college courses. After guiding them through a number of writing assignments, Debbie had Maren and her classmates select a research topic they were passionate about and then compose and revise a paper until it was academically rigorous as well as “clear, clean, and compelling.” These last three attributes are deceptively simple but remarkably difficult to achieve.

Maren relates that Debbie “encouraged me to do my absolute best on my research paper, and I spent months working on that paper until it became one of the best papers I have ever written. Eventually, I was able to publish that paper and use it to get into graduate school.” Papers from



Photo by David John Arnett (Photography '24)

freshman composition courses are typically first attempts at university-quality writing; rarely do they develop into graduate-level work. The combination of a gifted and motivated student and a talented and devoted professor, however, can work miracles. Truly Debbie embodies the ideal of “inspiring learning.”¹

Happy to Be in the Classroom

Enjoying and appreciating the importance of the topics she teaches brings a richness to Debbie’s classroom. During the COVID-19 pandemic when Debbie taught online, she would periodically need to review recordings of her class periods, and she was surprised to realize that she unconsciously smiled all through her classes. “I think this is because I am genuinely happy to be there, to be teaching something I love to them, something that I think will make a difference in their lives.”

Debbie strove to ensure every class had a warm, welcoming atmosphere, to make her subject matter relevant to students’ everyday lives, and to keep her class structure organized and clear. What she “loved best about teaching was seeing the light come into [her]

students’ eyes when they ‘got’ something or when they realized that they actually could write and might even enjoy it.”

Making Things Sound Better

Debbie has applied her hard-earned skills not only in the classroom but also as a freelance editor of 34 published books—from serious academic tomes to fantasy adventure novels. She explains that the art of editing is in “maintaining the author’s voice when you edit” as you help refine the writing. “I love to help writing read clearly and smoothly,” she observes.

Indulging a Personal Passion

Debbie thought that she might have an overabundance of time to read when she retired, but she is finding great pleasure in allotting much of her time to family history work, spending time with family members, and exploring the varied beauties of nature while camping. Ultimately, she resorts to her lifelong habit of reading before falling asleep. “It’s my reward for being responsible all day,” she explains. “It’s like taking a vacation when I read, because I am simply there, in the story or ideas.”

A Legacy of Service

As she retires, Debbie leaves behind a legacy of devoted teaching and mentoring in the College of Humanities. Her exemplary 46-year career is the realization of living and applying the principles of a humanities education. Debbie has been a dedicated colleague, professor, mentor, and friend who has inspired many with her passion for language that is “clear, clean, and compelling.”

1. Kevin J Worthen, “Inspiring Learning” [Brigham Young University devotional, Aug. 22, 2016], speeches.byu.edu.

John R. Rosenberg: A Scholarly Life

A discussion with Jeff Turley (Department Chair of Spanish & Portuguese, Hispanic Linguistics)

Professor John R. Rosenberg (Spanish Arts and Letters) began his academic career at BYU in 1985, having earned both his BA and MA from BYU, then an MA and PhD from Cornell University. His academic interests emphasized 19th- and 20th-century Spanish letters and art. During his career, Rosenberg served as the chair of the Department of Spanish & Portuguese and as associate dean and then dean of the College of Humanities. At the time of his retirement, Rosenberg had been serving as the associate academic vice president over undergraduate studies. Additionally, he spent two decades with the BYU-Public School Partnerships.

Professor Rosenberg always preferred the dialectic format, and his interlocutor, Professor Jeff Turley, has obliged us with a Q&A format to share Rosenberg's thoughts about the humanities and his career.

Photo by BYU Photo



Which of your initiatives as dean of Humanities informed your work as associate academic vice president for undergraduate studies?

JR: The 18 years I spent in the College office (eight as associate dean, ten as dean) were sufficiently transformative for me that nearly everything I did or said in the administration building had a humanistic echo. But to choose one, the notion of the human conversation—more of a worldview than an initiative—surfaced most frequently in the university forums.

By organizing our six annual forum assemblies around a theme (“Becoming a Beloved Community,” “In Pursuit of Democratic Character,” “What It Means to Be Educated”), we attempted to explore a big idea from the perspective of different disciplines. The forums were an experiment to demonstrate how we might approach the questions that matter most to us from multiple points of view. In other words, they attempted to model the human conversation.

At the close of your tenure at BYU, what are your thoughts on the human conversation? How important is this conversation now?

JR: The English philosopher Michael Oakeshott understood the human conversation (in part) as the recognition of and exchange between different ways of knowing and experiencing the world: there are voices of science and poetry, history and religion, voices of knowing *about* and of knowing *how*. “Liberal” (i.e., liberating) education occurs when the domains of knowledge enter into conversation. Sadly, the descendant of liberal education, our curricular experiment known as general education, too often allows each voice to exist in relative isolation. Often students are not taught to see how their class in physical science is part of the same conversation as the course in Western civilization. We call “training” what happens when a student is exposed to a single way of knowing; “education” occurs when one is inducted into the human conversation.

You spent a considerable amount of your career considering the role of public and private school administration, including BYU, democracy, and the connections between them. How would you summarize your thoughts on the role the university should play in the project of public education?

JR: At a university we view ourselves as stewards of our disciplines; we want those fields of study to be relevant and timeless, welcoming, and challenging, a *humanitas* (“humanity, kindness”) that nurtures *caritas* (“charity, esteem”). We rightly think that disciplinary stewardship manifests itself in our

classrooms and scholarship and in the preparation of new generations of the professoriat. However, we must also be concerned with the prospering of the humanities in the schools because all children, including those not bound for college, must be introduced to our common stories and languages and varieties of humanity (i.e., humanities)—what we call the human conversation.

Second, university and school people have much to learn from each other. Professors are wealthy in content that can enrich the K-12 classroom; schoolteachers are creative pedagogues, expert in the creation of engaging learning communities and sensible in rigorous self-reflection about practice. Third, in all democracies, but especially in composite democracies like ours, learning (both as noun and verb) is essential for both social and political democracy to function. Public schools, as political theorist Benjamin Barber insisted, are places of publicness, where we learn what it means to be a public and where we begin to understand how to be a people (versus a collection of persons).

“There is no education without continuing conversion of self.”

One of your central themes as administrator was stewardship. How did this concept evolve over your career, and what would you say to new faculty who are starting their careers as you are finishing yours?

JR: We use the term *stewardship* often as if it were something performed in isolation. The talent-bearing servants go about their business during the master’s absence in apparent independence, one’s choices disconnected from the others’. For me, stewardship makes community possible, relying as community does on shared accountabilities. Yes, I am an agent for my classroom and my time, but I am not an independent contractor. I am part of a department, a college, a university, each with a *vocation* that depends on me but is always larger than me. I occasionally used the term “transgressive stewardship,” one in which we take a step across (*trans* “across” + *gradi* “walk”) our stewardship into someone else’s. We do so not to meddle but to assist, because as a community steward I am as committed to my neighbor’s success as I am to my own.

You have found Paracelsus’ idea compelling, namely that the world is God’s book whose pages we turn by walking through it “pilgrimly.” During your final years at BYU, you became a pilgrim in the literal sense as you completed the medieval Spanish pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela and mentored students through the same experience. How has the Camino enlarged the metaphor of life as pilgrimage for you?

JR: It enlarged it by making it smaller, by changing the scale. The idea of life as pilgrimage is a metanarrative, a big idea rich in abstractions. The scale of the Camino de Santiago, nearly 500 miles of it on the route we follow, exists at the level of the footstep, the flower, the stony crossing of a brook; the scale is measured in material faces and places not always understood but always embraced—if one learns to walk pilgrimly. A physical intimacy on the Camino subverts grand metaphors, empties them out. And yet the miracle of the Camino is watching how what is material, quotidian, or trivial becomes transcendent.

You often quote Romans 12:2, where Paul admonishes us to not be conformed to this world but rather to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. What role does education play in that renewal?

JR: Education (versus schooling) is that renewal: there is no education without continuing conversion of self. A few years ago, when I first walked the Camino de Santiago, I entered a church I had not seen for a couple of decades. I saw it as if for the first time. The 700-year-old building had not changed; I had. And as I left, I wondered how much more experience and learning would be required before I could see that church again—as if for the first time. It is worth noting that Paul tells us why transforming is better than conforming: so that we can “prove” (test, experience) the will of God. ☐