

W. ROBERT CONNOR

# Watching Charlotte

## Little Steps toward Big Questions

FEATURED TOPIC

WATCHING MY one-year-old granddaughter, Charlotte, on the stairs—crawling, wobbling, trying to stand, constantly on the edge of disaster, determined—it is clear this is not play. It's work, obligation, a necessity that is programmed, hardwired into her developing brain. The stairs are Everest: she climbs them not from choice or whim but “because they're there.” Parents, grandparents, and babysitters can, temporarily, prevent the ever-imminent disaster of falling by distracting her, convincing her to try something else, offering a teddy bear, candy, or television. None of this will stop her for long, however.

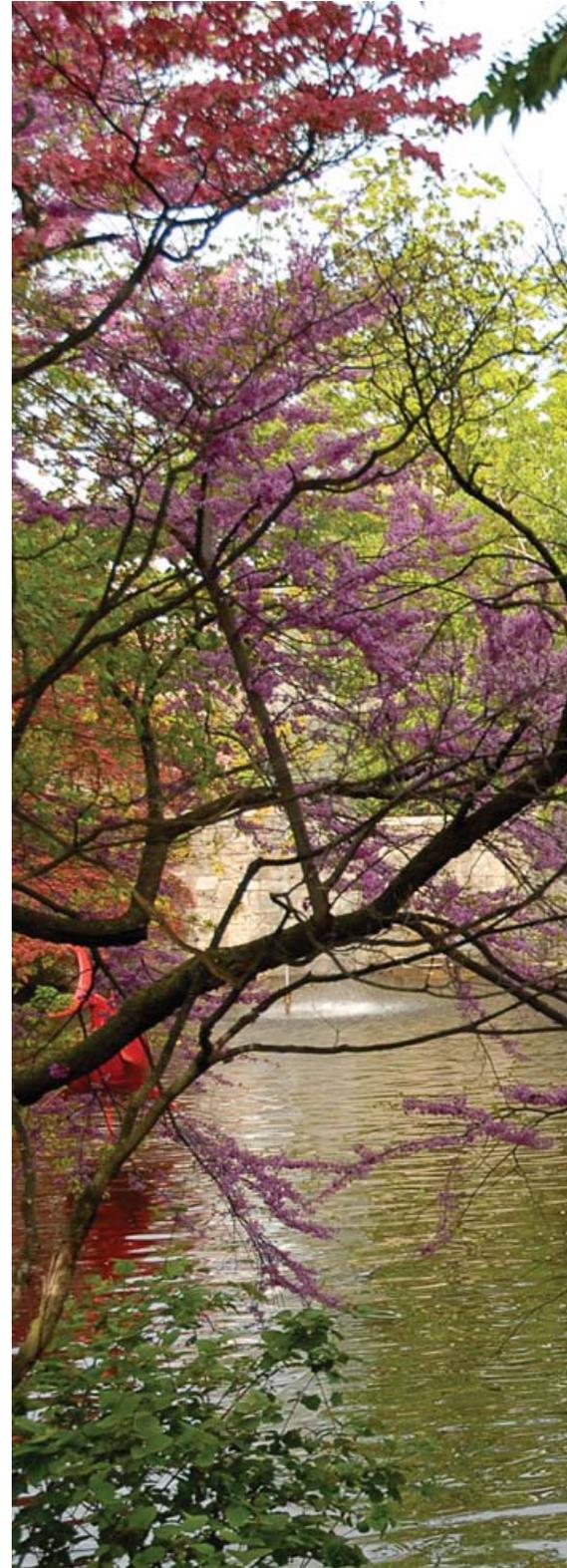
One could, to be sure, design an environment for her where there is nothing to climb, but she would be miserable. Figuratively, she would climb the walls. At this stage of development, she has to climb. Without having read Aristotle on happiness, she knows she must realize her capacities if she is to be happy. And once stairs are mastered, it will be something else—talking, for instance.

Charlotte is, I believe, Everyman—and Everystudent. Fast-forward seventeen years. She is entering college now. She looks so grown up, and yet retains her youthful enthusiasm. She's excited by everything around her—the college, her roommates, courses, parties, the social whirl. Now she's talking all right! She spends amazing amounts of time chattering with her friends, worrying aloud about her late adolescent problems, trying to sound very sophisticated and sometimes succeeding. As we watch her, we wonder if there is something at work at this stage that is equivalent to whatever was driving her to climb those stairs not so many years ago. And if

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W. ROBERT CONNOR is president of the Teagle Foundation, from whose initiative on the “Big Questions” this article emerged (see [www.teaglefoundation.org](http://www.teaglefoundation.org)). The author wishes to thank colleagues at the foundation and all those who have participated in the planning and implementation of this initiative.

**The Big Questions often illumine the material we study, opening up fresh approaches and raising issues that enrich scholarship**



# Climb



so, what does she need in order to develop her capacity as well as possible? In other words, is there a developmental process at this stage that is as powerful as what we see in infancy? It looks very much as if there is.

Neuroscientists tell us that the human brain doesn't stop developing at some early age, contenting itself thereafter with gaining information and refining existing skills. Rather, it continues to develop through adolescence, into young adulthood, perhaps even well into later life. So, although Charlotte and her adolescent friends may look like adults, "cognitively, they are not really there yet," as Bea Luna (Powell 2006, 866) reminds us.

Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) suggests, moreover, that the experience of college might have a very powerful role in the development of the brain. Abigail Baird of Vassar College recently published the results of a tantalizing experiment. Using MRI scans to trace changes in the brains of first-year college students, she and her graduate student Craig Bennett

found subtle but significant additions: five brain regions gained white matter, including frontal areas that prepare for action and form strategies, and other areas that interpret sensory input, emotions, body state and context. A control group of post-docs showed no such changes. "It's the stuff that allows you to put yourself in another's shoes and have empathy in the broad sense," explained Baird. (Powell 2006, 866)

Neuroscientists warn us not to rush to educational conclusions based on this exciting but very preliminary work. Fair enough. But the evidence that during the traditional college years the brain is gaining new capacities, and that such capacities need to be nurtured and stretched, will come as no surprise to those who have kept a close eye on how people in their late teens and early twenties think and react. That's the age group with which Socrates found he could make the most headway. Educational psychologists have insisted that there is a central developmental task at this period: making enough sense of the world to find one's way in it (see, for example, Parks 2000).

### The Big Questions

We might predict that, when she reaches college, Charlotte will be ready, even eager, to explore ground that a few years earlier might

have seemed weird or uninteresting to her. She may not have given up her old interests—and may be enjoying the state-of-the-art rock climbing wall her college recently installed—but they are now more likely to include a set of Big Questions such as, can I figure out how to lead a meaningful and satisfying life?

Given the fact that America is a country where religion holds exceptional sway, she may formulate those questions in religious terms: What is God's will for me? Is He calling me to a specific vocation? What happens if one fails to live up to His commandments? If she thinks in these terms, she's not alone. A broad-based survey conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California–Los Angeles (Astin et al. 2005) found a high level of spirituality among undergraduates: 77 percent of respondents said they pray, 71 percent said they consider religion personally helpful, and 73 percent said religious or spiritual beliefs had helped develop their identities. But a relatively small proportion of students who participated in the survey indicated satisfaction with how their college experience provided "opportunities for religious/spiritual development." Sixty-two percent said their professors never encourage discussion of spiritual or religious issues.

Some of these students—Christian evangelicals are perhaps the most noteworthy, but not the only, examples—may be deeply committed to and well informed about a particular religious tradition. More often, however, undergraduates are what Christian Smith (2005) calls "moralistic, therapeutic deists": they affirm that religion in general is a "good thing" because it helps people lead better lives. They may not be deeply grounded in a religious tradition, nor ever have struggled with the complexities of faith, let alone the problem of evil. In fact, some students may use religious formulations of their concerns and questions simply because they lack an alternative vocabulary. And, of course, right next to them may be sitting a student for whom religious formulations and experience are of no interest whatsoever.

Charlotte's instructors may, understandably, look a little puzzled from time to time as they confront the difficult pedagogical questions that arise in such a setting. Some may attempt to design classroom equivalents of the perfectly flat environment that would have kept

the infant Charlotte from falling and hurting herself. That is an understandable and fairly common response, but its consequences are deeply troubling. Although I don't often agree with his political views, I believe David Brooks (2002) when he reports that in traveling to American campuses and talking with students he "met students who had never really thought about how they wanted to spend their lives." But Charlotte and her classmates won't flourish in an antiseptic setting. Their Big Questions need to be brought to the surface, opened up for informed discussion. Once again, she and her contemporaries need to be challenged, guided, and helped with the developmental task of this stage of life. Charlotte needs a college that will help her understand her Big Questions and herself.

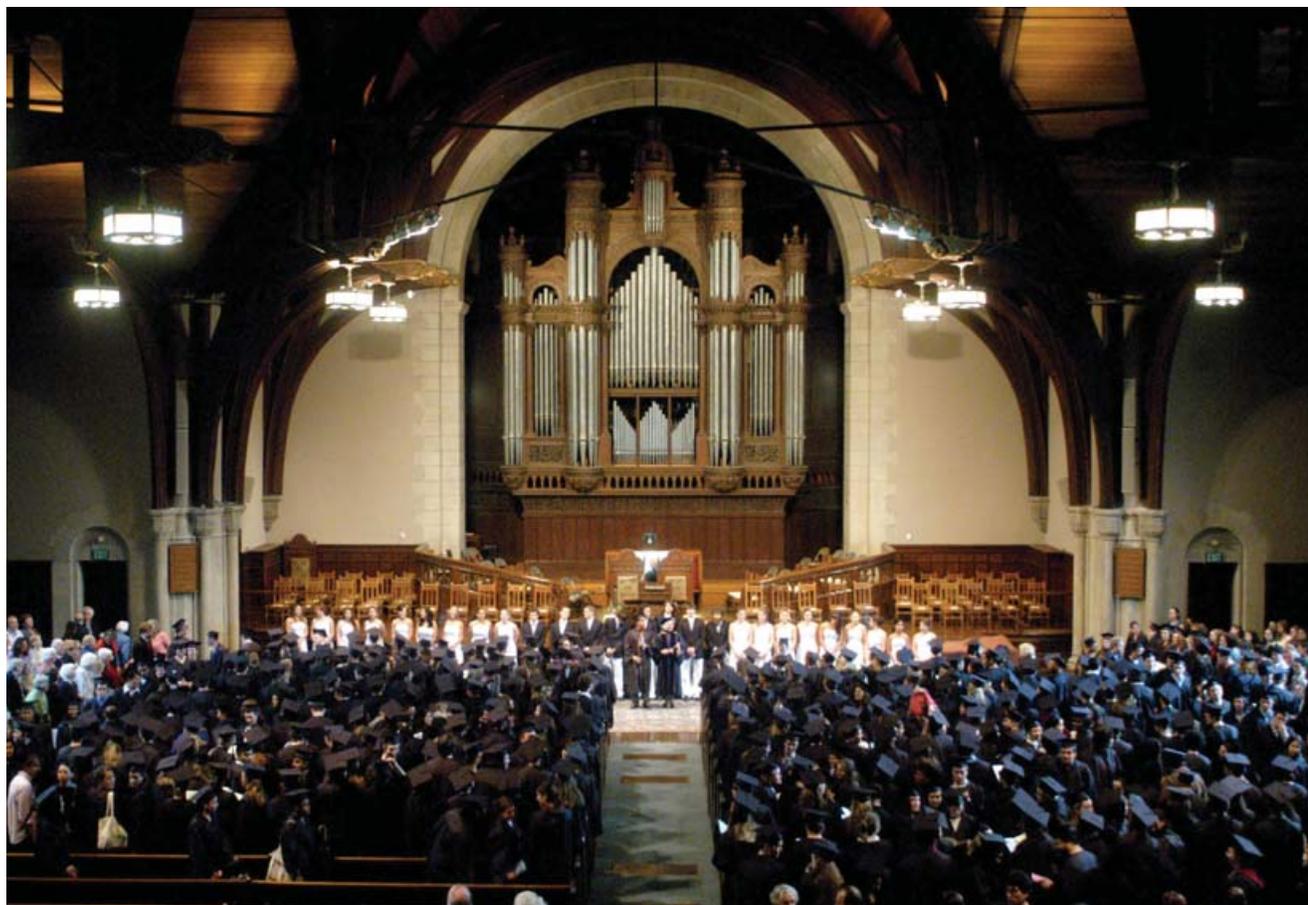
There's an opportunity here for liberal education, if the Big Questions are well formulated and approached at a high intellectual level. The texts, problems, and historical and aesthetic experiences that have long stood at the center of a liberal education speak directly to such questions and concerns. Unless they

are muffled or drowned out, they have important things to say to anyone who wants to lead an examined life.

"But I don't want to brainwash my students!" This is a common objection to engaging students in this way. Let's think about that from Charlotte's point of view before we ask whether such an objection is professionally valid. She's ready now to think hard about the Big Questions of meaning and value. But it's not easy for her when she tries to think about how she is going to lead this examined life. She may feel all alone—a very terrifying feeling for a young person. She may not know that her friends and contemporaries are also concerned about those questions. Young people have plenty of ways to talk about style, money, clothes, music, cars, and prestige, but they often lack good ways of talking about issues of meaning and value. And Charlotte, like almost all of her contemporaries, suffers from a debilitating amnesia.

She has forgotten, or never has known, that others—some from long ago, some alive today—have thought about the same questions,

Vassar College



struggled with them, developed ways of thinking, vocabularies, metaphors, images, logics, exempla from real life and from fiction. She's *not* alone; standing nearby are texts and works of art waiting to be put to work. Some are from the remote past—works by canonical authors such as Homer, Plato, Dante, and Shakespeare. But there are many others too—texts Eastern and Western, big and little, canonical and non-canonical, literary and subliterate, sacred and secular. And there is also logic and dialectic, as well as vicarious experience accessible through history, the visual arts, and music—all of which can inform her thinking and move her most inward being.

Yet despite her high SAT scores, the good high school she went to, her wonderful grade point average, and the great essay she wrote on her admission application, Charlotte is still a teenager, albeit a well-mannered one. She thinks of the great writers and artists of the past as her elders and feels that she has never been properly introduced to them. She's a little shy, and while she's easy and relaxed with her friends, she's reluctant to just walk up to such distinguished people and say, "help me learn." Charlotte is waiting to be introduced. And if she is not properly introduced, well, she just goes her way and forgets about them. And as she walks away, her instructor, fretting about "brainwashing," assiduously avoids calling her back and introducing her to those who could help her most.

Of course, young people *are* impressionable; they can be easily misled; one mustn't impose one's own beliefs upon them. But there's a fallacy lurking in such talk, waiting to trip us up and inviting us to cop out. Charlotte doesn't need *answers* to her Big Questions—even if she asks for them, even if we believe in one set of answers very intensely ourselves. She has to answer those questions herself. She needs not answers, but vocabularies, metaphors, exempla, and modes of thought that can help her think them through for herself.

So now, in temporary remission from her amnesia, she walks into the class we are co-teaching, you and I, and meets some of those "others," the ones you value most and the ones I do. She hears us argue about their thought and

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its implications. As her confidence grows, she joins in the argument. She searches for her own voice and for the texts and documents that are most meaningful to her, perhaps finding some that you and I have overlooked. She speaks and writes with passion, stumbling from time to time, but gradually gaining confidence, depth, and clarity. We can watch her develop her ability to deal in thoughtful, nuanced ways with questions to which there is no single right or wrong answer. You and I may rediscover lost sources of professional satisfaction as we watch her develop her capacity for "post-formal" reasoning. Perhaps, if we are courageous and ingenious enough, we will find ways of assessing our efforts more systematically and then use what we learn to improve our course next time around.

That's a nice fairy tale, isn't it? But let us treat it as a thought experiment: what keeps it from being true? Part of the answer may be, I suspect, the discourse of expertise. Those of us who have taught in colleges and universities have been trained to become experts in a specialized field. We receive scholarly recognition for our expertise and maybe even financial rewards. Above all, we derive great personal satisfaction from mastering a challenging body of knowledge. But the prevailing discourse of expertise in our specialty may not coincide with that which lets us talk well about core questions of meaning and value. The Big Questions, moreover, are intimidating; they seem to press us to move beyond our professional expertise and force on us an unfamiliar discourse. In this area, we are not confident about our mastery. Why can't we leave these questions to some other set of experts—the moral philosophers maybe, or the clergy, or the writers of pop-psych books? Let me teach what I know.

Such reasoning is a powerful impediment to helping students deal with their Big Questions. It is also evasive, for it avoids posing a big question of its own: what are the limits of expertise? One of those limits is already evident; what we have been calling the "Big Questions" are usually not ones to which there are clear-cut right or wrong answers.

The discourse of expertise must not be allowed to drown out other conversations.



Yeshiva University

The old Tom Lehrer tune had it right: “Once the rockets go up, who cares where they come down? / That’s not my department, says Werner von Braun.” Moreover, while I can only speculate about the place of Big Questions in other disciplines, as a classicist and humanist I believe I can often see that professional expertise, uninformed by the Big Questions, has a terrible tendency to turn into trivia. Once expertise becomes the be-all and end-all, pedantry and obscurantism are just around the corner. By contrast, the Big Questions often illumine the material we study, opening up fresh approaches and raising issues that enrich scholarship. After all, the authors we classicists study and teach were, by and large, writers who themselves struggled with the biggest of questions. Then and now, they provide not answers but challenge and insight.

### **Responding to students’ concerns about Big Questions**

All this says to me that we should not shy away from admitting the Big Questions into our classrooms. The classroom may not, however, always be the best venue for exploring them; certainly, it’s not the only one. Service learning, internships, overseas study, and extracurricular activities can all play a role—mainly by raising questions that need to be explored with the perspectives, vocabularies, and insights derived from subjects represented in the curriculum. What goes on outside of class must not be treated as unrelated to the subject matter being

studied in a college or university. A good example of linking the two together comes from Paul Christesen of Dartmouth College. When some of his students told him “they felt the need to discuss some things that were really important... [but] couldn’t find the right setting,” he devised an evening extracurricular seminar for discussing texts, ideas, and experiences. Christesen provides a brief text and a set of questions for the dozen or so students in the group to read and think about before they meet. The authors range from Sophocles to contemporary novelists and short story writers. Then, as he describes it,

Each meeting starts with a student doing what we call “discourse on your life.” The student, who prepares in advance, provides a brief autobiography and then speaks at some length (typically for 15–20 minutes) about a question about themselves they are currently trying to answer or a particularly important time in their life. The other members of the group can respond only in the form of questions. After the discourse is done, the group talks about the text and questions chosen for that evening. As moderator, my goal is to say as little as possible while keeping discussion focused. I always tell the students at the beginning of the semester that the ideal meeting is one in which I say absolutely nothing, and they run their own discussion and ask each other questions.

Christesen’s questions often illuminate both the text and the students’ understanding of

themselves. One of Christensen's questions will show what I mean: "[In this Canto] Virgil advises Dante to 'let your pleasure be your guide.' Can you imagine trusting yourself enough to put this advice into practice?"

I am not suggesting that every member of a college or university should go and do likewise. But Christensen's seminar may help us think in fresh ways about the dichotomy that students so often express as the divide between "academics" and "life." They are likely to continue to think in those terms until they are helped to see that there are other richer, more revealing ways to think about both "academics" and "life."

To do that takes a special kind of commitment. It's fine to have a few individuals trying things on their own, but on most campuses a structural problem keeps such efforts small in scale and sporadic. As soon as one steps away from formal course offerings, no one is in charge. It's literally "not my department." That problem can be an opportunity for chaplains,

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student life professionals, and others who work with students outside of class. If they take the lead, they can find patterns that work on their campuses and, thereby, bridge the gap that too often separates them from the faculty.

To be sure, this may require that the faculty first develop a more robust dialogue among themselves about Big Questions and how to approach them. As the Teagle Foundation explored ways to invigorate the study of such questions, we found that some institutions had developed ingenious ways of approaching them. For example, at one university, the funds for an unfilled position were used to create a faculty seminar on such questions. The same can be done with outside support. With Teagle Foundation help, for example, the University of Richmond is currently hosting such a discussion with participating faculty from several Virginia colleges. The success of such projects makes me think that colleagues on a campus often underestimate one another. Just as students

## The Teagle Foundation Big Questions Working Groups

In May 2006, the Teagle Foundation funded seven multi-institutional working group projects to investigate the connection between students' interest in Big Questions of meaning and value and their engagement with liberal education. Formulated around sets of questions grounded sometimes in religious and sometimes in secular terms, and approached through faculty development, curricular, or cocurricular means, these projects all point to the possibility that more extensive and intellectually robust ways of grappling with such Big Questions can have powerful and invigorating effects on undergraduate student learning. (More detailed descriptions of the projects can be found online at [www.teaglefoundation.org](http://www.teaglefoundation.org).)

**Engaging Meaning through Mentorship: Strengthening Post-Secondary Liberal Education through Vocation-Based Mentoring of Future Faculty**

How can faculty—charged with the development of future faculty—best mentor toward vocation? *Graduate Theological Union, American Baptist Seminary of the West, Church Divinity School of the Pacific, Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology, Franciscan School of Theology, Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Pacific School of Religion, San Francisco Theological Seminary, Starr King School for the Ministry, University of California at Berkeley*

**The Liberal Arts as Preparation for a Life of Work**

How should liberal education respond to shifting expectations about the nature of work, and what role should an undergraduate education play in preparing students for their eventual careers? *Hampshire College, Berea College, Cornell College, Smith College, Warren Wilson College, Worcester Polytechnic Institute*

**Contemporary Challenges to the Concept of the Human**

How do advances in genomics, neuroscience, computer science, nanotechnology, and other scientific and technological fields challenge our understanding of the concept of the human? *National Humanities Center*

sometimes fail to realize that they share a concern about the Big Questions, faculty members may not recognize that their colleagues also have an interest in Big Questions and a willingness to break fresh ground in exploring them.

It is also easy to underestimate the range of intellectual interests of chaplains and student life professionals. One of the most interesting responses to the Teagle Foundation's Big Questions initiative, for example, came from the dean of religious life at Vassar College, Samuel Speers, who is leading a working group to explore the origins and implications of the concept of "secularity" itself and its implications for contemporary liberal education. The group is trying to bring to bear on the mission of the liberal arts an important scholarly debate about whether societies become less religious as they modernize, thereby illuminating how the secular ethos in various settings can shape the ways students and faculty engage questions of meaning and purpose in the classroom and beyond.

There are, in short, many productive ways to respond to students' concerns about Big Questions. The one thing that is not productive is to turn one's back and pretend that these

questions are insignificant or unworthy of serious academic attention. That is, of course, itself an answer of sorts, albeit a contemptuous one. It sends a strong, implicit message that leading an examined life doesn't really matter. That's not good enough for a liberal education. Charlotte deserves better. □

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#### **The Pedagogy of Belief and Doubt**

When faculty ask their students—and themselves—to put aside moral or religious viewpoints in discussions of "Big Questions," do professors who claim a liberal stance in fact practice a restrictive pedagogy?

*University of Richmond, Associated Colleges of the South, Virginia Foundation for Independent Colleges, historically black colleges and universities in Virginia*

#### **Deliberation about Things that Matter**

Focused on the process of deliberation, ten Phi Beta Kappa chapters and associations will explore a range of substantive "Big Questions" such as the essential nature of the

human, the divine, the good life and the good human being, justice, or beauty and sublimity.

*The Phi Beta Kappa Society*

#### **What Can I Do to Right the Wrongs of the World?**

How can human rights education—drawing from theological, philosophical, political, cultural, sociological, and rhetorical perspectives—advance answers to the "Big Questions" of "What can I do to right the wrongs of the world?"

*The University of Chicago, Macalester College, Midwest Faculty Seminar*

#### **On Secularity and Liberal Education**

While secularity can promote tolerance and critical thought, and create democratic institutions and civic engagement, can uncritical secular assumptions strip—in various ways—students and faculty of fundamental aspects of their identity? Is secularity truly "neutral"? *Vassar College, Bucknell University, Macalester College, Williams College*