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High Marks for Asilomar’s Fiftieth

Nearly everyone who attended said it was very likely they would join us again in 2009 for the next Asilomar Great Books Weekend. The evaluation forms we all completed confirmed what we already knew; the weekend was a great success.

The overall rating of the weekend was high — higher this year than last — and the Saturday evening program received high marks. All four discussion sessions went well and leaders all did a good job. *The Scarlet Letter* was by far this year’s favorite reading selection.

**Brent Browning** (Poetry), **Oscar Firschein** (The Discourses), **Janice White** (The Scarlet Letter) and **Jim Hall** (Painting Churches) received the highest ratings from participants in the discussions they led. But three leaders who were new at the job — **Susana Conde**, **Sheri Kindsvater** and **Karen Schneider** — all received remarkably high scores for first-time leaders.

June Picnic Visits Utopia

Statistics show that a majority of Americans believe in God and an afterlife — a heaven of peace, love and happiness with no conflicts, no wars, no inequities, a home of health and safety where no one grows old. Ever think what that would be like? A heaven on earth.

With today’s fears and uncertainties and a myriad of problems here and abroad, the Picnic Book Selection Committee chose to take time out for something completely different. So on **Sunday June 8**, we will be discussing James Hilton’s *Lost Horizon* at this year’s annual picnic. It is the story of a utopian paradise hidden high in the snow-capped Himalayas.

While attempting to escape a civil war in India, four westerners are kidnapped in an airplane that eventually crashes in the mountains. They are found by a mysterious Chinese man who leads them to a monastery hidden in the Valley of the Blue Moon — a land of mystery and matchless beauty where life is lived in tranquillity beyond the grasp of a doomed world. Here in Shangri-La destinies are discovered and the meaning of paradise unveiled.

Our Annual Meeting, Picnic and Book Discussion will be held in the Padre Picnic Area of Tilden Regional Park, Berkeley. Directions to the area are on the flier that is enclosed with this newsletter. This is a *Potluck Event* so each member should bring a dish for four to share plus your own beverage, paper plate and utensils. Barbecue grills will be available. You may also wish to bring a folding chair and a sun hat.

*This event is free!*
As I write this letter, more than three dozen people are working on our 50th Great Books Asilomar weekend. Their efforts have been building since last summer. As the weekend comes closer, it seems like assembling an elephant.

Working with our Council volunteers is the most satisfying experience I have had in an organization, and I have been in some serious ones—Berkeley campus politics, local election campaigns, federal departments, county agencies, city services, co-ops, women’s groups.

The range of talents and experience among our Council members is deep. Great books and our Shared Inquiry method seem to reinforce thoughtfulness and listening in our meetings. Online discussions extend even more consideration into our plans.

Chuck Scarcliff, publisher of Reading Matters, and Jim Hall, vice president and publisher of our electronic newsletter, integrate events into our newsletters.

Lou Alanko, in late summer, mobilized our publicity plan for Asilomar and other 2008 Council events. Howard Crane, as Asilomar coordinator, began early recruiting individuals for key tasks. Rob Calvert stepped up as Asilomar coordinator in February when medical emergencies forced Howard to withdraw. Sheri Kindsvater, registrar, handles contract arrangements with Asilomar as well as participants’ questions and registrations.

Dorothy and Jerry McHale pitched in to package and mail readings to all registrants, and — amazing but true — they are helping even though they cannot attend Asilomar this year.

Barbara McConnell is my Council touchstone and talent. She has the long-term view and up-close details. She starts recruiting discussion leaders in the autumn and gently nudges us ahead of the time curve. Barbara arranges the thirty-two leader assignments for the weekend.

Mary Wood, leader trainer, arranges pre-discussions of the readings for the leaders, and summarizes their four discussions. She also arranges staffing for our Friday registration table.

Mary Stuart and Barbara prepare folders with group assignments, room locations, and essential program information. Mary welcomes newcomers to Asilomar in a reception for them. Jan Vargo prepares name and folder tags. Roy Harvey, treasurer, pays the bills, and tracks deposits.

Karen (White) Schneider and I prepare the Saturday evening program, along with Vince Scardina who adds Council history and photos. (I’ve only been around since 1997.)

Rob Calvert, besides being conference coordinator, is keeper of the Asilomar keys. He runs to each of our Great Books discussion rooms to unlock and lock our meeting places. This is circuit training multiplied by eight.

All these efforts culminate in our 50th weekend at Asilomar this April 2008. I am heading into the neighborhood of Robinson Jeffers, in the company of Billy Collins, Seamus Heaney, Mona Van Duyn, Robert Frost, Niccolo Machiavelli, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Tina Howe and best of all, into discussions with our San Francisco Great Books fellows.

Behold the elephant!
Readers of this newsletter will recall the persistent refusal of GBSF officials to admit there is a theme for the Asilomar Spring Conference or a committee behind it. We have previously reported that Brent Browning’s unconvincing denials have led us to suspect he is involved. Browning, unable to prove otherwise, makes the excuse that it is impossible to prove a negative.

Obviously this year’s theme was “autonomy.” The essay, Discourses, by Niccolo Machiavelli sets forth the requirements for a nation, in this instance the Roman republic, to sustain for several centuries strength and independence. The novel, The Scarlet Letter, by Nathaniel Hawthorne, describes a woman stigmatized by society who becomes strong and independent. The play, Painting Churches, elucidates the concept by presenting a negative case. Gardner, the aging poet, depends completely on his wife, Fanny.

The poetry follows the same pattern. In “Naming of Parts,” by Henry Reed, a soldier frees his mind from military indoctrination by ruminating on nature. In “The Master Speed,” Robert Frost assures his daughter as she enters marriage that she and her husband, as an autonomous couple, “cannot be parted or swept away from one another.” In “The Purse-Seine,” another negative case, Robinson Jeffers describes how the individuals in a city eventually will lose their autonomy through revolution, tyranny, or anarchy, “the mass-disasters” and so on.

Readers with information on who the members of the theme committee are, please write to either Reading Matters or the Great Books San Francisco (GBSF) Electronic-Newsletter.

When you open the door to an Asilomar weekend, there is no telling what you will find. In my case, I found a sauna. Yep, when I opened the door to my room I was hit with a blast of hot air that could have come straight off the Sahara desert (something was wrong with the heater in my room and it had been blasting away for goodness knows how long). My husband and daughter gave me a look that said “Just what have you gotten us into?” For, in fact, I had talked them into our first Asilomar family adventure. Well, as things generally work out, not only did we meet a nice handyman who took care of our heater issue – once he spotted our surfboards, he also had some words of advice regarding the local surf spots.

While our unconventional “sauna” was a unique way to start the weekend, it’s not what we will remember most. What we will remember most is…

- **wandering** the tide pools in search of small aquatic plants and animals before breakfast
- **napping** on the beach after a picnic lunch
- **watching** a spectacular Monterey sunset from the Asilomar boardwalk
- **visiting** the Monterey Bay Aquarium with Sheri Kindsvater and her daughter before heading for home.

Having my family join me at Asilomar definitely enhanced my weekend experience. While I enjoyed the various Great Books activities and introducing my husband and daughter to Great Books folks – my husband and daughter enjoyed a wonderful surf weekend together.

As I said before, when you open the door to an Asilomar weekend, there is no telling what you will find. In my case, I found a wonderful Monterey weekend with my husband, daughter and extended Great Books family.

We would enjoy hearing your reflections on the recent Asilomar weekend – please email your story to us at reading-matters@sbcglobal.net
**Celebrating 50 Years With Champagne, Cake and Trivia**

Rick and Kay White

With champagne and cake for our Saturday evening program and party, Great Books celebrated its fiftieth year at Asilomar. And we looked for ourselves and friends in a huge group photo from twenty-five years ago. Earlier in the day a 2008 Asilomar group photo was taken.

Then it was time for serious competition — the Great Books Trivia Game. Fifteen teams of five members vied for top honors. But, as Murphy said, “If it can go wrong, it will.” And it did. The amplifier system didn’t show up. Ellen Ward of Las Vegas — tall and with a voice that projects wonderfully — saved the day when she stepped forward to repeat for all to hear, the questions emcee Karen Schneider asked the competitors.

Wearing a black halter top and pants, sporting long white gloves Jan(na) White sashayed through the crowd waving signs with the question categories — poetry, play, essay, novel and Great Books Asilomar. Show producer, Kay White, had planted clues on a poster and in participant’s folders and was the timekeeper (with a cowbell, no less).

When competition was narrowed down to the final two teams, Karen asked the final question: “In which Asilomar building were the infamous parties of yesteryear held?” Frank Sorto clanged his team’s bell milliseconds before the competition. “Tide Inn!” Vince Scardina exclaimed and so the team of Frank, Vince, Lou Alanko, Rob Calvert and Jim Hall became champions barely beating out the runners-up of Brent & Erma Browning, Grace Dennison, Nancy Wortman and Mary Wood. And to the winners? A Rice Krispies © treat as a fitting tribute to their victory.

**A Personal Note:**

May I never forget participating in one discussion Marjorie led at Asilomar many years ago, learning from Tom how Great Books discussions are led by a pro, and the pleasure of Duke’s company for so many years.

Chuck Scarcliff
Publisher, Reading Matters
William Corbett-Jones will be back for a return engagement at this year’s Long Novel Weekend at Walker Creek Ranch. Bill, a Professor of Music at San Francisco State University, will have Egypt since Napoleon as his Saturday evening program topic. You can expect a lively presentation giving background to our reading, The Cairo Trilogy, and a historical view with insight into the rich culture of modern Egypt. He will attempt to bring focus to the trends and pressures of Egypt deepening our understanding of the lives of al-Sayid Amad and his family.

In past years he has spoken to us about the Spain of Cervantes (when we discussed Don Quixote), The Origins of World War I (for Parade’s End) and Expatriates in the Time of Henry (for The Ambassadors) each time bringing insight and interest to our weekend.

We will also enjoy a light snack of baklava and “spiced” pomegranate and orange juice. Egyptian dancing, music and revelry will follow. Don’t miss this memorable evening and the opportunity, once again, to get completely away for two days in the company of like-minded readers focused on one great work of literature. Bring your finger cymbals!

About The Cairo Trilogy
Chuck Scarcliff

First, let’s get a couple of issues out of the way.

The trilogy is long, but not too long and it is not “about” Islam or Middle Eastern traditions, although both the religion and the culture are present and important.

The three novels that comprise The Cairo Trilogy extend over many pages. Yet Naguib Mahfouz’s prose reads effortlessly and smoothly in this excellent translation. You are likely to find that these three novels require no more and possibly less time than some past Long Novel Weekend selections — The Sound and the Fury and The Ambassadors, for example — with far fewer pages.

This is a story of people, specifically three generations of a single family and it is these characters that make The Cairo Trilogy worth reading and talking about. The key figure is the family patriarch, Sayid Amad Abd al-Jawad. You won’t necessarily like him. He’s a tyrant with his family (but they love and respect him boundlessly) and treats the women in his life (and there are many) badly. The easy (and wrong) way out would be to say that his behavior represents that of a Muslim or Middle-Eastern man. But little about him is typical. He’s far more complex than that. And far more intriguing.

His five children are each quite different. One son is a politically active idealist who looks to the day when Egypt will be free of British rule. Another is an intellectual, a philosopher without a philosophy. The third son is a hedonist without virtues that I could discern. But even he is not without interest; he does, after all, marry one of his father’s former mistresses. Sayid’s wife and two daughters likewise are well drawn characters but I’ll admit that Mahfouz gives them less attention than the men folk.

Although there is not yet a Great American Novel, The Cairo Trilogy, covering a family’s and nation’s story from 1919 to the mid 1940s, could well be the Great Egyptian Novel. Naguib Mahfouz is not only one of great Arabic novelist of the 20th century; he is one of the world’s great novelists.
Reading Poems — Some Step-by-Step Suggestions
Chuck Scarcliff

It’s no secret that not everyone in Great Books reads poetry with ease, confidence or pleasure. Some say an invisible barrier exists between themselves and most poems. That’s a pity because poetry rewards its readers in ways that prose cannot. But the differences between prose and poetry can be surmounted. Here are a few tips that might help next time you find a packet of Asilomar or Poetry Weekend poems in your mailbox.

Take it slowly: Speed reading and poetry don’t go together so linger over every word and line.

Start by pretending its prose: Most poems use the words and grammar we use everyday so concentrate on the words and how they form phrases, clauses and sentences.

Look for key words, phrases and lines: Underline or make notes in the margin as you find passages that look important.

Look for the unusual: When you see unusual words or expressions and ask, “Why did the poet write it that way?”

Look for comparisons: When Robert Burns begins a poem “O my luve is like a red, red rose” he is comparing one thing (his “luve”) with another (a rose). Your job is to figure out how they are alike and what that tells you about his “luve.”

Look for images: Visualize the picture the poet presents. Nearly all good poems are built upon concrete language and images rather than abstractions and generalities.

Read the Poem aloud: Listen for its sounds — its aural qualities like rhymes, other repeated word sounds and its rhythms. Poetry, after all, has a kinship with music.

Get in touch with your feelings: A good poem is more than what it makes you think; it is also what it makes you feel — the emotions or sense of beauty its lines evoke. And those feelings are part of a poem’s meaning.

Look beyond literal meaning: Just as you would with a fable by Aesop or a parable of Jesus, be open for meanings that aren’t stated explicitly. But don’t go overboard by trying to force these meanings out of hiding.

Avoid locking yourself into a single interpretation: Many fine poems allow several valid interpretations so remain open to multiple possibilities. And remain flexible as you discuss such a poem.

Concentrate on the poems you like, understand and respond to: Read all of the poems in the packet you receive from Great Books, but you will find some more interesting and understandable than others. Especially while you are getting started as a poetry reader, give most of your attention those poems. Don’t spin your wheels fussing with poems that are either uninteresting or incomprehensible.

Listen as you discuss: This is a good rule for all Great Books discussions but especially so with poetry. There could be more experienced poetry readers in the room and by paying attention to what they say you can understand how they approached, read and interpreted the poems. Even if the others are no more experienced than you, they may have their own ways of dealing with poems and some of their ways may work for you.

Two Very Short Poems

Beautiful Woman
The spring in her step has turned to fall
A. R. Ammons

I Can’t Help You
Poor moth. I can’t help you. I can only turn out the light.
Ryzard Krynicki:

Three poetry discussions, an evening program and four meals all in a pleasant setting among Great Books friends.
Look for the flier to be mailed in August for a description of this year’s poetry selections and other details.
For information, contact Theda & Oscar Firschein,
oscarf@earthlink.net
Lost Horizon — A Novel Worth Talking About

The world is too much with us. That is William Wordsworth’s line but James Hilton (author of Lost Horizon), Hugh Conroy (the novel’s principle character) and the inhabitants of Shangri-La would have heartily agreed. Conroy’s world is of a post World War I time in which, after education in England and WWI military service, he is a minor consulate official in Asia. For Conroy, it is a world with little meaning or enchantment and from it he (and three others) are kidnapped and taken to Shangri-La, a la-masery hidden in an unexplored region of the Himalayas.

From here on, Lost Horizon calls for a large measure of willing suspension of disbelief, but no more than, say, Gulliver’s Travels demands of its readers.

Shangri-La, first, has all of the creature comforts of a pricey spa — beautiful buildings and gardens, excellent food with home-grown vegetables and even tropical fruits, a large and well-stocked library, musical instruments, modern plumbing and, in those pre-Surgeon General days, a good quality home-grown tobacco.

But that isn’t even half of it. The lamas lead tranquil lives away from the stresses of civilization engaging in the spiritual, artistic and intellectual pursuits of their own choosing. Some learn clairvoyance. And their lifespans far exceed the single century mark. For mind or body, Shangri-La is hard to beat.

Conroy is invited to stay at Shangri-La and even become a lama. But will he? Many of you know the answer, but I won’t give the ending away to those who haven’t yet read the novel.

Lost Horizon offers much to talk about in a Great Books discussion. For example, is it a picture of an ideal society or is it more a criticism of modern western civilization? Part of their secret for tranquility and long life consists of suppression of the passions that may otherwise rule human lives, but is someone without passion fully human? With death being a far distant event, time means nearly nothing so they are in no hurry to accomplish their endeavors, but isn’t that a recipe for laxity and laziness? And what do we think of the notion that moderation in all things is among the highest of virtues? And, perhaps of primary importance, we may note that Shangri-La’s appeal to Conroy and others including the lamas appears largely to be an escape from an unsatisfying outside world. But can we fully approve this escapism?

The opportunity of discussing these and other questions about Lost Horizon is one good reason for attending this year’s Annual Meeting and Picnic on Sunday June 8 at Tilden Park.

Did you know?

Before the Presidential Retreat became Camp David, it was known as Shangri-La.

FDR called the place Shangri-La and Dwight Eisenhower re-named it.

Three films have been based upon Lost Horizon, the most well-known being Frank Capra’s 1937 version that starred Ronald Coleman. There was also the 1956 (unsuccessful) Broadway musical Shangri-La with book and lyrics by James Hilton.

MINI-RETREAT - 2008

Claudia O’Callaghan, Event Coordinator

On February 2, forty committed and enthusiastic readers pored over a series of themes only to find that after examining one level of meaning, another was revealed. Leader Vince Scardina opined that although the work was a relatively short 300 pages, it could have easily qualified for the Long Novel Weekend.

If you like a sex ersatz love story with a liberal sprinkling of such weighty philosophical subjects as Nietzsche’s concept of the “eternal return” along with lengthy discourses on the relevance of “kitsch” in everyday life, as well as edifying sections such as a “Short Dictionary of Misunderstood Words”, then this is the book for you.

Kundera, a contemporary Czech writer, skilfully leads us down a Kafkaesque path, asking us to examine whether to have meaning, our acts must somehow contain weight because without this quality our acts become “light” in their insignificance.

Whatever conclusions, if any, we draw from the book we can all agree that The Unbearable Lightness of Being is a fascinating and challenging read. To such comments, Kundera has responded, “Man thinks - God laughs!”
London Theatre Tour for Thinkers
Ted Kraus

My preparation for the annual London Theatre Tour for Thinkers begins months in advance with checking drama reviews on the websites of four London newspapers and by checking blogs by theatre critics and fans. I arrive in London ahead of the group to preview and select the five plays which I find to be best suited for Shared Inquiry for the theatre — complex in theme and character development — and for which tickets are available.

We stay in the Bedford Hotel in Bloomsbury, near the British Museum and within walking distance of most theatres and museums and shopping. It is comfortable, convenient, and reasonable (by London standards) and features a lovely lounge overlooking the Duke of Bedford’s garden. The Russell Square tube station and many buses are within a block. Our schedule of four evening performances and one matinee allowed four afternoons and one evening free to explore London.

In 2007 we saw the British premier of The Enchantment, a 1888 Swedish play by Victoria Benedictsson and translated and adapted by Clare Bayley. This appears to have been written in response to Ibsen’s A Doll’s House and has echoes of both Ibsen and Chekov. Joe Guy by the popular and talented black British playwright Roy Williams was a powerful and vivid portrayal of current tensions in the United Kingdom between Caribbean and African communities. Moonlight and Magnolias at the intimate Tricycle Theatre in Kilburn was a hilarious presentation of Ron Hutchinson’s wild play on how David O. Selznick got Ben Hecht and Victor Fleming to complete the Gone with the Wind film script in seven days with the three surviving only on bananas and peanuts. Shadowlands, a 1992 play by William Nicholson (that was successful on Broadway and in film) examined C. S. Lewis’ slow abandonment of his aloofness and fear of commitment to the love of a very determined American female fan. All about My Mother was a stage adaptation of Pedro Almodovar’s Spanish hit film by Samuel Adamson presented as part of Kevin Spacey’s season at the Old Vic. The handsome, sometimes confusing production starred Diana Rigg as the Diva of a very mixed-up crew.

We hold our ninety-minute discussions on the morning after we have seen the play. In our Shared Inquiry for Theatre, the play is the thing; not just the text. So we consider all aspects of the production we witnessed the evening before.

Finally London is expensive. But London theatre is the very best and most exciting in the world. It’s worth the price.

The 2008 London Theatre Tour for Thinkers VI is planned for October 20-25.
For more information including rates for contact Ted Kraus, 925-939-3658.
tedmkraus@yahoo.com

Wilde Irish Celebrates a New Home
Breda Courtney

In October 2007 Wilde Irish Productions celebrated two firsts: the first performance in our new home in The Gaia Arts Center, Allison Way in downtown Berkeley, and the first in our Irish Myth and Saga Series of performances. It was the staged reading of an ancient Irish myth, The Children of Lir adapted for the stage by Breda Courtney and performed by the Wilde Irish Ensemble with live music (flute and bohran)*, singing and Irish dancing. The large number of young children who attended seemed to be spellbound throughout the whole performance. We received a wonderful review in the Berkeley Daily Planet (with a front page banner headline).

In December Wilde Irish celebrated with a Joycean Christmas: an Irish Christmas celebration replete

* A bohran is a drum about as big around as a large pizza and as thick as a dictionary.
We finally got it right.

A vast understatement but it was event organizer Rick White’s way of describing the outcome of the one-day event held at Oakland’s Allen Temple Baptist Church on January 11, 1997. Rick went on to say, “This was not our event, but a true partnership among three organizations. Allen Temple Baptist, a renowned East Oakland Church, brought in half of the participants, provided a third of the leaders and ran the event — superbly. Lafayette-Orinda Presbyterian provided a third of the leaders and half of the participants. We supplied the books, the method, a third of the leaders, a sprinkling of participants, and the Foundation’s top trainer.”

More than three hundred — African-American and white — attended and discussed Dr. Martin Luther King’s “Letter from the Birmingham Jail.” It was in part an experiment: Would the Shared Inquiry of discussion work for a group that was unacquainted with Great Books? And it was an effort of bringing together a diverse racial and economic group for a meaningful experience of understanding.

It was my privilege to be among the more than three hundred in attendance. We had met for a day long session a week or two before the event. Under the leadership of Gary Schoepfel of the Great Books Foundation we prepared for discussions that would follow procedures that were new to two-thirds of the leaders and nearly all of the participants. We were ready, but unsure of how it would turn out.

First, many more people than expected turned out for the event. There were around fifty people from the two congregations in the discussion I lead. All of them had carefully read Dr. King’s letter and thought about it. Even before knowing of the high evaluation scores the discussions received, we all knew the event had been a success. For me, the most successful of all of my Great Books activities.

Looking Back: “A True Partnership”
Chuck Scarcliff

Watch our website: www.wildeirish.org for details about Bloomsday or other events and productions.
Hass and Kunitz, plays of Shakespeare, Shaw, Beckett, McDonagh and more and fiction ranging from Sterne, Austin, Melville, Joyce and important recent writers.

In addition to reading, Carol writes. One of her poems, “Ripe Apricot,” appeared in the Spring-Summer edition of Reading Matters and she now has a play in the works.

She majored in history and comparative literature at City College of New York and received her M.A. degree in dance education at Teachers College, Columbia University. She has been a dancer, choreographer, dance instructor and had a dance company in New York. Carol now lives with two long-haired tabbies known as the Fluff Sisters and a retired industrial designer turned sculpture. She has six grandchildren, two who live in San Francisco and are (in her own words) “a steady Wednesday after-school date.”
Not long ago while prowling the aisles of my neighborhood Borders, I saw a paperback titled *How to Read Literature like a Professor*. Now who, I asked myself, wouldn’t want to read the way they do? Most Great Books practitioners; that’s who. It doesn’t take long to figure out that college professors — at least this one — don’t read the way we do. We concentrate on the text at hand while he connects what he’s reading at the moment with everything he’s ever read.

The author, Thomas Foster, is quite an entertaining and insightful writer who approaches fiction through myth (recurring narratives in stories of any kind). He might note that a particular novel involves a journey and that often translates to a quest. So he might relate its travels to those of Odysseus, Huck Finn or Holden Caulfield. Or going down into a cave (or the sewers of Paris) could represent a descent into hell.

Foster’s way isn’t our way of reading. We are more apt to look at the characters, their motivation and development while he looks most closely at the narrative and how this story fits the patterns set by other fictional works. I can only speak for myself on this, but paying attention to what Foster says could help me become a better reader but won’t help me lead or participate in Great Books discussions.

You might want to read the Foundation’s recent *Shared Inquiry Handbook; A Basic Guide for Discussion Leaders and Participants*. It’s short and at $4.95 it doesn’t cost much more than some coffee drinks at Starbucks. As the subtitle promises, it is basic. Some aspects and complexities of leading Great Books discussions are beyond its scope. But reading it gave me a few things to think (and write) about.

First, this is a guide book; not a rule book. Nowhere will you find a prohibition against outside references. What it does say is “Support your ideas with evidence from the text,” which implies that you shouldn’t go elsewhere for support. And it says “Expect the leader to only ask questions,” but does not say that leaders may only ask questions.

So instead of the “thou shalt nots” that have been drummed into many of our heads, the *Handbook* gives reasons for the essential Shared Inquiry practices and encourages us to follow them.

Further, the *Handbook* offers flexibilities that we haven’t always acknowledged we had. Here’s what I have in mind: “Discuss the ideas in the selection and try to understand them fully before exploring issues that go beyond the selection. Reflecting on the ideas in the text and the evidence to support them makes the exploration of related issues more productive.” (Emphasis theirs, not mine.) A little later on the topic of evaluative questions, we find, “Evaluative questions help us make connections between the insights we gained through discussing great writings and how we live our lives.”

I have long believed that our first order of business is interpreting the text through interpretive questions. Nothing in the *Handbook* says otherwise. But I have also believed that we read and discuss the books not only because they take on the questions that thinking men and women have wrestled with for centuries, but because those issues are relevant to our own lives and world. I don’t want to build unnecessary walls between our discussions and the world outside of Great Books.

I see the Handbook as informative to anyone new to participating in or leading Great Books discussions. But I also see it as giving long-needed attitude adjustments to old-timers like me.

My only wishes are that the book gave emphasis to the importance of careful listening during discussions. And that it told us to Have Fun.

The *Shared Inquiry Handbook* isn’t all I’ve been reading lately. I’m now partway through the recent Robert Fagles’ translation of *The Aeneid* by Virgil.

A translation I read many years ago seemed flat and without the poetry Virgil is known for. But not this one. Fagles, who died on March 26th, was the best translator of the classics I’ve read, and his *Aeneid* is a pleasure to read.

Among the great epics, *The Iliad* of Homer (Fagles translated it too) is the most powerful and will always be my favorite. But with this reading, I’ve gained a new appreciation of *The Aeneid*, a truly great book that’s well worth reading.
Coming Events

**Annual Meeting & Picnic**

**June 8, 2008**

Join us at the Padre Picnic Area of Tilden Regional Park, Berkeley for a good time — a potluck lunch, a short meeting and a discussion of James Hilton’s *Lost Horizon*. And best of all, enjoy the company of other Great Books enthusiasts.

Read more about the picnic and the book in the articles on pages 1 and 7. And see the enclosed flier for more detailed information.

**Long Novel Weekend**

**August 23-24, 2008**

You’ll never find a more pleasant and peaceful place for a Great Books Weekend than you’ll experience at Walker Creek Ranch in Marin County. Nor will you find a group that is more committed to excellent discussions than you’ll meet here.

The articles on page and the enclosed flier will give you more information and even more reasons to attend.

**Poetry Weekend**

**November 15-16, 2008**

Make poetry a part of your Great Books experience by being with us at Westminster Retreat in Alamo. You can expect three good and well led discussions plus an evening of fun, entertainment and participation. And the food is hard to beat.

More information will be sent to you later this summer, but for now: **Save these dates: Nov 15-16, 2008**