

2007

Interview of John S. Grady

John S. Grady
La Salle University

Christopher Schwartz
La Salle University

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Field Notes

Narrator: Prof. John S. Grady

Interviewer: Christopher Schwartz

Dates: April 3rd, 2007 at 6:00 PM; April 4th, 2007 at 4:30 PM

Location: The La Salle University Honors Program Center located in the basement of McShain Hall.

Language: English

Ephemera: Two photos of Prof. Grady taken by interviewer.

Prof. John S. Grady has been a faculty member of the Economics Department at La Salle University since 1959. More importantly, he has been the Director of the Honors Program since 1969, in which capacity, over the last 42 years, he has shaped its mission and curriculum. During his tenure, the Program has risen from obscurity to national recognition (by the National Honors Collegiate Council), and enlists an unusually high concentration of faculty who have received the Lindback Award for distinguished accomplishment in teaching.

Let's consider some hard numbers to appreciate his impact upon the La Salle community. First, in any given year there are 210 Honors students, all undergraduates, at various stages of their academic journey. Second, average annual undergraduate enrolment for the University rarely exceeds 3000. Third, as of 2007, if my calculations are correct, we can estimate 9000 individuals who have earned their Bachelor's degrees under Prof. Grady's stewardship. As a result, Honors alums constitute a critical node within the far-flung La Salle alumni network.

I myself am one of those 9000. I enrolled in the University and the Honors Program in 2000, and completed my Bachelor of Arts degree in Philosophy and Religion in 2004. While I was an undergraduate, Prof. Grady (also commonly referred to as "Mr. Grady," due to his lack of a Doctorate degree) was something of a distant enigma to myself and many of the other Honors students. My direct dealings with him were rare, no more than a handful in a year, but there was this sense of him constantly behind the scenes, quietly observing and even more quietly managing my academic career. His obvious impact upon the school, as evidenced by statistics, and his not-so-easily discernible impact upon my own self, coupled with the mystery of his true character, inspired me to choose him for a formal field interview.

Prof. Grady is reasonably tall in stature, and his stride is long, quick, and purposeful, with his hands always boring deep into his pockets. During the interview, I discovered that he is extremely fidgety, never seated in the same position for more than five minutes. There is something very *physical* about him, despite his obvious "brainiac"-ness. For instance, during our interview, he snatched books and papers off the nearby tables, jabbed his finger into the pages to accentuate a point he was making, and then plunked them down onto the couch when he was done. All in all, he sizzles with liveliness, and is someone at home in his own skin and body.

His voice, of a normal pitch and volume when I had first known him as an undergraduate, recently experienced some kind of trauma and is now low and scratchy, as if he is experiencing

permanent laryngitis. This is a shame, for he is an excellent and spirited conversationalist, bursting with energy. His face lights up whenever he reminisces about his students, past and present. When he discusses his favorite topic, namely, anything and *everything* intellectual or cultural, he gazes up toward the ceiling with a euphoric smile.

He is not a man to suffer whom he considers fools, and he expresses his opinions forcefully and unapologetically. He has the character of a fighter, like a bookish young boy constantly harassed by bullies while growing up, tiny tyrants whom he one day learned to defeat simply by disdain and disregard. As a result, to some Prof. Grady is an archetypical underdog, while to others he is an arrogant upstart. For instance, I recall several occasions during my undergraduate years in which my professors grumbled heatedly about the man. One professor of mine, who had worked closely with Prof. Grady and confessed “mixed feelings, good and bad” for him, explained to me that his lack of a Doctorate was at the root of long and serious confrontations with the faculty. Evidently, many of his colleagues felt he had sidestepped the traditional career path of the scholar, achieving ascendancy via a department that was neither wholly academic nor wholly administrative, but some peculiar half-breed of his invention. Yet, perhaps in his eyes the bullies had never really gone away, and he had simply found another way to work around them.

This theme of *defense*, of forcefully creating a safe space for oneself in a hostile environment, marks his career. During our interview, he expressed a staunch belief that American colleges and universities support special individuals, athletes and members of ethnic minorities in particular, but rarely the academically gifted, in which category he clearly includes himself. This was and remains the fundamental *raison d’etre* of his directorship of the Program.

Yet, it is its very ideology which has made the Grady directorship controversial in the La Salle community, among both students and faculty. The Program has been accused of being an elitist endeavor, and by extension, Prof. Grady has been condemned an intellectual chauvinist himself. Take for example the issue of what to do with vacant seats in Honors courses. Technically speaking, there is nothing in the bylaws of the University or the Program itself that restricts Honors courses to Honors students alone; Honors students simply get first enrolment rights, and if there are any remaining seats, the course is then *de facto* open to non-Honors students. However, I recall an incident in the Spring 2003 semester when a non-Honors student attempted to enroll in an Honors course. Prof. Grady fought tooth and nail to keep her out, but gave no reason why. Indeed, when he was accused of discriminating against a member of the general University population, his denial, though ardent, struck many, including we, his own Honors students, as disingenuous.

Recalling all this, I wasn’t certain that I would be able to interview him in a professional, neutral manner, but I still wanted to give it my best try. Privately, I believed that of everyone in the class, present or future, I stood the best chance at getting to the bottom of his story. Dr. Barbara Allen, the professor for my oral history course, agreed to let me interview him and proceeded to contact Prof. Grady for me. I had informed her that my purpose was threefold: to cast a light upon his persona; to record the history of the Program, from its inception to today; and if possible, to somehow explore the interplay between the man and his creation. In a sense, I almost had *two* separate subjects, two *individuals* to question, but one speaking for both. On January 23rd Dr. Allen reported that Prof. Grady “happily agreed” to the interview.

My next step was to confer with the University’s archivist, Brother Joe Grabenstein. We met February 3rd inside the Archives, a catacomb of metal shelves bulging with documents and artifacts that lurks underneath College Hall. In preparation, Brother Joe had dredged up several

boxes' worth of documents; these I poured over, selecting articles, lectures, and other papers that he and I determined to be consistent with and valuable for the goals of the interview. There was an overwhelming amount of materials on the Program itself, but much to our mutual dismay, very little on Prof. Grady—we even had difficulty tracking down his undergraduate *alma mater*! Was he truly the enigma I had long perceived him to be?

With this in mind, Brother Joe and I engineered a preliminary framework for questions. He was confident that Prof. Grady would be more than forthcoming, given his reputation on campus as an enthusiastic talker. Yet, doubt persisted. As an undergraduate my scant few encounters with him had been mostly cursory, pertaining to the nitty-gritty of coursework and schedules. It was also a difficult time for me personally as long-festering problems in my family finally turned gangrene. I tended to be hostile toward him, not for anything specific he had ever done, but because I needed someone to resent.

It certainly didn't help my confidence that, in my quest to get an appointment with him, Prof. Grady proved a hard bird to catch. Scheduling an appointment via his secretary failed, as she couldn't find any slot of time, however narrow, and so I resolved to make my appointment with him face-to-face. This was far more challenging than I expected. You see, he is someone *constantly* on the move, speeding about the campus and the city, meeting with faculty and donors and alums and dignitaries, planning field trips, refining curriculum offerings, smoothing out dormitory issues, and so on. As he later revealed to me, he is a man so busy, day in and day out, that he even has to schedule dinner with his own wife!

I worked full-time during the day as a groundskeeper for the University, so I even resorted to trying to follow him in the clattery trash truck. Though he later claimed to have been totally unaware of my pursuit, he nevertheless demonstrated an uncanny ability to elude me, always appearing in the corner of my eye just before darting into a building or down a stairwell. On March 1st, I finally succeeded: as he passed by a trash can near College Hall, I leapt out from behind it, ambushing him. We agreed to meet after the Spring Break, which was the next week, but he resisted setting a specific date, and so two weeks later, I was back at square one.

For the next month I persisted, but the semester was entering "crunch time," and as a result, both our schedules began to feel the squeeze of greater and greater amounts of school-related work. It wasn't until March 30th, a Friday, when I was finally able to corner him again. We decided to conduct the entire two hour interview in a single shot, so as to eliminate the need for a follow-up which, considering the immense difficulty we had already experienced, ran a great risk of not happening by my course deadline. His brow furrowed and he thought hard about his schedule, and realized that there could be a chance for a meeting early the next week, possibly Tuesday, April 3rd. It wasn't until Monday that we concretized the date.

The day of the interview was fraught with challenges for me. Not only had the file in which was stored my finished framework of questions suddenly been corrupted, but somehow I had misplaced my digital recorder. Using my only paid sick leave to take the day off, I snuck away from the campus (at the time, I lived right near the University, and my supervisor was the suspicious, prowling type) and hurried downtown. It took me nearly three hours to find a replacement digital recorder, which, ironically, turned out to be a finer piece of equipment than the one which I had lost. I then spent the rest of the day highly caffeinated as I rewrote my questions, and after that, hurried back to the University. Prof. Grady and I were scheduled to meet in the Honors Program Center at 4:30 PM; he was nearly an hour and a half late, held up by an errand that stubbornly refused to be resolved.*

The Center is really the basement of McShain Hall; as a result, most students are oblivious to its existence, and most faculty and staff, though they are aware of it, haven't the slightest clue where the "heart of the beast" hides. It has two offices, one for Mrs. Morris, the secretary, which is filled with neatly organized papers, and one for Prof. Grady, which is littered with books. A globe has the prominent spot on his desk, if you can call it that, since no one would believe a desk is actually there under all the papers. It is thus obvious even to the untrained eye that while he may be the imagination of the directorship, she is its organizing will and hands.

We did not conduct the interview in his office, however, but in the lounge, which constitutes the major section of the Center. It is well kept, with shelves tastefully filled with old volumes of *Encyclopedia Britannica* and the *Great Ideas* series, evidently a favorite of Prof. Grady's. This space used to be the site of the Honors Colloquium, a series of informal lectures and discussion groups with scholarly and governmental dignitaries which the Program hosted since the 1960s, but which was quietly discontinued in the mid-1990s.**

Dr. Allen had already taken the step of explaining to Prof. Grady the idea and function of the interview, so there was no need to retread the subject; instead, we dove right in. He was more than amiable, very much to my happy surprise. Unlike the image of him in my mind as a hurried and distant engineer of academia, he was expressive to the point of effusiveness, eloquent, engaged, and best of all, *earnest*. After all, this is a man who has been interviewed countless times by reporters, students, and faculty. Moreover, he had been speaking his mind for decades, in the unyielding belief that what he has to say is important; the responsibility and fame (or notoriety) of his directorship has reinforced this attitude.

One would think that his age might be a factor for his openness. However, he never once let on any hint that this concerned him—the contrary, in fact, for when I asked him about the future of the Program after his directorship, which I assumed would be near, he bluntly stated that his term would end only when the Provost decided to replace him. Additionally, the passion with which he spoke, and the simmering rage and frustration he exuded when discussing the state of college culture at the close of the 20th Century and in our present 21st, strongly indicated that he was not acting, but was truly someone who gave a damn about intellectualism.

His age did nothing to damage his memory, which was sharp as the teeth of a bear trap. The digital recorder fulfilled its function very well, and there were no distractions, such as a phone ringing or people moving around, for we were alone. To his credit and my relief, Prof. Grady gave me his undivided attention—so much so that, somehow, he found time in his schedule for a follow-up interview the next day at 4:30!

At first I was hesitant about that, but in retrospect, it was a prudent decision, for the simple reason that it gave me a chance to regroup. The initial interview ended up being a bit disorganized: for one thing, he steamrolled through many of my questions without my ever having to ask them; for another, the way in which his mind worked caused me to have to leap about my inquiry framework. The follow-up interview, on the other hand, was far more focused.

Yet, in both interviews, at about the half-way or two-thirds point, he leapt into what must have been his most pressing concern: the intellectual docility and general lethargic apathy of the contemporary undergraduate. As he saw it, my generation is obsessed with gaining credentials, for the sole purpose of attaining that Perfect or Necessary Job; intellectual curiosity, academic seriousness, and any kind of study ethic, have all fallen before the Market, and the thirst for

knowledge has been replaced by the thirst for wealth—“wealth” he interpreted to actually mean *survival*, in the debt-strapped, plunderous corporate nightmare he felt our society had become.

As you’ll probably notice when you hear the recording, he couldn’t have found a more sympathetic audience than me. As an undergraduate and now as a Master’s student, I have felt the keenest rage at my peers for their self-willed ignorance of any areas of study that may exist beyond the narrow goal of getting an A grade in class so as to get the A grade job in the dog-eat-dog hysteria they call “the real world.” My frustration became all the more pronounced after completing my Bachelor’s degree, for I, too, partook in that very sin for a short time, only to have the truth slammed in my face: the labor market has rapidly shrunk since the 1990s while the population of laborers has grown, prices in all goods and services, especially essential ones, have skyrocketed, wages have bottomed out, and more and more the situation has become *who* you know rather than *what* you know that gets you even the most basic form of employment. It was why I was a groundskeeper and not a full-time reporter (my desired profession) or a Master’s student with a nice scholarship, because neither of those really exist anymore.*** In the eyes of Prof. Grady and I, the unfettered meritocracy which was supposed to be America’s soul is dying—and no one seems to want to admit it.

Any kind of formal stiffness that existed in the question-answer phase of the interview melted away once we entered this subject, and the interview transformed into something more resembling a conversation. The tone of this dialogue, however, was not only frustration, but also *helplessness*: as an educator and administrator, Prof. Grady has watched as, inexplicably, his students, his school, and his society has been drained of blood; as a student and a young man of ambition, I have seen a long, featureless plateau, stretching out to a dim horizon, growing more untraversable with each passing day. For him, the past has been lost; for me, the future.

At the end of the initial interview, Prof. Grady seemed a bit dissatisfied, for he had sensed the slight slipshod questioning, the scrambling to keep up with his thoughts. However, and thankfully, at the end of the follow-up, he was very satisfied, even remarking that all-in-all I had been “very thorough.” Needless to say, after all my fretting, I was extremely pleased to hear this. What truly moved me, though, was the irony of our relationship: for years I had been anxious about this man, Prof. Grady, when in the end, we proved to be kindred spirits...

I have written these field notes with you, the future historian or archivist, in mind. I pray you have experienced what I hope is an enjoyable and fruitful account of the recording you now have. With that in mind, for the sake of context, below are the endnotes which I indicated in the text above:

* During the period of waiting, I read the Spring 2007 issue of *The Intercollegiate Review*, which had as its focus the 20th anniversary of Allan Bloom’s seminal work, *The Closing of the American Mind*. The themes of the essays therein meshed perfectly with the central theme of the interview, and you shall hear this journal mentioned in the recording.

** It is this subject that launched Prof. Grady into what became the real core of our interview: the disquieting apathy of the average student at La Salle, Honors and non-Honors, and nationally throughout the United States.

*** In 2000, there were 500 staff writers in Philadelphia, divided between the major newspapers—the *Inquirer*, *Daily News*, *City Paper*, and *Philadelphia Weekly*; in 2007, only 225. In 2004, when I hit the labor market, 100 staff writers were laid off from the *Inquirer* and *Daily*

News. Other industries besides journalism which have hemorrhaged employees include everything from heavy industry to custodians—in the case of the former, it has been outsourced overseas; in the case of the latter, contracted workers and illegal immigrants have replaced the full-time employee.

With regards to scholarships and grants for graduate students of the humanities and social sciences who are from the middle and lower classes, as so many of my professors have lamented, these have become extinguished for the most part. The general consensus is that what little “full” or “partial rides” that remain tend to be given to the children of the upper class as a status symbol. All of these changes have occurred under the corporate mantra of “cost efficiency,” even though costs continue to rise.

And now I leave you. As an immortal journalist once said, “Good night and good luck.”