

Klausner, Neal W.  
Interviewed by Emiliano Battista  
Transcribed by Emiliano Battista

For Ms. Hanna Griff. American Beliefs and Cultural Values.

Tape # 1 Side A -- May 19, 1993

**Neal W. Klausner:** My name is Neal W. Klausner, born in Neenah -- NEENAH -- Wisconsin; a small but very wealthy town because it was the location of major paper mills, for example: Kimberly Clark the manufactures of Kleenex is there. And I worked on the paper mills for two years after graduation from high school.

**Emiliano Battista:** When was that?

**N.W.K.:** 1925 till 1927. But I knew I didn't want to spend my life making paper and its various products, and I knew I wanted to be in College. And so in 1927 I was enrolled in Lawrence College, now it is called Lawrence University.

**E.B.:** Where was it?

**N.W.K.:** In Appleton Wisconsin, just about ten miles from my home town and I finished there in 1931 and thought I was interested in problems of theology and religion and I enrolled in a three in course at Colgate Rochester Divinity School for three years. I soon found out there wasn't where I wanted to go so I went to Yale, and took my Doctorate in Philosophy, which was exactly what I wanted to do. Now this was during the Depression, 1934, and there were very few jobs available. Under one spring day while I was studying very hard for my oral examinations for the Doctorate, a knock on the door of my room and the Dean entered and said that they had a job notice in Southern California at the University of Redlands of Southern California where they needed a professor of Philosophy and Psychology, and he wanted to know if I was interested and they would back me on that job. Well (laughs) of course I was interested. So I wrote to them and they wrote back; to cut it all short I got the job. Then I took my written preliminary examinations for the P.H.D. degree, passed them, got married ten days later and then went to the University of Chicago for ten -- no twelve -- weeks. I thought I better brush up on some psychology (Laughs).

E.B.: Laughs...

N.W.K.: And then after that my wife and I drove out to California in a model A Ford and I stayed at the University of Redlands for eight years. It was a beautiful and wonderful place to live and for a beginning teacher a wonderful place to begin teaching. I would look out of the window of my offices on the third floor and see the beautiful deserts and the valleys and the snow covered mountains in the distance and wonder just how long this would last. Well, it lasted eight years, and then I got notice for a position at Grinnell, and I knew something of Grinnell, because I was born in Wisconsin I knew something about Iowa. And so I accepted, and that was in 1944, just before the end of the War. And taught until 1975 when I retired. So I have been retired for eighteen years, it doesn't seem possible but... (laughs).

E.B.: Did you like teaching at Grinnell?

N.W.K.: Oh, very much. I found the faculty bright and excellent. The students eager, although remember this was the time of the War, and I think there were three hundred girls and twenty one boys. If those terms are acceptable these days.

E.B.: Laughs.

N.W.K.: Because most of them were away. The young men who were on campus those days were either injured or four F's, or something of that sort. But it was really an exciting time to teach, because there was such a close friendship, we shared so many not only intellectual matters, but feelings with students. There was always some time a report of a loss of life or an injury and we were always worried with what would happen in the future. So it was not a happy time politically but we were isolated here, and we made our own happiness here; with the students and with the faculty. That's about the story of my life up to the time I graduated, I mean up to the time I retired.

E.B.: How was the campus once the war was over, when it started to have...

N.W.K.: In many respects the campus was a shambles. There was so much repair that needed to be made, physically I am talking about

now. And the town itself was more than shabby. There were so many houses that needed to be painted, that needed to be repaired. But gradually as time went on all those problems were met -- some in satisfactory ways, some not. But the campus physically now in far different from what it was in 1944. So many new buildings, and the grounds of the campus are much better cared for than they were then. So some very major changes have been made; and of course many of them were made possible from considerable gifts to the College that made it financially stable, at least, and took a great deal of worry out some of the administrators. Although colleges always need money, but I think also I would say... well the faculty has expanded a good deal, and of course the student body too.

E.B.: How many students were there then?

N.W.K.: Well, as I said about, I think I recall it somewhere in the ball park anyway, about 300 women students and 300 men students. Then there came I time, I think that was 1945 or '46, when the men came back from the army and we had a considerable rise in the population of the students. And that was an exciting time to teach.

E.B.: Was that feeling of closeness and practically intimate relationship between faculty and students that you mentioned before the war was over still going on after they came back

N.W.K.: Yes it was, specially when the soldiers came. Soldiers were not interested in the nonsense of collegiate life. They were there to learn, they were serious students, and it was fun to teach serious students. I think we got rid of a lot of the freshmen hazing and that sort of silliness.

E.B.: Was it going on the too?

N.W.K.: Yes it was, but it didn't last. I think that the residence of the soldiers contributed a good deal to bringing the campus to its' senses, with respect to relations among students and faculty. It was really a fine time to teach because all the students were eager and worked hard.

E.B.: What were you teaching then, I mean what philosophers?

N.W.K.: Well, at that time...

E.B.: Well, I imagined you would teach something specific because of the War.

N.W.K.: No, I don't think, as I recall it, except incidentally and on occasion entered into my classroom. You see, I was the sole professor of philosophy and religion at the time, and I had an enormous load to carry. I was interested in teaching philosophy, not social problems or economic problems, though there were plenty of those (laughs). I taught all the philosophy courses: ancient philosophy, Plato, Aristotle, modern philosophy up to Descartes, contemporary philosophy, and it was a considerable load. I remember one year I had 77 students in Logic, now that was a real burden. I taught it in the Auditorium in ARH.

E.B.: Third floor?

N.W.K.: Well, no, this auditorium was on ah... Well I can't remember because they've done something to ARH to change the inside architecture. It was the theater part of ARH.

E.B.: It's the third floor now.

N.W.K.: It's the third floor now, right. I think they changed it a good deal, for the better I should say. It was fun teaching them, but it was not fun correcting their papers... (laughs). It took an awful lot of my time. So I tried the students see how important philosophy could be in their intellectual as well as in their social lives. That was my aim, how well I succeeded I don't know. But it was fun teaching in those days. The poorest, the saddest time, was in the late 1968's, the 1960's, when there was so much revolt all over on college campuses. I remember walking across campus and students... meeting students on the sidewalk, and they would lower their heads and not even say hello to you sometimes. Somehow they transferred their difficulties their social and political issues onto all of them who were over thirty, which included most of the faculty. Those were hard time, hard times to make the students see the importance of Aristotle, or the Pre-Socratics. But we got through it, and it is much better now, I think.

E.B.: Why do you think there was this hostility perhaps...

N.W.K.: I think hostility is not too strong a word.

E.B.: Not too strong a word?

N.W.K.: No. In many instances. The opposition to the Vietnam War was tangible among students. And there were marches in Washington D.C., and the students would leave Grinnell on busses and go there to protest.

E.B.: Did the academic level...

N.W.K.: Did it lower itself?

E.B.: Yes.

N.W.K.: It's very difficult to say. I don't want to generalize. I know that -- I hoped that mine didn't, that I could demand as much of the students as I had always demanded. I don't know whether that's the case for everybody in the faculty, but my guess would be that they wouldn't lower their standards either. But it was difficult. I could generalize and say something about the student body, but I don't think it would be helpful. Our problems were often with individual people, who would come in and wanted to be counseled, or simply wanted to talk their problems over. That was a good time to meet students. Some of them, on the other hand, were so hostile to any kind of approach that suggested that the Vietnam War, that there was something good about the war. I thought it was a moral disaster myself and I was not afraid to say so in class; contrary to Reagan's statement that it was a noble effort.

E.B.: For me, and for people of my generation, they look back on the sixties and on campus now there is a lot a people who try to go back to the sixties; to wear tied-died T-shirts, to be hippies, and they look back upon that time as a sort of age of awakening of the U.S., and for what you have been telling me, it doesn't seem to have been really an age of awakening but more an age of closing and an unwillingness to accept other things or opposing views on the Vietnam War, even though it was a moral disaster. Would you say that's correct?

N.W.K.: Well, I've been away from the campus for eighteen years, so I have not feeling at all now about what is happening in the



student body at all. I don't know what is going on except as I get it through some other faculty member or something of that sort. But with all the difficulties we have now; Bosnia... what else do we have now?

E.B.: Somalia.

N.W.K.: Somalia, South Africa; with all these hot spots in the world it's... I can see why the students would be, if they are, restless. Intellectually puzzled, and emotionally restless. At that time that I speak of, when I was teaching in the late sixties, there was a focus, and the focus was against the Vietnam War, that was where everybody found their satisfaction in protest; and it did, it seems to me, unite the students, but I don't think it united the students and the faculty. There were a great many faculty people, and I think I would include myself, who sympathized very much with the students. But we were also shocked by some of the techniques of protest that happened.

E.B.: What were they?

N.W.K.: Well, just a general incapacity to exhibit friendly relationship with those who taught them, and there were silly things. For example the occupation of a building by students who thought that they were accomplishing something. We have almost a musical comedy scene about this. Do you know the building almost directly across from ARH, on the corner of eighth and Broad? That building was the ROTC building, and the students protested against ROTC on campus, so they occupied that building! And they were sitting on the porch and wandering around, and the police chief of Grinnell came and parked outside, saw that there was no violence, went inside, sat on the railing, talked to the students and asked them if they were hungry, and they said yes (laughs), they were always hungry. So he said "Alright" and he got into his car, went downtown and bought pizza. He brought it back and served the students pizza, which is one of the great stories of that period; almost musical comedy. I don't think they accomplished much by it; we had some faculty members who were convinced that the political policies of the Nation at that time were right, and who would sit

around the flag-post protecting the flag from students who might want to raise it at half-mast or put up an United Nations flag, or something of that sort. But then of course there was that critical time when the college was closed about -- my memory now is a bit weak on me -- but it was closed about a week before commencement. It looked like there was going to be some severe damage, the threat seemed to come from some areas of the student body. So the President, and I guess with the approval of some other administrators and perhaps the Board of Trustees simply declared college closed and sent the students home. There were no final examinations, you gave the grades you thought you could give at that time to all the students. I was out of town, in St. Louis at a professional meeting and I only heard about it when I came back. And to my surprise I had nothing more to do. I didn't have any final examinations to correct or to read, and we got through the period alright. The college opened the following year and we have not had any problems since that time. But it was an uncomfortable period for many, no question about it.

E.B.: How did -- you mentioned 1968 as a better year in all of this -- how did the death of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. influence the student body?

N.W.K.: I don't think there was anything peculiar, or different, from the shock and dismayed reaction of students and faculty members here than any other place; everybody felt the shadow and the shame of those terrible events. Martin Luther King had been here to speak.

E.B.: Oh, really?

N.W.K.: Yes. Before the assassination, and he spoke on Darby Gym for a packed house. There certainly was... we all felt a shock and a shame that the Nation had lowered itself; at least that somebody in the Nation had given us such a blackened event. The recovery was, I think, natural as time passed. Now I think we expect some major historical devastating event almost every week; we are getting almost shock-proof, I am not so sure that that's a good thing, but there is only so much that you can take emotionally. I

don't think it made any difference -- again I am generalizing from my own experience -- I don't think it made any difference in the major effort of the faculty to see the students who came there to be taught were taught. They came there for learning, and we wanted to give them the best educational teaching we could give them. I think that was always done, in spite of what happened. But in the discussions that went on in the dorms... I don't know what went on there.

**E.B.:** How was the relationship between faculty and... I hear from Ms. Hanna Griff that when she first came she made friends with several professors very fast, and they would go out together...

**N.W.K.:** I don't think that there was any -- in my experience, again I have to speak from my perspective -- I never noticed any major traces of hostility and significant differences that would break up cordial relations among faculty. There may have been, but I never ran into them. For the most part, the faculty at Grinnell -- and again from my perspective -- are glad to meet each other and to talk to each other, and that is a lot of that going on; that's why I've been so happy to be at Grinnell. I don't think anybody on the faculty, seeing another faculty member on the street, would cross the street in order to miss him or her, I don't think (laughs). I don't believe that happened many times. I have frankly found the faculty here enormously interesting and cordial and warm. A single faculty member who had serious difficulties physically or medically could always find help one way or another.

**E.B.:** One thing I want to ask you. There is a lot of bad feelings sometimes among the students and the people of the town, and was that because of all the protest during the sixties?

**N.W.K.:** Yes, I think that was the case. I think for the most part, if you were to write the history of the faculty relationship with the townspeople you would find it a pleasant and happy relationship. But there were intervals, such as the Vietnam war, when the relationship was very sensitive. I am trying to think of problems of race...

End of side one of tape # 1



Tape # 2, side A.

N.W.k.: (continued) ... yes, I never had to prepare myself psychologically for retirement, it was to me like a long break, a long vacation; but a lot of my friends have retired and taken on teaching positions -- temporary teaching positions -- for a year at the time or something like that. I never did, I never wanted to. I thought I've done enough now and I want to keep as alive as I can by... I knew now I could not make an excuse for not reading a book because I had to prepare for a class, I could go and get that book and read it without feeling that I had taken some time from the students' tuition (laughs), or something of that sort. So retirement was never a problem for me, though I understand it is for some people. I am sorry for them, I like retirement, although I think that if somebody invited me, or if I had something to say, I might like to go back to a classroom for a week or two. But then, during these last few years which have been pretty difficult for me, it was impossible. I think retirement is a great thing, if you have enough energy to do what you want to do. If you retire and have to spend your time in a wheel chair, or in bed, or something of that sort; then I think permanent retirement of another kind would be welcome.

E.B.: I want to ask you (no sound for thirty seconds or so)... what do you think as a professional philosopher.

N.W.K.: Well, philosophy has gone through a difficult time. Always of periods that sometime in the history of philosophy you will find philosophers who will say "This is the end of philosophy. There will be no more philosophy as a serious human endeavor." Wittgenstein, throw away the ladder after him. Richard Rorty, a contemporary philosopher. Have you heard of him?

E.B.: I don't like him.

N.W.K.: (Laughs) He says philosophy no longer exists as the first form of study or of interest to the intelligent being. And there have been others, and I don't agree with them either. I've always felt, no matter how technical philosophy becomes, and it can get pretty technical, and the more technical it gets the more obscure

it gets it seems to me. But I've always felt, I guess ever since Socrates, that somehow or other the philosopher either had to come to terms himself privately or would speak publicly in writings or lectures, that the end of philosophy, one of the ends of philosophy -- I won't say the end -- was to find what the good life really is. As much as we scrap over the meaning of a particular term: how it is used, when it is correctly used, and so on. Somehow or other I have always thought that the real philosopher, the depth of philosophy, lies -- maybe too deep for us to discover -- but lies in what we can really do, what we should do with this life span that we have acquired, accidentally or deliberately, and so it... it's difficult for me to think of philosophy as logic. I don't deny how important logic is, it is difficult for me to think that the only difference in philosophy is language, even though the importance of language I recognize. But if a philosopher has nothing at all to say about how life should be lived, how well we can use what ever gifts we have in making this a better world community, than it falls short, it seems to me. I know that maybe it's difficult to defend this, and it may be thought to be shallow, I don't know. I don't want it to be shallow. And I don't think I can offer one, two, three, or four statements about how life should be lived. But somehow or other, that's a problem that should be wrestled with intellectually. It's an intellectually significant problem, it seems to me, often often denied by some philosophers. I don't find those philosophers particularly interesting, except for maybe some very minor issue of it. Oh, yes, there is a clarity. You see, it's something like this: there are so many philosophers and philosophies who have set the goal of cleverness. The more clever you are the deeper you are, and I think that's sheer nonsense. The philosophers...

E.B.: They seem to dwell on trivialities.

N.W.K.: Yes. Yes, and often they get remarkable following. But sometime, it seems to me, you have to say... There was one time in philosophy when clarity was the goal.

E.B.: Descartes.

N.W.K.: That's right. That's right. And then there came a time when philosophers said that philosophy was something more than clarity, and what more it's a long long story (laughs). A story to be found in Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, St. Thomas and all the rest. And then sometime philosophy was... The goal of philosophy was thought to be clarity, from... did I say clarity before. I don't know...

E.B.: Clarity...

N.W.K.: Clarity and cleverness. These are honorable efforts in philosophy, and it is important to acquire those skills. But somehow or other I feel that there has to be something deeper, something... A more honorable goal (laughs) in some sense is the aim of philosophy.

E.B.: A last question: I read philosophy and I completely agree with you that there is no point to studying philosophy unless you make of that philosophy something that touches you not only on an intellectual level, but also in the way one lives one's lives. It is like if you read a book, a novel, or a philosophy book, for me, if you don't... If you are the same person you were before you read it, then either you didn't understand it or the book was not good enough. And I guess that's what you were saying: it has to touch you deeper. How do you think that philosophy has touched people? I find it that we are losing some moral foundations, and the idea that everything is allowed, that we all have our own beliefs and don't mind others'. That creates a sort of... tension is not the right word, but something to that effect. That we lose an idea of how we are supposed to act. Do you think people have moved away from the sort of moral foundations that Descartes, Kant, and practically all philosophers of that time of modern philosophy and Enlightenment wanted to establish, up until now when we started with deconstruction, "Let's deconstruct, let's structuralize," and all that sort of thing, do you think that people have lost that sort of touch?

N.W.K.: Yes, I do. But I think there are some signs, though I have not read enough in contemporary philosophers, among some of

them, I have seen some signs... I am thinking, for example, of a philosopher you may not have heard of: Hillary Putnam. I don't know whether he is at Princeton or not, but he gave the Gifford lectures recently at Edinburgh. His skills in technical philosophy are not qualified at all, he is excellent. But reading his works every now and then, he will state that somehow or other philosophy's larger task is to know what to do with this life that we got, how best to employ, not only our skill, but how to use our behavior to make a difference that is affirmative, that is positive, healthy, and interesting. You know, Whitehead once made a statement that I have never forgotten, he said that it is much more important for a philosophy to be interesting than for it to be true. And I agree with that completely. If you remember that by interesting he did not mean titillation, he didn't mean a kind of psychic excitement. He meant by that word the fertility of your point of you. The cat is on the mat, it's true, but it's so uninteresting (laughs).

E.B.: (Laughs)

N.W.K.: Where do you go from there? What else can be said? And this was, I think, an important insight of Whitehead. A philosophy ought to be so rich, that you do not come to the final step, there is always something more to say, another problem. Philosophy is often a matter of answering puzzles -- not like a jigsaw where you got the answer before if you just put them right -- but one that goes on and on; you have this problem solved all it does is raise another problem. Now we'll go after that one. That was true of most of the philosophers that I enjoy reading; of James for example, and of John Dewey, and of Charles Perse. Did you ever hear of Charles Perse? Probably America's greatest philosopher. Arguably, at least, America's greatest philosopher. And that's the way I think of philosophy; if it's interesting is not just because it satisfies my curiosity, but that it leads me into an area that I had not realized was explorable before. I think that there are some contemporary philosophers now who are beginning to see that. I hope so, at least. I would hate to see the great tradition of

philosophy dissipated and discarded because it was no longer interesting. I really think that there are some philosophers would just as soon see philosophy taken out of the curriculum, which I think is absurd. Well, I think that's about it, Emili...

E.B.: Emiliano.

N.W.K.: Emiliano. EMILIANO (Mr. Klausner spells). Is that right?

E.B.: That's right.

N.W.K.: And the last name?

E.B.: Battista.

N.W.K.: Of course I should remember Batista.

E.B.: Mine is spelled with two "t"s. I was saved.

N.W.K.: Oh, it is. Well, I hope you have great success in your studies in philosophy, Emiliano. You plan to stay here for the four years?

E.B.: Yes.

N.W.K.: Come to see me every now and then, or see me on the campus and say hello to me; tell me how things are going.

E.B.: Alright. I promise to do that. Thank you very much.

N.W.K.: Well, I am looking through a period that's difficult for me, so maybe if we had met at another time I could have been better, but...

E.B.: It was wonderful.

N.W.K.: You can imagine what difficulties, after the death of a companion of 57 years.



But I don't believe there have been millions of incidents of racial difficulties between towns people and some of the blacks on the on the campus

students and faculty?

I don't know we haven't have enough black faculty for me to know just what their relationship to the towns people have been

How has your relationship been?

excellent. I'm crazy enough i guess to enjoy golf and tennis so I meet a lot of townspeople on the tennis court or the golf court. I have enjoyed every one of them never any problems . I fact I if I have some difficulty and I need some help, they're ready to help. I've head no unhappy experiences -- no unpleasant experiences with the towns people. And I think that speaks for most of the faculty. I cannot speak for the few black students on the campus. I don't know what they're experience is. It would probably be different than mine. The town makes annually a very decent contribution financially to the college. Every year we have the town-gown drive for funds and it has always astonished me. I think it has astonished the administration at times even the towns people themselves. The town of course knows how economically dependent they are on the college and they do repay by contributing to the college. I think in fact if there isn't a drive on right now it's either over or almost over. We'll know in a few weeks

When I was telling professor Moore about this assignment he told me you were a golf player and that your have ben involved in the community and had done lots of things -- he didn't specify them. In what way were you involved.

I don't know how to answer I can't believe that I have don't anything of the community of any significance except to greet people with a hearty hello when I meet people on the street . I belong to a club called the Fort nightly club which is composed of members of the community and the college and we would meet every two weeks to read papers.

what papers

whatever you're interested in . There were people from history and from literature. Towns people who belong would acquire an interest in some field. Something of interest to the city or they county,. For example this building was first explored in a paper written by the founder, about the possibility of residence in this area. That's as close as I can come. I can't think of any thing else, except I do enjoy using the town library for my escape literature.

What other things do you like t read. What other hobbies do you have -- do you like cinema, music?