

Sunday in the Park with Chris: A View from the Hilltop
(Dedicated to Sue Astley, Steve DeVries, Carol Enns, and Ellen Whale. Refer to Ellen as our Dr.
Christine Grant.)

Christina Morris Penn-Goetsch. 13 May 2018

Georges Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* or **(Call for President Brand to read the French title.)** *Un dimanche après-midi à l'Île de la Grande Jatte* invites the viewer to imagine and even participate in the process of creation. Remember that collaboration is a key to success! We all have unique gifts. Okay. You know the painting. A prominent feature in the Art Institute of Chicago, the work plays a rather central role in the classic 1986 high school romp, "Ferris Bueller's Day Off." At this moment, my hope is that you will come to see *A Sunday Afternoon* as a metaphor for the community on the Hilltop. Here, I offer less of an argument and more of an illustration of what helped shape who you are and lead you through some memories from Cornell's past up to this very moment.

Instructions to team Seurat: Now I get to play the artist in Stephen Sondheim's musical "Sunday in the Park with George." **Colleagues, please recreate the painting. Amy Gullen, Jen Rouse, Gwen Schimik, Tony Plaut, Susananah Biondo-Gemmel, Sue Coleman, Janeve West, and Katherine Baker hold up the panels of *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. Tony Plaut will deliberately hold a panel on its side so that I can correct him.**¹

Seurat's visual manifesto illustrates his theoretical motto, "Art is Harmony."² The small contrasting strokes of pigment, often referred to as an example of pointillism, invite us to complete the picture ourselves, as we, the viewer, combine those colors into a complete picture; at least, this was Seurat's goal in what might be deemed a social experiment or a utopian vision of various classes relaxing together along a diagonal shoreline that recedes into

¹ I want to thank Amy Gullen for printing out the large-scale panels and Tony Plaut for suggesting the performance aspect of recreating the image.

² P. Smith, *Seurat and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 34-40.

the distance.³ This is a paradise filled with light and cast shadows along the Seine. But is the end result a utopia? Art historian Linda Nochlin described the same subject as anti-utopian, as the figures stand stiff and rigid in their Sunday best.⁴ Few paintings result in such disparate art historical interpretations; however, that may be part of the work's success. One person's utopia may be another's dystopia. Certainly, my utopian vision would not include the figures and dress of Seurat's nineteenth-century patriarchal and European white world; besides, as some of you know, I am an animal rights activist and would have included at least ten cats and a few more dogs in my personal utopia. The differences in our personal visions also present challenges for a small school like Cornell that is made up of many experiences, perspectives, and ideologies.

Instructions to team Seurat: You may disassemble the painting for the moment.

The faculty and staff of Cornell have worked to create an ideal city on a hill, but this Hilltop is actually made up of the multiple gifts and personalities that develop and change on a regular basis. The class of 2018 has experienced social strife and personal struggle since your first days at the college. New student orientation began soon after protests in Ferguson, Missouri following the death of Michael Brown on August 14, 2014. . At one point, the contentious debates resulted in one of my advisees leaving the college. Cornell's Black Awareness Cultural Organization (BACO) held meetings on the Orange Carpet to open a dialogue about the Black Lives Matter movement and to support students of color during your first year. Some of you may remember participating in the rally in solidarity with the movement in December, 2014

³ *Ibid.*, 49-51; Thomson, *Seurat* (London: Phaidon Press, 1985), 119-120.

⁴ L. Nochlin, "Seurat's Grande Jatte: An Anti-utopian Allegory," *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 14 (1989): 132-153.

You may remember that Cornell also lost a first-year student, Connor Robinson, in October. This would be difficult for any community, and we will not forget him.

In the next few years, the situation in the United States and Cornell did not become easier with a controversial presidential election looming on the horizon. Incidents of sexual harassment, homophobia, racism and xenophobia bubbled to the surface in insidious yet subtle ways. Your sophomore year ended with more tension than I ever could have imagined for Latinx students threatened on-campus. Students, largely from BACO and unión latinx, pushed for change. These events resulted in an all-campus meeting called by President Brand and inaugurated a greater awareness and diversity training. At this historic meeting, Brand called for a “real shared sense of community” at the meeting,⁵ and this call remains the key to understanding the composition of Cornell College’s own *Sunday Afternoon*. Nevertheless, each piece or person contributes to the dream that is Cornell.

As I begin to talk about your final semesters, I want to offer you a more positive perspective of what can be achieved during moments of conflict and despair. To do so, the situation is helped by going further back into Cornell’s history to some observations made by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr when he delivered an address on Cornell’s campus in October, 1962. King argued for taking a “realist” approach to race relations, as he delivered a speech on the state of African Americans in the United States. Real progress was not achieved by extreme optimism or pessimism. The extreme optimist does nothing because change is unnecessary and the

⁵ J. Brand, “Cornell College, All-campus Address,” 18 April 2018, Cornell College, Mount Vernon, IA, Accessed 9 May 2018, <https://www.cornellcollege.edu/college-leadership/writings-speeches/all-campus-address-4-18-16.shtml>

pessimist is thwarted by the belief that change is impossible.⁶ It is King's realist position that allows us to make strides toward social change through small acts that are akin the individual strokes of a paintbrush that make for a better future.

You, as part of Cornell's community, have contributed to making a better world on the Hilltop through engagement in a variety of ways, both large and small. This is a context where we learn to be a community that can find methods for change. For example, a Diversity Committee started to play a more active role at the college, and the Sustained Dialogue team led us through processing the distress following the alt-right protests in Charlottesville, Virginia as soon as we can to campus this year. Many of you participated in the March for Women or the March for Science in 2017. Concern over the Dakota Access Pipeline and Standing Rock protestors provided opportunities to for you to send help, and protestor Lyla June came to Cornell last November to discuss "compassion for the political other" before a packed house of Cornellians anxious to make a difference. The Lyrically Inclined shared personal stories in ways that touched the heart while further informing us of personal challenges we often face beneath the surface.

No single brush stroke should be seen as unimportant in our Cornell community. Many of you cleaned at the Cedar Valley Humane Society, stayed up late helping the homeless at Willis Dady, as well as made quilts with the Linus Project and bowls for the Empty Bowls Project. Just last month, Unión Latinx raised \$1,000 at a benefit for Puerto Rico at Scorz. Every year, students engage with Relay for Life and Cornell has been nationally recognized in this area. Our

⁶ M.L. King, Jr., "An Address by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.," Cornell College, Mount Vernon, IA, 15 October 1962, Accessed 9 May 2018, <http://news.cornellcollege.edu/dr-martin-luther-kings-visit-to-cornell-college/>

own 2018 graduation commencement speaker, Katie, offered the Relay address for Jennifer Davis this year. We, as a community, care about one another. Furthermore, who would not embrace the dream of a cancer-free world? Trees were planted for Arbor Day and paths cleared from storm debris in the Shenandoah Valley as part of Alternative Spring Break, whereas others worked on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota or translated materials for immigrants in Boston during the break last March. In fact, students helped with immigration documents for four cases at the Justice for our Neighbors program right here in Cedar Rapids.

There are important changes happening everyday on the Hilltop. On April 20, 2018, Cornell students walked out of class and held a rally against gun violence, also known as a March for Our Lives. On May 6, 2018, TWRG, Alliance, and organized the very first Rainbow Graduation for LGBTQA students. Right at this very moment, Benjamin Wong is planning to work on establishing an alumni fund to bring artists and directors of color to campus. Be a realist. Be Benjamin. A person who recognizes the need for change and is not thwarted by extreme optimism or disabled by pessimism. With time, few things are impossible when we work as a community.

Instructions to team Seurat: Reassemble Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*.

Collaboration is not an easy or quick process. Remember that it took Seurat at least two years to complete his manifesto. Nevertheless, I can make another analogy. Our small college and the intense eighteen-day classes foster or even compel communal problem-solving. This observation relates to the choices I have made with this address. Instead of using a single

reproduction of Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon*, I took a risk and had the reproduction divided into eight parts that were controlled by different individuals. My hope was that this team, my colleagues, could literally "keep it together." The performance, then, was intended to further illustrate how you also have relied on the support of your friends and peers throughout your time on the Hilltop. This support sometimes came in more formal ways in the library, Bon Appétit, and the gym or in those informal moments on the track, in the chapel and within the walls of Olin, Merner, Tarr, and Bowman-Carter. How many times did someone pick you up when you were down? Help you "hold it together" in moments of stress or just listen? As you look back at your experience at Cornell, remember that what you do makes a difference to a community just as each of the pigments of *A Sunday Afternoon* brings the picture into focus. All parts of the painting, both big and small, are important to the composition of "real community" working towards not *the* utopia, but *a* utopia that acknowledges how community is made up of unique and valuable voices working towards a more ideal world.

Go forth and change the world for the better! Thank you.