

6-24-2010

## Interview with Dr. E. Alan Nordstrom Jr., Rollins College Professor of English

Alan Nordstrom

Wenxian Zhang

*Rollins College*, [wzhang@rollins.edu](mailto:wzhang@rollins.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.rollins.edu/oralhist>

---

### Recommended Citation

Nordstrom, Alan and Zhang, Wenxian, "Interview with Dr. E. Alan Nordstrom Jr., Rollins College Professor of English" (2010). *Oral Histories*. Paper 20.

<http://scholarship.rollins.edu/oralhist/20>

This Oral History is brought to you for free and open access by the Archives and Special Collections at Rollins Scholarship Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of Rollins Scholarship Online. For more information, please contact [wzhang@rollins.edu](mailto:wzhang@rollins.edu).

## Interview with Dr. E. Alan Nordstrom Jr., Rollins College Professor of English

Thursday, June 24, 2010

Wenxian Zhang, Alia Alli & Jennifer Ritter

AN: This is an interesting operation here. Kim was telling me, or you were telling me, a number of people have been doing this interview that I know, like Hoyt Edge. He and I came at the same time—forty years ago, and let's see, who else did we have? Well, Rita Bornstein, but this is relatively new project, isn't it?

WZ: Yes, we had this start in 2005, and so this is our second round. This year marks the special 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration.

AN: Right, right—

WZ: But anyway, let me first introduce myself. My name is Wenxian Zhang, head—

AN: (speaking at the same time) Oh, it's so nice to meet you [laughs]

WZ: —head of Archives and Special Collections. With me are two Rollins students, Jennifer Ritter and Alia Alli. We are going to be interviewing Dr. Alan Nordstrom, professor of English at Rollins for forty years. So Alan, tell us about your background—where you grew up, where you received your education?

AN: I grew up in Buffalo, New York, in a very different climate from here, and that is not irrelevant to my choosing to be here eventually. Being *from* Buffalo is a lot better than being *in* Buffalo. I went to public schools there until fourth grade—through fourth grade—then I got a rather discouraging report card from my fourth grade teacher, who said that “Alan walks and talks and wastes his time.” And it was true, though fortunately I was able to make a profession out of it eventually.

But in the meantime, that assessment was not a happy thought for my father, who said this requires some stringency. He was not wealthy, but he managed to scrape together enough money, and I think I had a scholarship for a few hundred dollars that allowed me to go to something like Orlando's Trinity Preparatory School—to the Nichols School in Buffalo, a “country day school.” It was, though, all boys, and when I started in fifth grade, I had of course to appear in uniform, which meant a jacket and a tie, and a white shirt, and charcoal grey flannel pants—it's Buffalo so flannel was appropriate—and be a little gentleman. It was good for me; it did shape me up.

I stayed there for eight years. There were the four years before you got to high school, and then you moved from the lower school to the upper school. I was the president of the student council of the lower school, and in the upper school I was the president of my junior class. So I had some leadership qualifications, that and some sports involvement—I was captain of the squash team. (You don't even know what squash is down here; squash racquets is an indoor game, like racquetball...) But those and some decent, but not stellar grades—at the very beginning was I was getting highest honors, with a lot of help from my Mom, who said, “If we're going to spend

this much money to have him there, he'd better do very well." But by the end I was earning just decent grades. Still I was able to get into Yale University, much to the dismay of my Dad. Dad was an ardent supporter of Cornell University, where he had gone for a year and a half, I think, shortly before 1929—the Depression. That calamity eliminated the money that would allow him to finish, so he had to quit and for the next several years work as a lineman for AT&T installing phones and climbing poles and things like that, until World War II came along.

Because he'd had a stint of ROTC during his time at Cornell, that got him into an officer position during the war. He went away for five years—I'm not going to go into much detail, just enough to set up a couple of things—so he was away for about five years of my first years of life. I stayed with my mother, and had a grandmother, and grandfather nearby who helped out a lot, I think. But when Dad got back, he was scrambling hard, as so many other people coming out of that experience were doing to catch up on all those lost years, and going to night school and doing a full-time day job working with large factories in Buffalo, like Trico windshield wipers and Sylvania electronics, and mostly in the area of engineering and new plant facilities, the orientation of his schooling. He finished his degree at the University of Buffalo night school and took an MBA as well, he moved on to other things, but he was always a Cornellian, even though he didn't have a degree from there, and he had his heart set on my being a Cornellian, too, which kind of accounts for the fact that I was slow in understanding that there were any other colleges, other than Cornell. It was all he ever talked about; we'd drive from Buffalo to Ithaca for football games on some weekends and things like that.

So it was a big heartbreaker for him when I decided no, I didn't want to go there. And that was the beginning of a big break away. He was the kind of father, who had plans for me, and I had a brother and sister, and he had ideas how all our lives should go. But I had a contrarian in me who just said no, I don't think so, not that, not that; but I wasn't sure what. I'd been strong in literature and English in high school—physics, nuh-uh, chemistry, no, mathematics, calculus, absolutely not.

But I was able to make into Yale, from the waiting list, and then I found that being in an all-male school still—it hadn't gone co-ed yet—wasn't all that happy, and by the end of the first year I was saying to my Dad, maybe you were right. And he said, "You've made your choice." [laughs] So I stayed there and got to enjoy it more and certainly profited from, if nothing else, the reputation of the school. When I came down here to apply for the job, if I hadn't been a Yale undergraduate and then the University of Michigan graduate student, I probably wouldn't have gotten the job. So I owe it its reputation, if not a vivid educational experience.

Several years after I got here, when Rita Bornstein was president, I wrote an article in the *Sandspur* with the title "Rollins, Not Yale." It was obviously somewhat autobiographical, and I was basically making the case that had I known about Rollins—I had never heard of it, as it happened, even though as my mother had almost come here, except for the Depression, but I found out about that later—had I known about Rollins, I would have loved to have gone here, and I think I would have enjoyed the educational, the collegiate, experience far better than I did at a rather cold, rather impersonal and highly competitive kind of world at Yale. After graduating from Yale, I was still pushing against my father, who said, "Well, come in to my business." By that time he was doing industrial real estate appraisal work, and I would work for him during the summer as a sort of apprentice, but it didn't appeal to me.

At the end of my senior year at Yale, I was thinking, I've heard about this new program in Africa—well actually I had previously applied for something that had been established there for many years called “Yale in China.” Two or three undergraduates, I think, would be chosen each year to spend at least a couple of years in Hong Kong. They would teach English and perhaps learn some Chinese, but I didn't make that cut; I wasn't very polished, I think; I wasn't very impressive in the interview. I may still not be, but I will leave that for you to judge. I can talk more now, but then I was more constrained, and they thought, “Well, he's not quite mature yet.”

My next thought, though, was there was a new program called Operations Crossroads Africa that turned out to be a prototype for the Peace Corps. The Peace Corps didn't come along for a couple more years. By the time—let's see, in my senior year, I voted in the Kennedy-Nixon election—for the wrong guy. I was still listening too much to my parents, and they were Republican, and I went for Nixon, and I'm so sorry about that. [laughs] But anyways, it was shortly after Kennedy took office that, at the University of Michigan, on the steps of the Michigan Union, he gave a speech that announced the Peace Corps. But this notion of going over and spending a couple of years in a Peace Corps-like program in Africa, in Nigeria, didn't appeal to my Dad, who had been to Africa during the war, got hepatitis there, and thought it was a dirty place and not a safe place.

So I offered a compromise; he wanted me really to come work for him, I wanted to go to Africa, so I just took a middle position and taught for the next three years in a boarding school in Vermont. It was an all-boys school of two hundred people in a town of about two hundred more folks. It's wonderfully mountainous. They had a ski jump and an outdoor hockey rink. I spent three good years there. The reason for doing that is I wanted to get into teaching, but I also wanted to be near the girlfriend whom I eventually married—my first wife—who was going to the University of Vermont, so I could on occasional weekends, drive up to the other end of the state and meet her. Teaching at VA for three years, having been married during the third year, and living in a dormitory and coaching and being at every meal and serving and being totally involved in the boys' educational experience was a lot of fun but pretty confining, and it wasn't all that happy for her. So at that point we were thinking about graduate school.

I was thinking maybe I'd earn a masters degree and maybe teach in a community college, an institution just beginning to develop in those days. So I did—I spent the summer before my last year there—it was actually our honeymoon—and we traveled out to the Midwest and went to Michigan, but before that to Wisconsin and Minnesota Universities. I don't know why now I wanted some big Midwestern university—it would be different, and Michigan looked good and they liked me, and that began six years there, and by the time I came to Rollins—ah finally, Rollins! [Laughs]—I had not yet finished my dissertation. I had done all my coursework and there is an unofficial term that you probably haven't heard of called ABD, not MA (I had the MA), not PhD(that would come later, after the dissertation) but I was ABD, which means All But Dissertation, it's an unofficial status.

I was partly into writing a dissertation on Shakespeare, and I was working with the head of the English Department at Michigan, Russell Fraser, who was the chief Shakespearian as well, and it was a good start, but a small start. He had suggested that then would be a good time to look for a job, even though I hadn't finished. For once, after a slack time, the academic market

was looking good, and we figured to take my chances even though I hadn't finished. Well, I had several scheduled interviews with various colleges, about eight I think, in Boulder, Colorado, where the Modern Language Association was meeting that year, as they do every year right after Christmas. Besides scholarly sessions and gatherings, it's a large interview scene for anybody looking for jobs, meeting with representatives from colleges interviews. and universities. I didn't have an interview with Rollins—, however—I hadn't even *heard* of Rollins—but I just by luck, or synchronicity, or the grace of God, or something [laughs], in the middle of this three- or four-day period, I happened to sit down at a hotel breakfast counter next to a young man who looked like he was, like me, looking for a job. But it turned out he already had a job; he was an assistant professor of English at the University of North Carolina, and he knew about Rollins. He also knew that they were looking for somebody in Renaissance and was friends with the head of the Rollins department, Marion Folsom, who was the one person up there doing the interviewing for Rollins. Kindly, he made an arrangement for me to meet Marion. He told me a bit about the College, and it was only later that my mother revealed that she had almost come to Rollins. Even though she had a scholarship offer, it wasn't enough to be able to afford tuition during the Depression. But she was delighted to hear about my prospect since she had gone to a progressive school in Buffalo—the Park School—that was developed by John Dewey, who had come to Rollins in the '30's and helped set up the conference idea—our “conference plan”—and totally revamped the curriculum here and made it quite “progressive.” I'd visited a couple of other campuses, and my prospects were tenuous, but when I came here, this was love at first sight. I mean it was February and Ann Arbor, Michigan, is cold then—it's just about as bad as Buffalo—cold, overcast, grey, all the time, slush if not snow on the ground, just shivering.

I came down to Winter Park, the azaleas were blooming, the miniskirts were in [laughs], and the sunshine was everywhere. I think some of the orange trees were blossoming and maybe even the tabebuias, those yellow trees, but it was just a gorgeous spectacle, and I absolutely fell in love with the place and, if it were necessary, I would have fallen on my knees and said, “Please, please, take me! [laughs] I'd love to be here.” This is an ideal place; it was small, it was personable, it was certainly larger than that boarding school that I'd been in, but not the behemoth that a university like Michigan was. By the way, it was Vietnam time, and so protests were always going on in Ann Arbor. Here they'd barely heard about Vietnam, it seemed [laughs]—that's an overstatement, but there wasn't rioting, there weren't sit-ins.

Well, fortunately, the feelings were reciprocal, Rollins did like me, and they invited me to join the faculty, and so later on in May I visited again. While I was here on the first visit, one of the things that I fell in love with was the Annie Russell Theatre. They were rehearsing some play, and I went in one evening when I didn't have anything particular to do and met some of the theater people. David Gawlikowski was the director of that play and lived just across the street from the Lakeview entrance in a stucco house that used to be Rollins property, and his wife Joni was in the audience and befriended me, took me under her wing, so then I got to see a personable side of the College before I left. And then in May when I came back, the Galikowskis invited me to stay at their house and introduced me to several of the faculty and helped me find a place to rent. It was this personableness that impressed me, at all levels of the College. The comprehensible size of the place—you knew you'd know people and that you'd know them for some time. That really sealed the deal for me; I thought I'd come to heaven. [laughs] And I have never—I'll have to say in forty years—ever thought about moving somewhere else—it's

more getting in deeper, and getting more familiar, and becoming venerable. [laughs] There's the answer to your first question.

WZ: (speaking at the same time) Okay, that's a very good answer –

AN: Now there's time for about a half of a question left.

WZ: Now let's talk about your teaching career. What courses were you teaching over your forty-year career? I mean, there are going to be a lot, but give us some examples, some of the ones that you enjoyed, some of the challenges—so tell us.

AN: Okay. Well, the good news is, though I had not finished my dissertation on Shakespeare when I came here, even so, I was able to finagle an assistant professorship—couldn't do anything like that these days, couldn't even get hired here without your dissertation done. A professor named Nina Dean had recently retired, and I believe I was replacing her. There was another Shakespearian, Wilber Dorsett, who remained here for many years before he retired, and we were good friends, and he coached me a lot in Shakespeare.

But as it happened, the project that I had begun to write a dissertation on kind of fizzled. Turned out it had to do with the least-known of his plays—an early tetralogy of history plays, written when the Bard was just learning his craft—and I had a very arcane kind of subject about rhetorical figures and how he may have learned from his intensive studies of rhetoric, how to structure a play. However, I wasn't even able to teach those plays here, since they didn't deserve to be in an undergraduate curriculum, so I found myself obviously paying attention to the major plays that I was teaching, and writing about them instead. And after a couple of years of being sort of stalled on this dissertation project, it occurred to my director that—because I shared some of my recent writing with him—“Well, just change your subject.” He, being the head of the department, [laughs] had an authority that nobody else would have had to be flexible like this. He had picked my dissertation committee, and they did what he said, so I was very lucky. Russ and I were friends by that time, and he trusted me to be able to do good work in a different area of Shakespeare. So, I had the extraordinary opportunity—I'd never heard of anything like this—to be able to write a dissertation that directly derived from and contributed to the teaching that I was doing here. The dissertation is titled, *Ingenuous Hypocrisy: Modes of Paradox in Shakespeare's Major Plays*. Would that others could do something like that instead of writing something very highfalutin, which three or four people will read later on, maybe, and will mostly occupy shelf space in a repository on Zeeb Road in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Do you know if dissertations still go there . . . ?

WZ: Yes, UMI.

AN: Uh-huh, right –

WZ: University Microfilms International

AN: So that was a happy conclusion to what was an uncomfortable situation for quite some time. So I've taught Shakespeare and Renaissance literature because those are what I had advertized myself to do, and I'm happy to have stayed with Shakespeare all this time because there's no

bottom to him, there's no end to it. And well, of course, everybody in the English Department teaches freshman composition pretty regularly until maybe later on they'll get beyond that, but I still do it, one course every year.

The course that I would most like to tell you about is one that sort of derived from another experience that I had here. So let me tell you the experience first, which is a program that doesn't exist anymore, but for a while, for five or six years I think, we had something called the Community of Learners—COL. It was a program that Rollins had adapted from Stony Brook University that would allow one group of students during the term, say maybe fifteen students, to take all the same courses together, four courses; three of them would be courses in different divisions: humanities, arts, sciences, social sciences. So, fifteen students plus a Master Learner—a member of the faculty who would be excused from teaching for that whole semester and be the coordinator of the COL group, but would also be a student. The fourth course would be a seminar of only us. The other three courses would have other students in it—we would be a block of students, but there would be others, so it wasn't being taught or devised specifically for us. For instance, the first time I did it, it was called “Art and Society”—that was the theme. I had set up this theme and that's what the Master Learner would typically do—decide what theme, what idea, what courses and professors, and then make the arrangements for that to happen.

Well, that program included a painting and a drawing course that Tom Peterson—who is retired now—used to teach, a social psychology course that Bob Thompson taught, and an aesthetics course by Dan DeNicola in the philosophy department. Art and Society was the theme. So the idea was, in that seminar, to make some links, find some commonalities and talk about the connections in relation to the theme. So COL had to do with integrating knowledge, which is the same kind of notion that's reemerged in our new Rollins Plan. In the case of COL, we had an overarching theme and all those courses somehow spoke to it, but it was our job in the seminar to draw some connections and write about it in ways that would make that integration happen.

I had to take the tests in, and write the papers for, those other three courses and get the grades as well. [laughs] And I didn't always get the best grades. There were sophomores that were getting better grades—at painting, I just didn't have as much of a knack, that's understandable. But in the second COL, there was a course called Professional Ethics—Marvin Newman taught that—and there was a young lady there who was a very strong rival and often beat me. [laughs] It was a good experience to realize when put myself on a level with students; some of them have very remarkable talents and are sophisticated. It was a humbling experience. Now you've got to figure: what would be my job in the seminar, do I grade that? No, that would be against the community spirit of COL. We figured some way collectively to do the grading on that seminar. I wasn't supposed to have any authority over them; I was to be a kind of first among equals—a Master Learner.

The second COL program, Creating a Sane Society—and this is going to lead to my developing another English course, a writing course—Creating a Sane Society, had Professional Ethics with Marvin Newman, Political Philosophy with Margaret McLaren, and Human Ecology with Joe Siry. Creating a Sane Society—both of those COL themes were ideas of mine, but this one was even closer to my heart, I think, because I've continued doing something like that, Creating a Sane Society—which a lot of skeptical people will say, “Pshh, you're kidding. You've

got to have sane people for that, don't you? Too many people are insane to have a sane society." But I'm an optimist and I think in terms of human potential and possibility.

I'll just plant a seed for what I'm saying in a bit, which is that my latest initiative along that line—Creating a Sane Society—was when the Rollins Plan came about a couple of years ago and proposals were being made for what kind of theme to have—an overarching theme that all the gen-ed courses would speak to. I was sort of the captain of a group that I gathered together who advocated a theme called “Exploring the Human Frontiers.” It was a future-oriented program in the same vein as creating a sane society—hopefully thinking that those frontiers are bordering on greater things, better things, and saner things, and more fully realizing of human capabilities.

Back in the Sixties and Seventies, there was a movement called “the human potential movement”—a lot of psychologists and other thinkers were involved with that. I think I caught that spirit, and I've been that sort of person. Hoyt Edge in our Philosophy and Religion department has thought along that same line for a long time, too, and I think that's informed a lot of what I've tried to do at Rollins, and tried to infuse in various courses, and it comes out very openly in this one and in the Human Frontiers.

A tradition in that COL program and a way of linking and getting the group working together was to have a journal, a community journal. This was something that I didn't invent; it came from Stony Brook. The community journal at that time was a large notebook of mostly blank pages at the beginning of the semester that was up on reserve at the circulation desk and that every student was required to come in at least once a week and write an entry—write on one side, leave the other side, the backside of the previous page, blank for comments, so that there would be sort of a written conversation going on all the time. There was no particular subject to write about, just what you're thinking about this, what you're thinking about that, and perhaps soliciting ideas from others. And so you would write here and others would write comments opposite it or make another entry, and it was a lovely communication device. I would take the notebook home every weekend and read through it and make comments on probably most of the entries, and it was a good bonding device, because people will write things that they won't speak, and they feel more confident putting it down that way and be more articulate about it, than in speaking.

I loved that part, especially, of the COL program, and I wanted to carry that on somehow after that term was over. So there I was, about the middle of my career here, making up a new course, which has really been my favorite course I think, other than maybe Shakespeare, but in some ways, a much more useful course—called Personal Writing. You can tell from that title, and from notebooks that are about this thick, that I just like to write essays. I like to write, and now I've got a blog that's been going on for three years where I've placed little micro-essays and a lot of verses. So, I thought, yeah, let's start a course that's called Personal Writing because most of the writing, if not all the writing that most undergraduates do is impersonal, it's academic. You can't use the pronoun “I,” only the third person. But since I liked to do personal essaying and thought it was a good thing to do because I had come to understand that writing is a way to think, and it's a way to think better than sitting there mulling over something silently, unless you've got a very good memory, which I don't have, or even talking, because talking is sporadic and it gets interrupted, and it's hard to hold on to a thing unless you're doing what I'm doing

now, having a monologue. But even then, as you can tell here, it wanders. But if you write, it comes down more sensibly, and of course you can revise things. Use writing as a way to think more clearly and to investigate, to wonder, to ponder, to muse, to go in many kinds of directions and to employ many styles and many languages and maybe not even intend that it be public.

As with journal writing, it may just be you and the paper, or it's sort of an implicit audience that you're writing to—maybe just another part of yourself. I very much enjoyed that experience, very much felt the benefit of that kind of writing and thought it should be shared; it should be an opportunity for undergraduates to have. So I invented the Personal Writing course. I've taught it, usually once a year, ever since and have found it's my most personable course. We get to know each other very well. Students will often be reading their essays aloud. They also post them on Blackboard now, so if you've missed somebody's essay and you knew that they probably wrote something good, you would have a chance to look at it.

How this connects with COL is that for a long time—I've stopped doing this now, I'm not quite sure why, probably because it was so burdensome for me and a too much trouble for students—I had them do that community journal, as well as usually weekly essays. They would also have an obligation to come over here to Olin and take that notebook out and write something and read the other people's entries. But the pedagogical idea of it was the same as COL—for the class to get to know each other better and more informally and get more comfortable with each other. Then the writing that we did would have more of a sense of audience to it since we knew whom we were writing for.

So I think it's very likely that the Personal Writing course is the best thing that I've done here regularly in that the effect of it, I believe, has almost always been wonderful for students. The opportunity to write like that, the opportunity to form a habit of writing like that, even if there isn't anybody to read it, is a good thing for the rest of our lives, and many of them do carry on.

WZ: Okay, that's great. Now let's talk about your writing, your research and scholarship. Maybe you can go over some of your publications.

AN: Right, what you don't see here [on the table with a few of Dr. Nordstrom's books of essays and verses] is anything scholarly—my dissertation for instance, or some articles that I've written on Shakespeare. I guess I'm happiest with article that was recently published in the *London Review of Education*, titled "Shakespeare on Wisdom." Now, that's an eyebrow raiser. First of all, what do I know about wisdom, though I might be able to say, well I've been teaching Shakespeare for a long time, so I do know something about that. But that brings up another subject, and I think its related to the Sane Society and the Human Frontiers because, in brief, to say that maybe we as a species have a prospect of living in a saner world and having a more peaceful and productive world in which human and societal potential is better realized—that would probably be a *wiser* world than we live in now.

It's pretentious to talk about wisdom and to claim that you know something or that you may be wise, for goodness sakes—Socrates is a good example of why you shouldn't do that, because when he was told he was the wisest man in Athens, he said "No way," and he spent the rest of

his life eliminating other people who made a claim to wisdom by showing that they weren't wise either. [Laughs] But still, I won't throw out that term, wisdom, and here's a little sidebar.

You may remember that a few years ago I brought down a gentleman named Copthorne Macdonald, who lives in Prince Edward Island in Canada, whom I met, thankfully, through the Internet. I discovered that he had something called the Wisdom Page ([www.wisdompage.com](http://www.wisdompage.com)), and perusing that site and being impressed with it and thinking that here's a guy who knows something about wisdom, who had written three books, one of which is called *Toward Wisdom*, about the subject of wisdom. That book was somewhat academic, higher-level kind of writing, but another one of his was a popular book, called *Getting a Life: Strategies for Joyful and Effective Living*, which was kind of a self-help book, but written very well, very pointedly, and I've used it in my Personal Writing class for many years now. "Wisdom 101" is sort of a subtitle of personal writing that I've slipped into our syllabus (with deference to the philosophy department, who might take exception to my making that claim.) Eventually I wrote a companion book to *Getting a Life*, a sort of a user's guide, making it more accessible to students, and now it's up on his website along with Cop's book itself. But the highlight of this encounter was getting to know Cop personally and then inviting him down here a few years ago to speak as a Thomas P. Johnson Distinguished Visiting Scholar at the auditorium in Bush on the topic of *Wisdom: The Highest Aim of Life and of Higher Education*. That provocative title drew about one hundred and fifty people, a lot of them faculty, to Bush Auditorium, where he gave an impressive PowerPoint-illustrated lecture, which is on even now on his website—the whole thing, the audio and the slides. So, he and I have been conspiring about wisdom.

And there's a friend of his that I got to know, named Nicholas Maxwell, who is a philosopher of science at the University of London who is making the case—well he's written a book called *Why Science Is Neurotic*, and his thesis is that the whole scientific enterprise is that of seeking knowledge, irrespective of everything else: find out more, discover how, what, where, when, all those things—and that's what he was objecting to: where does the idea of value come into the decision about where science should expend its energy and pay attention to things, and what it *should* be doing? And so Maxwell, now a retired teacher from the University of London, who has written about nine books and largely on this theme, is beginning to get some recognition, but still the scientific community is not cozying up to him exactly. But his idea is that "Wisdom is realizing what is of value in life to ourselves and others." There's a double meaning in *realize* there—not just knowing or comprehending, but making real. "Realizing what is of value to ourselves and others" is a good pocket definition of wisdom, and Nick Maxwell would say that's exactly what science needs to do, as well as all the rest of us. Of course that opens up lots of issues: what is of value and how do you determine value? But, you know, part of our curriculum here has been "values and decision making." Having a course that somehow teaches us to learn to evaluate—that's the key of wisdom, he's saying.

I come around to that because ultimately a couple years ago, a book was commissioned to honor Maxwell for his lifetime academic service, what's called a *festschrift*—a book of commemorative essays written in honor of him that somehow relates to his thinking. And I managed to write an essay on Shakespeare—on wisdom in Shakespeare—that I would say is probably the best thing that I've written about Shakespeare, and it got into that anthology among other kinds of tributary essays.

But I've yet to write the book that I hope to do before it's all over, one that might in some way expand on that notion of why Shakespeare is The Man—why he has that reputation. And everybody would answer first, “Well he wrote some wonderful plays, and they just continue to live on.” You know, it may be hard to explain why that is, but it happens, and not only that, they live on all around the world. And think of all the scholarship that's done on Shakespeare—well, here's something I bet you can't answer: What's the number-one nation in annual production of Shakespeare scholarship, number two nation, number three nation? You know, the sort of thing that Wenxian is involved in, the library is involved with, how many articles, how many books, how many whatever, previous dissertations have been produced about Shakespeare in this country, this country—who do you think is the nation that makes annually the most scholarship having to do with Shakespeare? Remember, Shakespeare is English –

JR: France

AN: [laughs] now, that's interesting.

AA: I would have to say England –

AN: That would be logical, but in fact, England is number two. Number one?

WZ: The US

AN: Yes: we're big, got lots of universities, lots of people doing this—oh actually, no, not number two, number *three* is England. So who is number two? Not France [laughs]; they, you know, with all that French bashing that Shakespeare did [laughs], they have a reason—

JR: That's why I picked something outside the box –

AN: [laughs] Well, this is *way* outside the box, and its way around the other side of the world; number two is Japan. They don't even speak English, but they love him, and they have made versions of Shakespeare, taken stories like *Macbeth* and *King Lear* and made plays or movies of them that are very close to the plot, of course in a different language. So Shakespeare is definitely universal, but why? And especially you may know there is a controversy about whether that young man from Stratford who had such an unlikely beginning and had no more schooling after age sixteen, and didn't go to university—how could he possibly have written what he is alleged to? We know that he lived, he went to London, he became part of the acting company, which eventually was the Globe Theater, and he acted some small roles, but you know, how could he have gotten to know what the author of the plays evidently knew about law, about history, about maritime things—there is a lot of information about all this in the plays—politics, aristocracy.

Well, the answer, although there are a couple of strong contenders with small, ardent supporting followers, who'd say no it's this guy or this other guy—it used to be Mark Twain would've said oh, it was Sir Frances Bacon, almost an exact contemporary of Shakespeare's, who wrote the plays. Others would say Christopher Marlowe, but he died too early, though he actually was born in the same year as Shakespeare and got on to the playwriting game much quicker and stronger than Shakespeare did—but he was killed in a duel, and there is no question about the date of that. Some have even said Queen Elizabeth wrote the “Shakespeare” plays. By the way,

nobody until about one hundred and fifty years after his death began to scratch their heads and say, “Was it really that guy?”

So for the longest time—and seven years after he was dead; he hadn’t made any provisions for having his plays published—it finally was done and the famous First Folio edition was published by his friends, his colleagues at the theater who thought the works needed to be preserved. His archrival playwright, Ben Jonson, was still alive and wrote a commendatory poem for the folio and praised his dramas to the skies. So there didn’t seem to be any kind of controversy then, but later on, maybe it was snobbishness that made it a problem—and one family in particular thought that the real author was an ancestor of theirs was a truly likely candidate and of the upper crust society and went to the university and was much more likely, had been a poet—and all this.

Well, the point of all of this is that Shakespeare was a genius. There are good ways to explain how given with that grammar-school education (which was an intensive education including many things we don’t learn now), he could thrive. And, you know, if you’re a genius and you scarf up stuff and you just read widely and you get to meet people, and you travel—there are some seven years in there between Stratford and London where he did who knows what things. I would like ultimately to write an imaginary story about those seven years. I think other people have tried, but I’d like to see Shakespeare traveling as far as Egypt and Greece and meeting wise people and maybe even being inducted into an esoteric society or something like that. I think he had extraordinary insights that were even at the level of mystical, and ultimately that’s what I would like to do: prove that the genius or the wisdom that I have already partially written about in him, has a source in a kind of higher consciousness that he obtained and that set him really above and apart from ordinary mortals. Not unlike other people in the past, but there are extraordinary insights. William Blake, for instance, was a mystic, and there were others in that arcane lineage. I don’t think anybody will approve this as factual, but I’d like to know enough to make a good case for it, with references to his writings. That’s not unrelated to my whole human potential interest or the idea of human frontiers. In those terms, I would call Shakespeare a great frontiersman. He was way out ahead, way ahead of the rest of us in his understanding of what’s going on, not only in the world but in the universe.

WZ: That’s great. We really sense your passion for Shakespeare, but right now, I want to focus on your career –

AN: We do have five hours for this— [laughs]

WZ: Yes, well there are still a few questions before the time is running out. So, I want to ask you about your writings for the *Sandspur*, for the *Orlando Sentinel*—

AN: Okay –

WZ: —and also your personal poetries, I want to hear about that.

AN: Good, thanks. Well, Personal Writing is the course that embodies my own impetus to write essays, but essays that are not formal essays; rather, reflective of my thoughts and ideas in process. About *Sandspur* pieces, I’ll make a wild assertion that nobody has written more in the *Sandspur* than I have, ever. [laughs] Because I’ve had forty years to do it, and for a couple of

years I even had a weekly column. For whatever reasons, maybe good reasons, the rest of the faculty tend not to submit things to the *Sandspur*, but I boldly go where wiser colleagues don't, because I like to do this kind of writing, and I like to observe things. So, irregularly, but usually several times every year and sometimes more than that, depending on maybe getting in touch with the editor and having a particular rapport, I have been writing in the *Sandspur* forever. I can't tell you how many issues—I've got a big stack of each of them at home that had something of mine in it. And it's fun, and I meant to do it partly as an encouragement to other faculty because none of the editors has thought of the *Sandspur* as being exclusively a student newspaper or necessarily wanted it to be so. They wanted it to be a voice of the community. So, I've written a lot of those, and I wrote as well for the *Orlando Sentinel*. They had a section called—what did they call that?

WZ: "My Word"—

AN: Yeah, "My Word," which they still do, but they had a particular incentive awhile ago for me and for some of my friends, like Socky O'Sullivan—he barrages them with stuff and he's often to be seen there—and Rick Foglesong and Bruce Stephenson, too. But when newspapers were in happier days—and you know everything is declining now—for many years the *Sentinel* would invite all the people who had been published in their "My Word" column to an annual banquet at the downtown Marriott Hotel. And we had a nice spread of food, sat around in tables of eight with usually at least one member of the *Sentinel* staff there, maybe a reporter or a columnist or whatever, and then a large dais with the president, the publisher, and some featured speakers. And then they'd have two podiums, and there'd typically be some sort of debate, often on a humorous topic. After that there'd be three or four microphones set up—this was in a large dining room with many, many people, a couple hundred at least—and this would be a sort of come up and speak for a minute on any subject that you wanted to. And it would just be kind of blowing off—whatever was bugging you, whatever you thought—and there were a lot of people there from the city government, some important people to address if you had something on your mind—bike paths, we need bike paths, or whatever it was—you had a chance, and everybody loved to line up and get their shot at the mike and mouth off until a gong was rung [laughs] and the mike was cut off and they had to stop. The newspaper gave you a commemorative coffee mug, with that year's logo on it, which was another incentive. I hated to see that end—and frankly I have to say my submissions have fallen off since then. I must have been motivated too much by the coffee mug. [laughs] Well, if you're not going to give me a coffee mug, don't expect to hear from me anymore.

WZ: What about your personal poetry?

AN: Well, poetry is something I can't not write, apparently. I just have to do that, and I enjoy doing it, and what I do is the old-fashioned style of verses with meter and rhyme, which has led me not to try very hard for publication, because if you look at what's current and what's published in poetry magazines these days, it's free verse—no rhyme, no meter, no set forms, like sonnets. But I've grown up teaching and loving what Shakespeare did, what everybody in the tradition of rhyme and meter verse has done—from Chaucer up to say Robert Frost. That's the medium I've lived in, that's what rubbed off on me, that's what I love to do. So writing a sonnet would be the most typical thing that I do. I get up every morning now about five o'clock, and go downstairs and sit where I like to muse and write. It's still dark, I make a mug of chai latte, and I

sit there pretty much in the dark in an easy chair, cocked back, have a writing pad in my lap, and a little dim light nearby to turn on when it comes to the point that I think I can begin writing something that's occurring to me.

I just sit there and wait for the Muse to come through. It's like fishing, you know, throwing out a line and waiting for a nibble, and when I get something that sounds like the beginning of a line and it forms in my mind, I turn on the light and start writing. Having all those—what might seem like—restrictions and constraints actually facilitates the writing:

da-DAH da-DAH da-DAH da-DAH da-DAH,  
da-DAH da-DAH da-DAH da-DAH da-DAH  
“When I do count the clock that tells the time  
And see the brave day sunk in hideous night . . .”  
da-DAH da-DAH da-DAH da-DAH da-DAH

it carries you on.

I was just reading, yesterday, one of our great Rollins philosophers from the early years that I was here—Bruce Wavell. He was the head of our philosophy and religion department, a grand old British fellow—I think the last book that he wrote was a small book called *The Living Logos*, a Greek word that I guess he would translate as *reason*—as being something essential in us, and he wanted to write about this subject. He had previously written a large, very formal book of standard philosophical discourse—but when it came to writing about this topic, he decided that he was going to be more personal, and he would actually compose it in verse. He called it “free verse.” I was just looking at it again yesterday, and what I realized is, well, no, it's *not* free verse because it's all in iambics. It's all going da-DAH da-DAH da-DAH da-DAH da-DAH, except not iambic pentameter. Some lines were longer, some were shorter, and he put a capital letter at the beginning of every line because it was the old-fashioned, formal thing to do. But it was only “free” in the sense that it moved in longer and shorter lines, but almost completely it was as much iambic verse as Chaucer or Shakespeare or Robert Frost—or me [laughs]. And he did that because, as he wrote in his preface, that method facilitated the writing, making it come better, and even though used for a philosophical discourse of a kind. He felt that there was a certain magic, there was a certain impetus, there was a certain generative capability that came from using metrical language—language in meter.

And that's *my* experience, too. That's why I do it, because I'm always amazed. I'm not saying that I'm writing great stuff, but something is happening within the course of about an hour or an hour of a half. Fourteen lines will have emerged from where, and how and why? Well, they followed from a little thought that wandered out to find to a word—if it's a sonnet then probably two lines later—a word that has to rhyme with this first word . . . so what word is that going to be? Sometimes I write a list—green, seen, bean, keen, submarine [laughs]—and occasionally I'll even go to a rhyming dictionary that's right at hand and find some other words—but that word above suggests what will come when I get to that later point. And, as Bruce Wavell found, the rhythm in itself just carries you along—da-DAH da-DAH da-DAH da-DAH da-DAH. So there is much generative potential in a form like that, which people who don't try it, who don't get involved with it, who say “Oh, that's old fashioned,” have lost, losing a great mystery and a great potential for creating. So, I've always been doing that kind of poetry

and because, as you now know, I have this sort of philosophical or wisdom interest, a lot of these sonnets, a lot of these verses, are not just personal emotional things; they're more thinking things. I guess I do relate to Bruce Wavell as a philosopher using verse as a way of doing philosophy.

This is a way of me for me to do thinking about many things, for instance—*Pragmythic Beliefcraft* [holds up his book of that title]—I made up two words for that. Also “credology.” We've heard of *pragmatic*; it means practical or how something gets done. “Beliefcraft” deals with how beliefs you hold create the life you live or even the world that you see. And I would say that we all have certain myths that we live by; some of them are maybe religious or cultural or philosophical, or systematic, or you subscribe to this or that kind of ideology or belief system. And as we do that, we see the world accordingly; the world corresponds to a theme that we have internalized. Well, I'm trying to get at the notion here that as we can alter our beliefs, as we do probably as we grow, developing a different worldview, a different vision of things. Maybe we can do that more explicitly, more intentionally, more *pragmythically*: “Well, this one is not working out, so maybe I can shift my belief to that other way.”

And that goes back to *human frontiers* I think. I think that's saying something about how we can change the world, and there's a lot that needs changing in this world—we're not going in a very good direction right now—by changing what we believe about what the world could be or where we could go, or how we could live, or how we should order our lives. I was just talking to a friend of mine about something that came up twenty or so years ago, when the Parliament of the World's Religions met in 1993 in Chicago, a hundred years after its 1893 previous initial meeting—think of that. The idea would be get religious leaders of all kinds together in one hotel, one conference, in one city—Chicago as it was—and see if they could find what they had in common, instead of declaring: “My way is the true way.” That was a noble idea that didn't get very far initially, but then a hundred years later in 1993, they tried it again. This time they also had a project that was called the “Global Ethic,” a document that tried to say: We're not going to bother with reconciling our various religious, theological doctrines—we know that's impossible—but can we at least say something in common about how we ought to live, what sort of ethical principles we hold in common—like the status of women, or rights of equality. And that was the question: What common ground could we find amongst all of us who would subscribe to coming here to think and talk about such a consensus?”

Of course the first thought that you would be thinking is that maybe we have the Golden Rule in common. And it turns out that you can find versions of the Golden Rule—“Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you”—in all of these great traditions; and they included not just spiritual traditions but even the secular humanists, who have no problem saying they can be ethical without being religious. All that the Parliament were looking for here was a consensus about ethics. They produced a wonderful booklet proposing that, and those proposals would be, I'd say, *pragmythic beliefcrafts*—in this case a statement of ethical principles that purport to be universal, on this earth anyways. Maybe they could be believed in, subscribed to, followed, implemented by all people coming from all these different, often factious, contentious religious orientations.

Well, the Parliament of World Religions hasn't sold the idea, you haven't heard of it, so it hasn't exactly blown the minds of everybody in the world, but it's published and it's an em-

blem of what kind of wisdom I'm looking for. I'm not a wise person, but I do believe in wisdom, and I do believe that Shakespeare was a good exemplar of it and that my study of him is in that vain to see what made him special and see how he saw the world. Personal Writing is one way of constantly probing issues like this; likewise "Exploring Human Frontiers," which I had set up as a possible program for the RP. It didn't make the pilot program, but it may come along down the line. In a year I hope to be teaching an MLS—a Master of Liberal Studies—course on the human frontiers topic and make that more central to what I'm doing at Rollins. I'm sort of pushing literature a bit behind me so that in the later part of my career, the more emphasis I can put on to human frontier studies, the more I'd like to do that.

WZ: Great, we have about ten minutes left. I want to give Alia a chance to ask questions.

AN: Oh, yes.

AA: Well, I understand that you got your doctorate in philosophy rather than in English. Could you—

AN: No, you see, a doctorate of philosophy is what we all get.

AA: Oh, okay.

AN: A PhD applies to sociology and mathematics and mine was in English language and literature. But I'll make a small point there. Most of the faculty who are hired here now do have PhD's and that means a "doctor of philosophy." And what's *philosophy* mean? Phil-o-sophy—*phil* means love; *sophy* is derived from the Greek goddess of wisdom. Any doctor of philosophy, any PhD, is therefore a doctor of the love of wisdom. I used that notion when I introduced Cophorne Macdonald here to speak. I said, to the faculty, look, whether or not you know this, you are all doctors of the love of wisdom, so wouldn't it be a good idea to find out what this wisdom stuff is?

AA: Now you've mentioned various faculty members. Do you mind sharing what were your experiences working with some of them? Hoyt Edge . . . ?

AN: Well, I'll mention one thing that you'll find in here [an outline of talking points Dr. Nordstrom brought to the interview]. A few years ago I began to feel keenly that we faculty are mostly hanging out in our departments, and we don't get to cross over those lines very much. We're just busy doing our parochial things, and I've missed the opportunity that I had of talking to the colleagues during the COL experience, where I actually got to take courses in two terms from six of my colleagues. Nobody else on the faculty here could say that, and that was a wonderful experience. But how to get together more informally as a group of people? So a few years ago I suggested at a faculty meeting just before the school year, that I was going to set up something called VIGOR—Vital Interest Group of Rollins—VIGOR, implying the idea of something that would be vigorous. It would be a group of six or eight faculty members who would get together informally some evening every couple of months for dinner maybe, and go to different people's houses, and we would have some reading that we would do. It would be maybe like a reading group or more topic based, something that we had decided to talk about and have this opportunity for cross-fertilization. So, Hoyt—let's see I've got them here—so Hoyt Edge and

Lezlie Laws, then Lezlie Couch—and Barbara Carson, and Bob Smither—so these are all, some of them are in my department, one is, two of those are in English—let’s see, somebody else, Judy Provost and Mark Anderson—those were in the psychology areas, and we did this. I proposed it at that faculty meeting, hoping that others would follow the model. I think one other group did form that first year, but that was it, whereas VIGOR stayed together for about eight years I think. And that has been a wonderful experience with those colleagues, getting to know them and talk with them about things that were shared intellectual interests and not exclusively academic matters either.

AA: Besides for not having the time to interact with other faculty members, what have been some of the other challenges that you’ve had at Rollins?

AN: Challenges? Well let me see; one of the things, you’ll see in here [his talking points] one of the places where I had interviewed was Williams College. I didn’t get an offer from them, but I enjoyed going up to Massachusetts and visiting a college I had almost attended—Tom Cook, a Rollins professor of philosophy, went there I think and later came back there as a faculty member. Williams was a college like Rollins in having fraternities. That was before Williams went co-ed. Though they had fraternities in the late sixties, what with the social turmoil going on then, they began to scratch their heads and say why do we do this? It’s kind of beneath us, too adolescent or something like that. And like Rollins—and this is rare—all the buildings that were Greek buildings were owned by the college, so collectively, they decided, “We’re done with this, we’ve outgrown this. We’re going to make these different housing units serve different functions. Maybe have interest groups in them—the science house, the art house, or something like that”—and they abolished the system, and the alumni were happy to go along with it.

So, I came here thinking, oh, same thing is going to happen. We’ve got the sororities over here, we’ve got the fraternities over there; they were very much on other sides of the campus then. Girls’ dorms, boys’ dorms. They’d just gotten past the idea of having dorm mothers where you had to come in by eleven o’clock at night, sign in, very strictly, no boys ever allowed up in their dorms—don’t you wish for that anymore? I don’t know. [laughs] So I thought, yeah, things are changing and that’ll happen too, the Greeks will go.

Well, it didn’t happen, and it didn’t happen. And then a few years in, one of the fraternities got into some trouble—it still happens—lost their house, and for the first time the faculty raised the question—well does it have to be? Why can’t that house be used to something else? Well, I was in with a couple of students at that time who very eager to start up a new kind of housing called the Fine Arts house, so I was instrumental in helping them have the first former Greek house become an independent kind of house with a theme to it. After that, Rollins Outdoor Club came along and several other kinds of interest groups. And it was—whenever somebody flubbed up and lost their house—it was open for competition and sometimes when the competition came along, it was another Greek organization, maybe a new one that started up. But as you see, the Greeks are still with us. [Asks the students:] Are you Greek? Are you Greek? [laughs] I do have some prejudice, but I’m always happy to hear when sororities and fraternities serve students well, but I don’t think it’s where we need to be.

So that’s one thing, my way of getting involved with something and being in at the beginning of it. What else was I—oh the *Brushing* magazine, which is art and literature. When I

came here there was no such magazine, and I didn't realize that there had been one, but there had been. It was called the *Flamingo* that expired sometime—I don't know—sometime well before I came. It just had a good tradition. It had Hemingway's sister who was here and who published in it. And it somehow didn't occur to me until a few years—three or so years after I was here—that yeah, we don't have a literary magazine, why is that? And it occurred to a student of mine, Michael Madonick, and we conspired and said let's start one up. And *Brushing* was born. He named it because—and it's not *Brushings*, it's *Brushing*—because he wanted it to be both literary and artistic, as it has been over all these years, and I've got all those editions in my office. I think it just had its thirty-fifth anniversary last year. Unfortunately, this year the editors fell down and there is no *Brushing*. It'll get back together, but I've been an on-and-off advisor for it, and this last year I wasn't paying much attention. There was another person also advising. We were never being contacted until it was too late, and it didn't happen. The staff had a lot of material gathered, but it wasn't enough for the issue. Anyways, I think *Brushing* will be pulling its act together for next year. I'm happy, though, to have been in it from the start. Did you have any part in it?

JR: I had a submission that was accepted, but it's now obviously not going to go anywhere since . . .

AN: Well *next* year—anything that was accepted for last year I think will hold over to this coming year.

WZ: So Alan –

AN: Oh, ODK, I guess I should mention that—Omicron Delta Kappa, the National Leadership Honor Society. I was the Rollins faculty advisor for about twenty or twenty-five years for ODK. I was always a bit ambivalent about it—a good idea, but I don't know that they ever accomplished much except to just congratulate a few people at each year for having been good leaders, and that's nice to do.

Oh, may I say one other thing? I won a—

AA: McKean grant?

AN: Yeah, and an Arthur Vining Davis Award, but the McKean grant is for a project that looks promising. And what I did in winning that was to go to England for a summer and study theater. It was an intensive tour of mostly Shakespearean drama that was partly situated in Stratford and then moved on to London, and we saw every Shakespeare play then playing, and some others. It was led by Patrick Stewart—yes, *Star Trek's* Captain Picard—who is also a wonderful stage actor. He was with the Royal Shakespeare Company at the time, and this was a regular summer gig for him to take a number of Americans and show them British theater. But my main rationale for doing this was the hope that possibly we could start a Shakespeare festival here at Rollins. To that end, I assembled a group of people from the faculty and elsewhere out in the community, and tried to bring off this scheme. It didn't happen, mainly because there really wasn't financing for that. But a good friend of mine, who was part of my original group, Stuart Omans, was then, or around that time, the head of the English department at UCF and was also the Shakespearean there. So he and I were sort of Shakespeare colleagues. He adopted that no-

tion, developed it, and now we have the Orlando-UCF Shakespeare Festival, which at first was an outdoor performance at the Lake Eola band-shell in downtown Orlando. Today, over in the Lock Haven Park, the organization has its own building with three stages in there, and it's just changed its name from OSF to Orlando Shakespeare Theatre. And it is very well known. Eric Zivot in our theater department often plays leading roles there. It is first class. I have a small link to that, only because of coming up with this idea, pushing it to a standstill, and having one of those people carry it on. Much to Professor Socky O'Sullivan's chagrin, however, it's now a UCF project, not a Rollins project. Even so, I'm happy to have been a catalyst for that happening.

WZ: Great, one last question. Can you share briefly your reflection—how do you view your Rollins career of forty years?

AN: Well, it's a good beginning, a good start. I hope to carry on and do more and better.

WZ: Well, that's great—

AN: (speaking at the same time) This is not a finale here, this is not an exit interview. I am still a work in progress, as is Rollins. [laughs]

WZ: That's great Alan. Thank you so much. We really got involved in the conversation. We want to thank you for all your contributions to Rollins College, and for your participation in Oral History.

AN: Well, thank you very much, thank you.

WZ: Okay, bye bye.

AN: Thank you, thank you.

*(Edited "from rough-draft talk toward coherent conversation," by Alan Nordstrom)*