

# A Celebration of the Humanities

3 p.m., Oct. 6  
Tolley Building Courtyard

Thank you, Dean Newton.

I am very happy to join you today as we rededicate a treasured icon of our campus: the historic and newly renovated Tolley Building as a home for our new Center for the Public and Collaborative Humanities.

When Bishop Jesse Peck, the first chair of our board of trustees, developed SU's original master plan in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he set forth the concept of an eclectic campus grounded in an expansive, humanistic view of the world. Time and the world have moved on, and the building itself is now a National Register landmark. But the bishop's plan remains pertinent and fresh, especially in this facility named for Chancellor William Pearson Tolley, whose vision for the University was inclusive and far-reaching.

It was Tolley who welcomed to campus an unprecedented number of returning GIs, and Japanese-American students from internment camps. The campus became a place for replenishment of the human spirit, so as to enable the kinds of explorations of a new, shared future – a new place – so needed in the face of conflicts and the after-math of war.

Now, in a time that once again tests the will of a diverse world to find common cause – a shared place to restore and reinvent the spirit of democratic pluralism -- this building, which has returned to its traditional façade, will be asked again to teach us all together about humanity.

In this building, the Humanities will both HAVE a place --- a room of one's own, as Virginia Woolf once said---rightfully in the center of our campus) and will be asked to DO place (looking outward toward the world in humanistic exploration of the public realm).

*Having* place and *doing* place are complementary and compatible with each other in the work of humanists. If we only *have* place – even as beautiful a one as this – it tends to become insular, stagnant, and dull (we need the dynamic of reinventing our place on the basis of our explorations of others’); conversely, if we are constantly reinventing, exploring, traveling, without a touchstone of having place, there is little to give meaning to our efforts.

If we think about the place where we live, New York State, we see a regional crossroads---the only state on both the Atlantic Ocean and the Great Lakes---with a geology and topography second only to California in its variety. New York State is untidy, complex, and, as the editors of *The Encyclopedia of New York State* observed, radically heterogeneous. More than half its population is crowded into New York City on less than five percent of its area,<sup>1</sup> yet the central Adirondacks are called the nation’s last great wilderness.

As such, New York State combines the stability and density of place, with the excitement and possibility of explorations of new places. That is, explorations of places fought for and lost, places re-created here by refugees fleeing other homes, places that once were thriving and now must re-find a foothold in the new economy, or sacred lands and waterways, to be reclaimed and given new life.

Even with its heterogeneity, New York’s regions are linked in a common narrative. Cities and counties throughout the State face common issues such as de-industrialization, urban poverty, the quality of public education, the sustainability of our environment – natural and human.<sup>2</sup>

On the hopeful side is a common heritage of brilliant inventions and solutions, especially in our part of New York. Certainly the Erie Canal, which ushered in the Industrial Revolution in the United States, still stands out as we learn today about the impact of our Information Revolution, and begin to consider the implications – human and physical – of the new Biological Revolution.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Eisenstadt and Laura-Eve Moss, Preface, *The Encyclopedia of New York State*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005), xi.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

Yet innovation has never been confined in our region to technology, with social change and human innovation permeating our history. As part of the “Burned-Over District,” central and western New York was a laboratory for new developments in religion. It gave rise to Mormonism, spiritualism, and utopianism. It was the home of the nation’s first integrated institution of higher learning, the Oneida Institute, and the nation’s first college to have an integrated faculty, New York Central College. It embraced the crusade against slavery and nurtured fighters for women’s rights. It is the historic home of the Haudenosaunee confederacy, a rich culture that reached out north and south, east and west and provided the first model both for a democratic federal system of government and for the empowerment of women as clan mothers within that system.<sup>3</sup>

In New York State and in Syracuse, our history and our location give us both a sense of place and of possibility. Yes, it is untidy. We have a heritage of dissent, diversity and struggle. But we also have a powerful history of invention, discovery, and a passion for social justice that continues to this day.

So, we are both firmly *in place* and reaching out, and it is that mix, that dialectic, that we celebrate today in this *new* Center, in this *historic* building.

Here, we will have many Humanities disciplines and the interdisciplinary Humanities – that is, creative writing *and* Native Studies, for example, co-existing and working off each other in one place. And each will be enriched by these interactions, as well as challenged by the embrace of a look outward, to the many, diverse publics of which this great region is made.

Yes, like the place we live in, the new arrangement may be untidy, but the Humanities themselves must be untidy because they must get close to the flux of lived experience.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, xx-xxviii.

<sup>4</sup> John D’Arms, “Pressing Issues for a New Generation of Humanists,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2 July 1999, B6. For a full discussion, see *John H. D’Arms: His Achievements, Our Future Course* by Nancy Cantor, W. Robert Connor, Barbara DeConcini, Patricia Nelson Limerick, and Neil Rudenstine, American Council of Learned Societies Occasional Paper 53, 2003. Internet at <http://www.acls.org/aclspubs.htm>

And this will indeed be a dynamic, energizing place, with the Mellon Humanities Corridor, Imagining America, the Ford fellows in the arts, public humanities, architecture and the media, and the conversations in religion, the media, and international relations, spurred on by the Luce Foundation.

When we add other public Humanities projects across campus---some recent – such as the Ford program in African American Studies, the Connective Corridor in Syracuse, and the Muslim Cultures Program in London, and others evolving from an historic base – such as the Africa Initiative and the Community Folk Arts Center, to name only a few, we can see many possibilities for dramatic transformation across academic disciplines, the interdisciplinary humanities, and our many connected communities, at home and abroad.

The Tolley Building is the gateway to our campus, and the new Center for the Public and Collaborative Humanities housed within it, is an important gateway for a new kind of future. The Center will provide a place to sustain and encourage humanistic inquiry --- public and collaborative--- inclusive of our heterogeneous academic, cultural, and civic landscape. Bishop Peck's vision of 140 years ago is still alive and renewed in this Center. It invites us to celebrate the Humanities by transforming the world.