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## School as Authentic Connection: Reflections on the IIH Summer School Experience

If, as Gadamer suggests, conversation is the heart of hermeneutics, we would do well to seek those rare opportunities that afford the genuine practice of such dialogue. One such occasion is offered each spring at the International Institute of Hermeneutics International Summer School in Philosophy and Education under the organizational leadership and passionate guidance of Prof. Dr. Dr. Andrzej Wierciński and through the co-sponsorship of ten international universities.

The IIH summer school gathers not only philosophers and scholars, but lawyers, medical doctors, NGO workers, therapists, clergy, and others who share a deep commitment to hermeneutic explorations and understandings of their fields. It is a uniquely intergenerational assembly in that many are accompanied by their students and mentees who are just beginning their own investigations of this rich and always relevant field of study.

This diversity of vocations and ages produces a remarkable interchange of perspectives. The conference themes – translation, fragility, hospitality, memory, to name but the most recent – provide conversational parameters that are both broad enough to house a wide range of commitments, yet narrow enough to maintain a focus on the most

pressing ethical concerns we have been asked to address at this crucial and dire historical moment.

True to its commitment to philosophy *and* education, the summer school in the best sense of *educare* “leads one out” of their habitual intellectual comportment into new and sometimes startling realizations of the multiple manifestations and uses of hermeneutical inquiry – sojourns that lead one back to one’s own work refreshed and laden with new understandings and insights.

For the younger members of the gathering, the summer school provides a welcoming space in which to obtain a hearing of one’s early work. Rather than face the intimidation of the formal academic conference or the condescension of the “junior” conference/program, the summer school invites each participant on equal ground and views each contribution as worthy of serious attention. Recent graduates present alongside career professionals and debates are passionate yet rarely polemic. There are no concurrent sessions: each participant presents to the entire group, an organizational decision that quickly coheres the community and provides the foundation for the emergence of a complex overarching conversation as the week proceeds. Earlier threads are taken up repeatedly and integrated into new conversations, weaving a rich thematic tapestry by week’s end.

For those of us bringing students from the U.S. educational system, this is a rare opportunity to introduce them to an experience in which their work is both sincerely received and nurtured to its next articulation. Over the past several years, my students have brought their dialogues with art, the environment, gender, imagination, immigration, atheism to the school and left with deeper and more nuanced understandings of their topics as a result of their encounters with scholars and students from different educational traditions and systems – Israel, Italy, Iran, Canada, Poland, Slovenia, to name but a few.

In a unique hybrid of the Epicurean garden and the monastic table, attendees quickly find themselves members of an intentional community, sharing nourishing food (and drink) at each meal and evening gathering and experiencing together the cultural offerings of the school’s location (Krakow or Zakopane). Here, not only are the philosophical conversations continued but the opening is provided to cultivate genuine friendships with those both like and unlike one’s self. Through the school I have found new, rich, and ongoing relationships; not international professional contacts, but authentic connections, something one is rarely blessed with past a certain life stage.

Furthermore, such successes of the IIIH Summer School are not only achieved in Zakopane (or in Europe). Five special sessions of the school have taken place in Phoenix, Arizona USA with the support of Barrett, the Honors College at Arizona State University West campus. In these

sessions young scholars have interacted with professors from Poland and Slovenia, again in settings conducive to hermeneutic conversation. In this setting, arrangements were made for the visiting international scholars to hold special classes with honors students, including seminars on the poet Miłosz, the poet Celan, and one seminar and lecture on hermeneutics and translation dealing with the poet Plath. One visit provided the opportunity for a seminar on the political philosophy of Arendt. These US school sessions also have the virtue of allowing many students unable to travel to benefit from the rich intellectual atmosphere and international collaborations achieved in the Zakopane sessions outlined above.

In a moment hurtling with increasing speed and scope further into Heidegger's technological epoch, the summer school offers a true restorative respite. Time slows, care is taken – a rare offering in the present age. It was with grief that many of us met the news of this year's necessary postponement, one we simultaneously realized was the correct decision since spending time with one another via screens would have been but a thin and inadequate replacement for what has come to be the embodied experience of previous years.

What one takes away from attending the IIH summer school stays with one; it becomes a part of how one understands oneself, and others, and the lifeworld. So, we await and invite others to the moment when, unlike Romeo's schoolboy, not with heavy looks but looking forward to all the school makes possible, we shall again gather together to engage in the genuine conversations that mean the world to us.