

Salve Regina Oral History Project

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Interviewee: Dr. Jim Hersh

Interviewer and Transcriber: Allyse Zajac, Class of 2018

Dr. William J. "Jim" Hersh was a professor of Philosophy at Salve Regina University for forty years from 1970 until his retirement in 2010. During this interview, we discussed his arrival at Salve Regina University, the school's financial difficulties in the 1970s, his involvement in the founding and development of the VIA program, and his experiences as a professor in the Philosophy Department.

Allyse: Hello, my name is Allyse Zajac. It is July 5th, 2017 and I am here with Dr. Jim Hersh and we are doing our interview. So kind of as an opener question, just tell me a little about yourself and how you ended up here at Salve.

Dr. Hersh: Well I came to Salve in September of 1970. I started teaching in Atlanta, Georgia, taught high school there for three years. Then my wife and I came to New England. We worked at a school in the Berkshires for six months. I think that was like a half a year program and as soon as I got the job at Salve we moved in that spring or summer of 1970. So Salve was a very small place at that time, but it was a wonderful place. I mean it was beautiful, like it is now and I remember my feeling of time ... there was a danger that first year that Salve might go out of business because it was such a small number of students. I was worried for myself at the time, maybe I took a job at the wrong place. But I remember having the feeling of, oh my God, there's so much potential here, what this place could become and turn into if there were enough people who loved it. You know, I teach the sort of philosophy that is interested in art imagery, philosophy of religion. Asian philosophy was the reason I was hired. Students were asking for Asian philosophy, full of imagination and imagery. And I was interested in fairy tales at the time, I would even put some in the classroom. And I remember thinking about Salve in those terms, Salve seemed sort of like a Sleeping Beauty to me. It seemed kind of asleep, but it needed to be kissed, to be loved and if enough people loved it, it could wake up. And that's a pretty good metaphor for my ... I taught full time here for forty years and I've been teaching, I retired seven years ago, but I've been mentoring dissertations and teaching courses since I retired, but I think I'm done now, **\*\*laughter\*\*** I just got my last paycheck from Salve last week, so this is a good time to be interviewing me.

Allyse: The very end.

Dr. Hersh: So anyway, that's a metaphor for my experience at Salve. Sleeping Beauty, people would come, there would be surges of people who would come in and love the place in new ways and so I would say it's sort of on an upward track. You know there would be a surge of energy and new expertise come in and then a leveling off and then a surge and a leveling off, sometimes there would be a little backsliding, but generally upwards and it's ... Sleeping Beauty is waking up, still going on, I guess.

Allyse: It's true. So you mentioned how in the 70s there was a bit of uncertainty.

Dr. Hersh: There was a lot. I was terrified. I didn't get paid for two months. That's how bad it was.

Allyse: Right. That was exactly what I was about to ask you. So how did that affect you, the financial crisis?

Dr. Hersh: It terrified me! I had always wanted to teach at a university level, I had been teaching high school in Atlanta and I wanted to teach at a university level and I finally got this dream job in this dream like place, and I thought, "Oh my God, it's not going to be here next year." So it was terrifying. My wife and I had a four year old daughter ... I mean yeah, I was scared for the family. I was scared for my dream profession. You know I wanted it to happen somehow, and luckily it worked out.

Allyse: That's good.

Dr. Hersh: Yeah.

Allyse: So you talked about teaching high school then going on to teach at the university level. I am a Secondary Ed student so I am interested in that.

Dr. Hersh: Oh you are?

Allyse: Yes.

Dr. Hersh: Oh good for you. I admire you people<sup>1</sup> **\*\*laughter\*\*** I don't know how they do it.

Allyse: Yeah, so for you, what was the biggest difference? Like shifting from high school to teaching at a university?

Dr. Hersh: I think the major difference was it was a better marriage for my skill set. I never had an education ... I went to DePauw University in Indiana and never had an education course. So I'm coming from graduate school, little seminar rooms like this,<sup>2</sup> ten English Lit honors majors talking about John Keats in a reasonable way, and suddenly I'm in a room of eighth grade orangutans, screaming and yelling. And you know, I'm only 22 or 23 at the time and that first year I thought I was losing my mind. By the second year, I'd figured out the discipline thing. So it got better each ... generally my career ... the worst was the first, it got better and better every year but by teaching at a university level, I didn't have to worry about all of the disciplinary issues and I could focus on ...

Allyse: The content?

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<sup>1</sup> High School Teachers

<sup>2</sup> McKillop Library Room 217

Dr. Hersh: Aristotle and Keats and you know, the things that I loved. I didn't really know how to teach in the beginning, when I arrived here I don't think I had to ... you know I was still learning at the end, learning how to teach.

Allyse: Alright, so can you describe a typical day in your classroom at Salve?

Dr. Hersh: Oh God, that is what I miss the most, Allyse...

Dr. Hersh: People always ask me if I am happy with my retirement and my retirement is amazing! I live across the street from Stanford and I walk in and out every day. I am taking a seminar there with a philosophy professor ... I am in a reading group with Stanford philosophy professors. Little me! So that's top of the line. I get blown away, I'm like a freshman at Stanford, I'm learning all the time; it's ideal. When somebody asks me what I miss the most, I say the chemistry of the classroom.

Allyse: Can you explain that a bit?

Dr. Hersh: Yeah, well let me give an example. The biggest rush for me as a teacher would be when a student would teach me something. And it happened with freshmen, I mean it happened ... it happened a lot. But I had to learn over the decades to shut up and to listen and to not be thinking about what I am going to say when, you know, the ignorant, boring student finishes what they're going to say. So, it involved a respect for the student and they would say something and ask questions sometimes that even ... learning is such a rush for me and I know everything that I have to say so what I miss is the chemistry, the back and forth. This is in Plato, *The Symposium*. The VIA program<sup>3</sup> I designed is based on *The Symposium*; it's all Socratic, it's about teachers shutting up, students showing up, listening to each other so that our thinking gets freed. That was the best experience for me and what I miss the most is students freeing my mind in the classroom. It's the meaning of liberal education: to liberate the mind, Seneca.

Allyse: So in that vein, was there a favorite class that you had that you had to teach? A type of class, a particular class, one specific year that was out of this world?

Dr. Hersh: Well the VIA classes were always the best for me because we were stressing life design and putting these great books in front of them and seeing how their lives changed. So the VIA courses were great because the relationships with the students were more one on one. I would have them come in like this, I would do tutorials with them because when I was at Oxford, I had a tutor, that's how I got into teaching. It was one on one, so I would do that with the VIA students. But my favorite class that I ever taught was on Joyce's<sup>4</sup> *Ulysses*, my favorite book. And I taught this course three times ... I think maybe the best time, I had ten students. It's not cost effective, but it's education effective because they're all participating.

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<sup>3</sup> The VIA program, which was established at Salve Regina in 1997, consists of six courses that cover many areas of study, but focus in particular on the great ideas in history that inform the building of the "Good Life." Taken together, the courses provide a pathway ("via" in Latin) to graduation and a sound preparation for life in the 21st century.

<sup>4</sup> James Joyce, Irish Author.

Allyse: The best kinds of classes are.

Dr. Hersh: Oh my goodness, and you know we had this one text and then we would have backup texts, I would bring in an armload of stuff. So I'd use a video they made of *Ulysses* in the '60s and I would show them five minutes of that so we can see what the characters looked ... these are Irish actors in Dublin, and what that looks like and then we read the text side by side with Homer's *Odyssey* that it's based on. Well yeah, here's what I really miss: in the class I'm remembering, there was ... she was a VIA student, Katherine Fish was her name. She was one of the best students I ever had. I think she's in India now. But, I don't know if you've read Homer's *Odyssey*?

Allyse: Yes.

Dr. Hersh: Yeah, okay. It's in a genre of literature that's about going home. So Joyce writes a modern *Odyssey* on one day, June 16th, 1904, about a Jewish guy in Dublin who encounters all the anti-Semitism. So he's like Odysseus and he's trying to get back home after the Trojan War, it's about home. So I start the course by asking them, "How do you define home? What is home if it's not a literal house? Why is there this genre of literature?" And Katherine didn't hesitate. She said, "Home is where everyone knows you but they love you anyway." \*\*Laughter\*\* And I said, "Wow, that is really, really good." Because you're just held and contained despite your craziness or your dark side, or whatever it is and that's where Odysseus is trying to get, it's where Leopold Bloom is trying to get, and it's the way Joyce ended his book, with the word, "Yes," an affirmation of life. And I thought, wow, I've been so lucky to teach about such things in this dreamscape that we live in here at Salve. And somebody has allowed me to put what has been named the greatest book in the English language in the twentieth century by the Modern Library,<sup>5</sup> to put this in front of these amazing students and have moments like that happen where I'm caught up, I have to ... I'm a student again at that moment. So I'm really teaching in order to be a student. If I'm not a student in the classroom, I am not teaching properly.

Allyse: I get that.

Dr. Hersh: Yeah, you understand. You would have been a great VIA student.

Allyse: Well thank you. Speaking of the VIA program, you helped develop it. I just wanted to ask you, can you tell me about the development? What inspired you to create it? How did it come about?

Dr. Hersh: That's a good story. I went to a faculty meeting in 1994 and we were changing from Sister Lucille McKillop<sup>6</sup> to Sister Therese Antone<sup>7</sup> so we had a faculty meeting and there were three faculty on the stage: Barbara Sylvia,<sup>8</sup> Tom Day,<sup>9</sup> I think, and I can't remember who the

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<sup>5</sup> An American publishing company that ranks top books.

<sup>6</sup> Sister Lucille McKillop, RSM was president of Salve Regina 1973-1994

<sup>7</sup> Sister M. Therese Antone, RSM was President of Salve Regina 1994-2009

<sup>8</sup> Dr. Barbara Sylvia is a professor of Social Work at Salve Regina

<sup>9</sup> Dr. Thomas Day is professor in the Music, Theater and Dance Department at Salve Regina. He is now retired but is still on staff as an adjunct.

third one was. They challenged us. They said this maybe as an opening, “How would you change the curriculum if you had the freedom to do so?” And I got angry at myself because I didn’t have anything to say. Nobody had ever asked Jim Hersh. I never had the freedom to do such a thing, but we’re changing administrations. So that night I went home and I laid awake all night, I called it my dark night of the curriculum.<sup>10</sup> So, what would I do? I didn’t have anything to say. I had this sudden awareness that I’m so much older than these students. I’d been teaching twenty-five years by that time. So I don’t know the world that you guys are graduating into, and as somebody who is preparing you for that world, I oughta know what it is. So for the next year, I traveled around the country. I talked to people in New England, I gave presentations at educational conferences, always with the question, “What’s the ideal student?” What does the world want from you guys? And why can’t we enhance our effort to help you get to that point? So I interviewed deans of Graduate schools, I interviewed people who were running nursing agencies in Texas. I went to Chicago, Seattle, all over the country. I was just interviewing everybody that I could get to and it came down to ... I collected all of these notes, but it came down to four things that they were looking for. And the first one on the list was the ability to organize thoughts in speaking and in writing. Thinking would be in both of those. Wow. And I would hear things like: “We get students graduating from Ivy League schools who can’t write a coherent paragraph.” I mean people actually telling me, “I got a job at Apple, I’m working with great people and all they asked me was ... they didn’t ask me about my degree from Brown or whatever, they just said, ‘Can you write a coherent paragraph?’ And I did and I got the job. They didn’t even know I went to Brown.” And I said whoa. And my son had just graduated from DePauw where I went, and he was working at a place in Chicago, a consulting place called VIA, which was an acronym for Visions Into Actions. So I would talk to David and say, “What did you get from DePauw that you’re using?” And he would start to tell me things, so I had to boil it all down to ... creative intuition was another thing I got all over the country. That is something, like you’re able to ... my son was a football player so he used the phrase, to mean in a football game when a runner is running and his body just knows which way to move at the right time. It’s like lightning chess or something. And he said, “There weren’t a lot of courses that gave me that skill but there were some.” So we talked about what that meant. Another thing was an integrated education. A lot of people say, “We have to work with these students you know, nine, ten hours a day sometimes, and we want to work with interesting people.” People who are risk takers. People who are good conversationalists, that came up a lot. And people with an integrated education, Liberal Arts majors, not Business majors. That sort of shocked me. In Chicago, I went to VIA, the place where David was working, his bosses were in their forties, and they wanted to talk to me about Heidegger.<sup>11</sup> “Sit down, we gotta talk about Heidegger!” \*\*laughter\*\* They didn’t care about business majors. They wanted people who had traveled to ... or could make connections between the printing press and what was happening politically, statebuilding in the sixteenth century. They wanted what I wanted as a teacher, the opportunity and the desire to shut up. I want to listen to this person; I want to learn. So why not produce students ... you know some of this is written into the Mission Statement of the University,<sup>12</sup> but I saw VIA as an enhancement of what is there in the opening of the Mission Statement, which is at the heart of

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<sup>10</sup> Dr. Hersh is referring to the Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross, who wrote a book entitled *The Dark Night of the Soul*.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Heidegger was a German philosopher

<sup>12</sup> The Mission Statement of Salve Regina University can be found here <http://www.salve.edu/about/mission-statement>

what liberal education is: to free your mind. That's what you are paying for. If you walk across the stage and get your diploma and your mind isn't free-er, you got cheated or you cheated yourself. Or if you leave a class without a new idea, you got cheated. You paid a lot of money and got cheated. So I brought all of these notes back to the faculty and I got on the agenda for a faculty meeting and I said, "Have you ever been passionate about something you haven't had the opportunity to teach?" Like when I came to Salve, I was passionate about the imagination, the human imagination. And Salve was not an Ivy League school, you know Brown would never have asked me anything. Harvard says ... imagination ... Salve says, "What would you like to do?" I taught a course called Philosophy of the Imagination: Dream Symbolism. I taught it for thirty years. But there is such a prejudice against dreams, imagination that most schools, particularly Philosophy Departments who all want to be so scientific, were not curious about the human imagination, which is insane. Anyway, I think I got something like seventy-five courses from the faculty, this is something I always wanted to teach, I really care about, I've never been able to do it. So we took these four themes that we wanted students, who had these skills, in the VIA program when they graduated. VIA was not to be an honors program; it was for students at all levels and the higher students would lift up the lower students through their friendship. It's based on Plato. A group of friends in a circle, the teacher one of the friends, talking to each other about how to design their lives in the best possible way, using the great ideas, the great book. And what happened with VIA is that the students took over the friendships. They got so tight. They were from different majors, different backgrounds, so the learning carried outside the classroom. But it was based on life design. Which is based on ... oh, sorry to blab on like this, I'm just so excited about this stuff.

Allyse: It's fine. It's what you're supposed to do.

Dr. Hersh: July 4th, Independence Day. Jefferson. The pursuit of happiness is that Greek idea. He was reading Aristotle. He was reading the same stuff we designed VIA on. Happiness, according to the Greeks, is produced by living the good, beautiful life. So we're walking around in that Greek idea. Democracy, Greek idea, invented at the same time. And philosophy, invented at the same time in that little town<sup>13</sup> with 30,000 people in the fifth century. So we're walking around in that, but we're not aware of it, we don't talk about it. So we needed to make sure that VIA students knew that you're living in a country based on life design. What do you need in that life for it to be designed in the best possible way? So I would start the VIA classes that I taught asking them, "Take a sheet of paper, just write a word. What's the one, single thing that you want the most for your life?" A lot of them had never thought about it. And then I would write all of these things up on the board and we would look at them, and I would say, "Okay. Aristotle did this with his students. One of the things on the list is qualitatively different than everything else on the list. Which one was he talking about?" And well, could you answer that?

**\*\*laughter\*\*** How would you answer that question?

Allyse: Well I'd probably say happiness.

Dr. Hersh: Yeah. That's the one! Most of them would put "happiness." So happiness is different. Why would it be different? Qualitatively different from the others? From money, or wealth, or love, and all these other great things? Why is it different?

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<sup>13</sup> Athens, Greece

Allyse: I feel like it's the most subjective?

Dr. Hersh: Subjective?

Allyse: Yes.

Dr. Hersh: Yeah, well we need to talk about it. If it is subjective and we all have different views about it, we need to talk about it. That's what *The Symposium* is about. Plato invented the university. His academy was what we do. So if you read *The Symposium*, it's kind of the heart of the matter. So yeah, we'd say happiness is different because ... Aristotle says it's because it's the one thing in the list that's a true end. Everything else is a means to happiness. So we may differ on what the means is to happiness, but the Greeks had this interesting idea where maybe happiness itself is not different. This is why Jefferson puts it into the Declaration, but he didn't spell out exactly what it is either because it requires us to have the conversation about it. So if happiness is an end, and we see all these other things as a means to happiness, but we've designed a country that is based on pursuing this thing, we need to figure out what's in the list that would make you happy. When I asked my wife, Paula, about this, oh God, thirty-five years ago, like Katherine Fish, one of her favorite students, she didn't hesitate. This is in 1982. Paula said immediately, "An ecstatic death." And I didn't understand what she meant by that. And when I tell students about that, they never forget it. It's amazing. Twenty years later and they remember what Paula said. An ecstatic death. And I started thinking about Socrates because he defined philosophy as the preparation for death. I put those two things together and it made sense to me. When Paula said that what she wanted more than anything else was an ecstatic death, it meant that Greek thing. Think of your life as a movie, a bunch of movie stills building up to the last moment. So Allyse is going to get to that last frame of the movie. And Aristotle says that you don't know until that last frame whether you've lived a good, beautiful life or not because anything could have happened otherwise, but at the last frame you're seeing the whole movie that's Allyse. And what Paula is saying is that okay, in that moment I want to be ecstatic. When I see the whole thing, I want it to blow me away, like I was listening to a Beethoven string quartet or something. I want my life to be like that. And then students never forgot it. So Socrates says philosophy is just preparing for that last frame of the movie. So what do you need in your movie in order to be blown away by the beauty of that movie at the end. That is what VIA is about, and as a group of students who are friends and are reading these amazing books, and sharing our differences on these ideas, we help each other to build a good, beautiful life. That is the heart of VIA taking these visions and putting them into action.

Allyse: So how was the reception towards VIA when it first started? Like what did the faculty, students ... were they very receptive of it? Were they very enthusiastic?

Dr. Hersh: Well there was a group of faculty that were against it, who said that we're already doing that ... I mean, which was sort of true. I mean, the goals of VIA were the goals of liberal education. But what I wanted VIA to be, and the committee that we were working with, we wanted VIA to be was an enhancement of that so we'd know what these are ... we're going to take this small group of students, no more than twenty or twenty-five, and every semester over the four year period, each year had a theme, they're going to get closer and closer together. That

was amazing how that happened, how those students bonded. So there were a small group of faculty that were against it in the beginning and thought that it was just selfishness or something, you know? Life design or the good life they were thinking about is partying or something ... I don't know; it was a misunderstanding because we gave them what the ten goals of VIA were and humility is one of the goals, serving the community and these sorts of things were essential to a good life. But most of the faculty was interested in it. They were enthusiastic, good supporters and we had a great VIA committee, fifteen or twenty faculty on the committee. It wasn't just Jim Hersh; it was this committee that put it together. The first year, the students didn't know what it was, I had to ... what you just heard was my pitch to the students. It was tough for the students to get all of the requirements in and still do VIA so we had to make sure that most of the VIA courses also doubled as requirements. So that was always a challenge. And sometimes the majors made great demands on the students that would not allow them to VIA; that was always a challenge.

Allyse: Secondary Ed!

Dr. Hersh: Yes, so I know about majors and you know, turf wars and all of that. VIA was about bringing majors together from different areas because we learned from our differences, not from our similarities. So the first year, I think there were eight or nine VIA students, but they were all really strong and I'm still in contact with some of these people. And then the second year, there was like twenty-five. The word got out from students and so the second year group of students was strong. And you know, VIA got stronger as the years went by because people were seeing that it was working and what its goals were, what it was about. It's about this fundamental thing of life design. The title was VIA: Vital Courses in Life Design.

Allyse: Okay. So do you believe or has the purpose or importance of VIA changed over time, or do you think it's the same as it was when you developed it?

Dr. Hersh: Oh you mean now?

Allyse: Yeah. Now or when you retired.

Dr. Hersh: Well, I have been retired for seven years. So, I know that it is still going, but I've tried to stay out of it. I told John Rok,<sup>14</sup> who is one of the directors, and Craig Condella,<sup>15</sup> if you need anything from me, let me know. Like, I could come in and do the little spiel. And I am on the West Coast, so my concern is that it keep its life design theme about ... that's what VIA is; it's about life design that we get from the history of ideas, and realizing it in our lives. And I think that really matters to students. We built a country out of this; it's what liberal education is. A part of that, a major part of that is ... Socrates talked about the good life and so on and there was an attack on him because this is selfishness. The Socratic answer is that this is a self love. If Allyse designs the best life that you can come up with so that at the last frame of the movie you are ecstatic, that's good for Allyse. So it is selfish in that lower sense, Socrates says. But then he had this great expression, that the lofty self love ... my Mom graduated from high school in 1927 in Cincinnati, Ohio and she was in the top five out of six hundred students at Hughes High

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<sup>14</sup> Mr. John Rok is an assistant professor of Religious and Theological Studies at Salve Regina University

<sup>15</sup> Dr. Craig Condella is an associate professor of Philosophy at Salve Regina University

School, a very good school, and she wanted to go on to university but it was 1927. She was an only child, her parents were scared for her to leave home. They put pressure on her not to go. Female. 1927. You can imagine. She'd fallen in love with my Dad who was five years older. He was poor. His Dad was a clown in the circus. My grandfather was a clown in the circus!

Allyse: That must have been fun.

Dr. Hersh: **\*\*laughter\*\*** A tightrope walker! So my dad did not have a college education. And he was five years older. He was afraid she'd go to college and fall in love with some educated guy and dump him, so he put pressure on her not to go so she didn't. But right before she died, my mom died in 1995 and I'm with her down in Florida and I'm asking her that VIA question, "Are you happy with your life?" She's at the last frame of the movie. And she says, "We had a really good life, a good family. We had all the things that we needed," and I can tell she is sort of hedging her bets and I say "Whoa, what are you thinking about?" And she's looking at this stack of books on her desk and it's like popular novels or crossword puzzle stuff or something. And she's looking at it and she says, "I wish I had done more with my mind," and it goes back to that pressure on her. This is when I learned of the pressure on her, from my Dad and from her parents, and she bought into the pressure. It would have been really tough for her to defy that pressure. But Aristotle says that a right desire is one that leads to the good life. That's what you ought to desire and we all have the same ... the Greeks had the same list of things you had to accumulate. So cultivating your mind is really important, otherwise you're like a tree with one of the limbs cut off. I don't know if you were at Salve when the VIA tree ..

Allyse: Oh, was that the one in front of McAuley?

Dr. Hersh: McAuley. And it got struck by lightning? Did you see that tree?

Allyse: Yeah. That was during the summer after my freshman year.<sup>16</sup>

Dr. Hersh: Well, I used to take my students out from under that tree and talk about these things and my Mom because it would ... I said this stupid thing spontaneously one year and they laughed so I kept using it. I said if I were a tree, I'd want to be this tree, and then I would ask them why. And it's obvious, this tree is doing the hell out of tree-ness.

Allyse: It was a pretty good tree.

Dr. Hersh: Whatever tree-ness is about, there's nothing missing. So all you have to do is figure out what human-ness is, and you get that from the great books and from your friends talking. America is designed for you to express human-ness like this tree is expressing tree-ness. If a martian came to Earth and wanted to know what a tree was, just point. So if you wanted to explain what a human is, you should just be able to point to Allyse, this is what you want to do, fully blossomed out, it's bloomed. So why not do that? There's a sort of a contest between Greek tradition and Catholic tradition, until you start to talk about it, because the Catholics made great universities in the Middle Ages, so the people who understood this ... but it looks like for you to

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<sup>16</sup> The 125-year-old Fernleaf Beech Tree in front of McAuley Hall was destroyed in a thunderstorm in August, 2015.

build a life that expresses human-ness in this complete way so unlike my Mom, you're cultivating your mind and you want a fulfilled life. That's going to benefit everybody that's around you; that's a lofty self love. So the Greek thing is the good life, and if you just say that by itself, you don't understand what it means. The Catholic thing is to love your neighbors, and so there is a contest between Athens and Jerusalem on this and it sort of came out at Salve because at a Catholic university, there is a lot of Jerusalem here, but it's a university so there's a lot of Athens here, too. And I never felt that they were at war with each other because of this idea of lofty self love. The more you cultivate human-ness in your life, the more those around you benefit. It's the best thing you can do for the rest of us. It didn't do the world any good for my mother not to cultivate her mind so that she feels unfulfilled at the end. America was set up for her to defy that pressure. Even in the '20s, by women against men ... well, you know as a woman .... But you're lucky not to be a woman in 1927. VIA is all about that. Paula always said that as a woman, she never wanted to be alive at any earlier period in history. And by the way, she died a year ago, June 10th, of cancer. That's why I had to retire. We'd been here since 1970 and we needed to get away from the blizzards so we moved to Palo Alto, but we had to design the ecstatic death for her, the last moment of her life. She wanted to end her life on her own terms. It is such a VIA moment, how you end your life. Death with dignity and all of that. So she had cancer, but we were able to manage her pain through meds so she's fully conscious and awake before she slipped into an oblivion. She might have lived another two or three weeks in pain or unconscious, but she was a nurse for twenty years and she saw people dying, her expression was, "wired up like a fruitcake." And she'd say, "I don't want to die that way. I want to die ecstatically." That's what she was saying thirty years ago when she was a nurse. So we had to deliver on that thing I had been saying to VIA students all those years. Paula and I worked very hard to design how she was going to end her life. I have pictures of her that whole last month. She had broken her hip, but in all the pictures, she is smiling. She was ecstatic. She was worried about me, you know in every marriage one goes first, but I told her, "That I will be okay, just like I'll let death wash over you," and she smiled that whole last month with a broken hip in a hospital bed in our living room ...wow, she memorized all of Shakespeare's sonnets, all of Yeats's poetry, you know, when she was healthy. So that last morning before she ended her life, we read three Shakespeare sonnets, and she's clear as a bell. She's asking me questions about the phrases. "Read that phrase again." And this was the way she died. She was fully Paula, making the choice, the autonomous choice, that we were living the VIA moment. VIA's whole life design, not just your four years at Salve but it's how do you design the last frame of the movie so you're ecstatic at that moment. What are your options? Not everybody wants to do it the way she did it, but you want to be making that choice yourself, whatever it is.

Allyse: Going off on a completely different note...

Allyse: Yeah, that's fine. Before we started the interview process, we had to read the Tobin sisters' book about Salve.<sup>17</sup> And in the reading we read that in the 70s you took several trips to Great Britain with classes.

Dr. Hersh: Oh, that's in there?

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<sup>17</sup> Twin sisters, Sister Mary Jean Tobin, RSM and Sister Eloise Tobin, RSM. Sister Mary Jean was one of Salve's founding English professors. Sister Eloise taught Philosophy and Religious Studies. Together, they wrote, *With Courage and Compassion: A Reflection on the History of Salve Regina University in the Light of the Spirit Which Engendered and Sustained It* (1993).

Allyse: Yes. I just want to know about that.

Dr. Hersh: Yeah, three trips in the 70s when there were no trips.

Allyse: Yes, so just tell me about those.

Dr. Hersh: Oh my God, those were great.

Allyse: Like what did you do? how did you choose what courses to teach? Where did you go?

Dr. Hersh: Well you see, there was no International Studies program really at that time, for traveling abroad, so we worked with a guy named Joe Monahan and I did these courses with Glenn Giuttari who taught in the Music Department. He's a harpsichord maker now. He was the first person I met at Salve.

Allyse: That sounds like a fun job.

Dr. Hersh: We did three of them and they were to Ireland and England. The best one was in 1977; it was a three week thing in January. We had long breaks in January. And it was on the Arthurian legends. And so I got Sir Geoffrey Ashe, who was a high flying British scholar on Arthurian subjects and he had gotten an archaeologist to do digs. So what we would do was read Malory<sup>18</sup> and different Arthurian legends from Wolfram von Eschenbach and Bach in German. You know, 11th Century stuff. And we would go to the spots where the events in the story take place. Where Excalibur comes up out of the Black Pond. We would stand by the pond and we would read from Malory and then Geoffrey Ashe would talk to us about the archaeological finds that they had made there from the British Dark Ages and what they were learning about the historicity of the myth, of the legends. It was after the Romans left and that sort of opening, where the Celts and the Anglo-Saxons were vying for power, but the Roman Empire was gone so ... oh God, that was just wonderful.

Allyse: A bit more academic than Monty Python,<sup>19</sup> huh?

Dr. Hersh: Oh I love Monty Python! Yeah, I could have showed that movie if they'd ...

Allyse: Yeah, the movie came out around that time.

Dr. Hersh: Yeah, but now it's hard because of Monty Python, it's hard to go back and see these things seriously. Monty Python did it so well. Better than Malory \*\*laughter\*\*

Allyse: We're getting to the wrapping up point, so is there anything else you want to share, like a favorite Salve memory? Anything you feel should go in the archives about your Salve experience?

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<sup>18</sup> Sir Thomas Malory, author of *Le Morte d'Arthur*

<sup>19</sup> A reference to the film, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975)

Dr. Hersh: Well, I can tell you what popped into my mind. Oh God, there's so many things. I'm thinking of funny things for some reason.

Allyse: I would love to hear some funny things.

Dr. Hersh: Here's a crazy one **\*\*laughter\*\*** I'm teaching Asian Philosophy ... this was early on. This is like 1972 or something. I've got like thirty students in the room and it was an Asian Philosophy course and it's the final exam. We'd been talking about Zen Buddhism. I had taken them up ... there's a Zen monastery up in north Rhode Island. It used to be in Coventry I think.<sup>20</sup> Somewhere up there, I can't remember where it is. There was a very high Korean Zen master who was in charge of this place. He was the advisor to the president of South Korea. Zen Buddhist master, and they regarded him as a living Buddha, this guy. Anyway, I had taken my students up there. They had participated in Zen meditation and seen the other Zen students there meditating. In this style of meditation, I don't know how much you know about it, but the Rōshi is the teacher. So the students are doing wall gazing meditation. They're sitting on cushions and they're staring at a point on the wall for hours. So you have to stay alert. That means you can't slump. If you do this,<sup>21</sup> the Rōshi goes behind them with a long stick and if he sees them slumping a little bit, he taps gently on their shoulder and they go like this and they bend over, and he whaps them on the back. And it's loud. The loudness of it wakes up the others. They call them love taps or something like that. So he didn't hit my students, but he did hit his students, but they knew what it was. Anyways, my students are in the final exam, so I got robes and dressed like the Rōshi. I tied the little Japanese headband around my head and I got a Rōshi stick and it was just a pointer, like a wooden pointer in my classroom. I came in the back door of O'Hare, they didn't see me so I came in and I whapped the desk as hard as I can and they jump up and they look around and they see me and they're sort of laughing at me. I say, "No cheating. You get a 'love tap' if you cheat." And they're looking at me like just give us the exam and then one of them is pointing like this. He's pointing up at the blackboard and as I'm saying "No cheating," on the blackboard are all my notes from the last class, from the review session for the final exam! All the answers are up on the board! So much for being the wise old man, teacher.

Allyse: Oh, but you totally planned that, though. Just go with it.

Dr. Hersh: Oh I wish I could say that. Stuff like that is ... that's what I miss. That's what you remember, those human moments.

Allyse: Alright. So we're at 48 minutes so a little...under an hour so that's good.

Dr. Hersh: Anything else you need?

Allyse: If you have anything you want to share, you can. If not, we're good.

Dr. Hersh: No. For me, I look at Salve as like a really good marriage. I told Sister Jane<sup>22</sup> when I left that when I came to Salve, it seemed to me that Salve was all these nuns and I grew up

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<sup>20</sup> Most likely referring to the Providence Zen Center in Cumberland, Rhode Island

<sup>21</sup> Dr. Hersh slumps in his chair

<sup>22</sup> Sister Jane Gerety, RSM, has been Salve Regina University's President from 2009 to the present day

Protestant, Presbyterian. No nuns. I was agnostic, atheist by the time I got here. So nuns were like magical to me and I saw Salve as like a big nun, as like a mother to me. I felt about this big. But as the years went by, the university itself felt more like a sister or a sibling. There were men. There weren't men when I first came. It seemed like a sibling in our mid career. And then as I got older, the students seem to get younger as you get older, the university itself, I'd seen it go through all of these changes: from going almost bankrupt to this wonderful thing that it is now and to have been a part of that is such an honor. So I felt as I was leaving like the old grandfather or something and I'm leaving this child and it's nice to see people taking care of it. But wow, what a charmed life to teach in castles over cliffs on the Atlantic about dreams. Whoa, I mean, that's a job, right? So it was the best thing that could ever happen. Just one last thing. I was always going to be a Presbyterian minister. I was at Oxford and I had a tutor, and it changed my life. I was sitting like this, but in an Oxford room so it was spectacular old architecture, Middle Ages stuff. I'm reading him a paper on Shelley or something, it was on Romantic poetry, and I remember this guy's name even, Anthony Knowles. He was my tutor and the Oxford style is the student reads the ten page paper, the tutor stops, asks questions, interrupts, makes corrections as you read it. And I'm in the middle of reading this paper, I was a junior at DePauw University, reading about Shelley or something, and he stopped and he looked at me and he said, "Wow, read that again." I read it again and he had a moment like I told you I had with Katherine Fish. He said, "I never looked at it that way." I suddenly had the rush of teaching and I'm teaching a teacher! And it's like electric fire going back and forth. Plato writes about it. And then I saw he had this beautiful tea set. We're having tea in this beautiful room and there's this electricity of new ideas in this spectacular architecture and I thought this has got to be the best job in the world. I'm looking out of the corner of my eye at this guy and thinking why doesn't everybody do this job? He's working now, that's his job! That sounded so good to me. So I said, "To hell with Presbyterian minister, I'm going to teach." It took me a couple of years to make the final decision. It was the middle of Vietnam, so I was in the middle of Princeton Seminary, still thinking I was going to be a Presbyterian minister, but I stayed there three days. Like I rose again from the dead **\*\*laughter\*\***. I realized I can't do this. I'm an agnostic. I went back to Indiana and studied philosophy. That's how I got to that point and then thank God I found Salve, because Salve was the perfect marriage for me, for somebody with my personality and skill sets. The students were right for whatever this is I am. It was really, really good.