



THE FROMM INSTITUTE  
FOR LIFELONG LEARNING  
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

# FROMM FOCUS

The Newsletter of the Fromm Institute

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## A SPECIAL EXPRESS YOURSELF FROM PROF. MANFRED WOLF

*Author and Fromm Institute faculty member, Prof. Manfred Wolf shared some written pieces in our first Fromm Focus this Fall. The staff received many compliments about Prof. Wolf's writing, and we have asked him to share two more articles for this fourth issue of the newsletter. Below you'll find his preface which introduces the two pieces he has submitted. The following pages contain those writings. As always, if you wish to submit to Express Yourself, please email Scott Moules in the Fromm Institute office - [moules@usfca.edu](mailto:moules@usfca.edu) or [fromm@usfca.edu](mailto:fromm@usfca.edu).*

**EXPRESS YOURSELF**



### PREFACE

*By Manfred Wolf*

My thanks to all of you who have written me in response to my first set off columns.

In this second set, two pieces on education — not really a subject I write about a lot, but these days such odd things are happening in that world that I can't help but be intrigued, or, more likely, thoroughly annoyed.

Shortly after I wrote "An Age of Conformity," I came across an article in The Atlantic, "The Coddling of the American Mind." It mentions an article by a Harvard professor who cites some law students asking not to be taught rape law because it upset them, one student even requesting the word "violate" not be used in any context.

Another article called "I'm a Liberal Professor, and My Liberal Students Terrify Me" was published pseudonymously, a fact that speaks volumes.

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My second column, "Advice to my Grandson About Going to College," was an attempt on my part to have my oldest grandson avoid a few crucial mistakes and impart some rapid-fire wisdom to him. This was a doomed effort, because he never read the column. Nor was it read by my other grandson a few years later. Both times, I also forwarded it to some grandmothers I knew, who liked the advice and were going to send it to their grandchildren. To my knowledge, those grandchildren never read it either.

But I take great comfort from its continuing popularity with a fair number of grandmothers.



## AN AGE OF CONFORMITY

*Manfred Wolf*

A few months ago a serious proposal was made to a number of publishers to label some textbooks as presenting “dangerous ideas.” The reasoning seemed to be that students needed a warning about them, much as people these days are warned to shield their children from disturbing images in the news.

This put me in mind of my first academic job interview in the early Fifties. The Department Chairwoman who hired me stressed that in Freshman English classes we were not only supposed to teach our students to write clearly but also to “expose” them to “dangerous ideas.” Our students, she said puffing at her cigarette, need to be made less “comfortable.” This was said with a knowing smile.

I was very young but understood perfectly what she meant. Unusual ideas, unorthodox ideas, non-conformist ideas — for instance, that other cultures might have values different from ours! That morality could be of our own making rather than society’s! That sex before marriage might be good for the maturing individual! That political dissent could be positive — civil disobedience, Thoreau, Gandhi!

These non-conformist ideas weren’t spectacularly against the grain, but certainly they tried to be. In the Fifties, we solemnly set ourselves against “society,” which we saw as unthinking and docile in those placid “Eisenhower Years.” If we could impart a mildly skeptical attitude to our students, we would’ve done them a huge favor. It was, we all affirmed, “An Age of Conformity.”

Now back to our own time. A young colleague at an Ivy League university recently told me of a student, who had great difficulty with “upsetting” facts and ideas, and needed to be excused from class when these arose. Her dean had asked my colleague to make an “accommodation” for the student.

I questioned her closely. If she said in class that World War One was the bloodiest conflict in human history, would her student want to leave the classroom? And for how long? Did the word alone create the image, or only if she were graphic in her description?

Tired of my interrogation, she finally said, “I’m just letting him decide. If he needs to be excused, fine. No different from a stomach ache.”

I mused about this some more. While bloody scenes aren’t the same as “dangerous” ideas, aren’t we somehow teaching students the wrong thing? Instead of shielding them from unpleasant facts, difficult concepts, contrarian thinking, shouldn’t we be explaining them as lucidly as possible and require students to judge those ideas on their merits?

And what is meant by “dangerous” anyway? Is an idea outside the mainstream dangerous? Are only conventional ideas acceptable?

If the Nobel laureate V.S. Naipaul seems occasionally to defend colonialism, must you close the book? Or should you try to follow his thinking, observe the intricacies of his settings and insights — and then accept or reject them, as you see fit?

Must we guarantee students the right never to be offended?

If so, we are now enforcing conformity with the same intensity we once taught “non-conformity” in the much-derided Nineteen Fifties.



## ADVICE TO MY GRANDSON ABOUT GOING TO COLLEGE

*Manfred Wolf*

Some of this advice about how to navigate college that I used to give to my students at San Francisco State, or the University of California, Berkeley, or even the University of Helsinki. While these three institutions differed from one another, they had much in common. All offered a number of courses from which students had to choose. Those student choices ended up being crucially important.

So here goes.

It doesn't matter so much what you study, as long as you feel you're being constantly challenged and stimulated. These days I'd prefer you to study science, because I feel — sadly, after a lifetime spent teaching the humanities — that my field has been taken over by jargon-mongers, by academics who reduce literature to semi-political babble, pointless “theorizing,” and obscure philosophizing. But if you study humanities anyway, there'll still be teachers unaffected by this fashion. Same goes for the so called soft sciences, e.g., psychology or sociology.

I also urge you to choose two fields, not one. The American college is flexible enough to permit that. Major in physics, minor in political science. Or major in environmentalism and minor in business. The combination will be interesting — and make you more employable.

But how do you choose courses, especially the ones not required by a major, or a pattern of concentration, or specialization? That may be your most important decision. As I see it, it's your job to begin by sitting in on as many classes as possible. If a teacher is stimulating in the first couple of days, chances are he or she will remain so for the rest of the term. I realize some universities discourage this sort of “shopping,” but you'll just have to find a way around it. If you must, pretend to have wandered in by accident. Once you appeal to them to be admitted to their class, say to these professors that you were interested in their approach (and be prepared to tell them why).

Whether you're at Harvard or a less prestigious state university, the proportion of good teachers to poor ones will be about the same. I have heard, reliably, of brilliant teaching at unsung two-year institutions. Trust your judgment. People who tell you something new, who bring their subject to life, who make the time pass quickly, who do not get side-tracked into irrelevancies — those are the ones for you.

Above all, avoid teachers who talk excessively about themselves at the expense of their subject or who're imbued with the fads and fashions of our time. This is inevitably the mark of a shallow mind, or of boredom with their own specialty. You can easily imagine that in another ten years they'll preach whatever ideas obtained then, without even remembering what they said or believed ten years before.

And, finally, do remember that college means much more than courses or teachers — it means friends, friends with enthusiasms and knowledge and passions. The old all-night bull sessions may be gone, but in some form they continue. Those friendships flourish in the benign, tolerant atmosphere of the American college, which for all its flaws and deficiencies is still the envy of the world. Not only are our best minds here, but both the hopefulness and creativity of American culture have found an expression on the campus — and that will almost certainly make the college years among your very best.

Manfred Wolf is the author of “*Survival in Paradise.*”

FOR NEWS FROM YOUR STUDENT ASSOCIATION PLEASE VISIT <https://www.frommfisa.org/>

The Fromm Institute Student Association's Diversity Task Force is reminding you of their work on diversity. For those of you who may have missed it, here's the information again. To reach FISA directly, please email them at [frommfisa@gmail.com](mailto:frommfisa@gmail.com). or through the contact emails below.

## THE DIVERSITY TASKFORCE - CALLING ALL FROMMIES!

*By Maxine Einhorn on behalf of the Diversity Taskforce*

Irene Minabe, Hector Esparza and Linda Marks introduced our Diversity Taskforce to you in Fromm Focus #1 and explained the purpose of the group.

“Increasing the diversity at Fromm of both faculty and students will provide new perspectives and opinions from a broader sector of the community that will enrich the Fromm experience.”

Part of our strategy has been to draw up a list of organizations to contact and to that end we have set up a database of contacts. However, we do know that sending brochures or emails to an organization may not yield results. The most effective strategy is through personal contacts. Word of mouth always works the best and can give us access to an organization through their meetings, boards, newsletters, networks and of course coveted email listservs.

We also know effective outreach needs to be targeted. Our courses are academic and college-level courses, not hands-on arts and crafts, so although classes do not require former qualifications, our students are fairly academic. Professional organizations as well as nonprofits are ideal.

What organizations for seniors do you belong to? What organizations serve communities of color or students from diverse communities? Which of our courses would speak to them? What do we need to be offering? Let us know.

Speak up and out.

Please contact:

**Irene Minabe** at [iminabe@hotmail.com](mailto:iminabe@hotmail.com)

**Linda Marks** at [lindamarkssf2@gmail.com](mailto:lindamarkssf2@gmail.com)

**Maxine Einhorn** at [maxine\\_einhorn@hotmail.com](mailto:maxine_einhorn@hotmail.com)

## POETRY FOR A LOCKDOWN

Fromm Institute members **Sally McNulty** and **Kathy Gilbert** share recent poetry in our *Poetry for a Lockdown* column. If you would like to share your poetry/prose poems, which you've written during our current stay-at-home orders, please submit your work to **Scott Moules** either at [moules@usfca.edu](mailto:moules@usfca.edu) or [fromm@usfca.edu](mailto:fromm@usfca.edu).

### *Saving Grandma*

*by Sally McNulty*

That face.  
That face on ...  
FaceTime.

Peachy cheeks,  
Blameless blue eyes  
Moist, earnest lips.

Light brown bangs tumble  
As you sit in concentration  
On my screen.

Two plus three equals?  
Eight takeaway five is?  
What is an equation?

Eh. Uh. Oo.  
We learn the vowels.  
Together.

I was at sixes and sevens.  
Lassitude no more.  
I've become a kindergarten teacher!

From March to June  
Your parents working  
My new job lifts me up.

Oh little boy  
You're a reader now.  
Welcome to first grade.

# POETRY FOR A LOCKDOWN

## PIED PIPER ODE

By Kathy Gilbert

i.

I heard Abby Lincoln singing on the radio

When all the guests are gone yah gotta pay the piper who played your song

Her distinctive voice phrasing

Certain of the ow sound as central pain, final g voiced hard certain ending

Because this is also about death

Yah gotta pay the band That played your tune You danced to all night when you give a party

Give a party, make a party, have a party

different places, different languages, all party, all party to, all members, all of us

ii.

SF piper wears multi-colored clothes a 1909 painting by Maxfield Parrish at the Palace Hotel

Post-earthquake when rats were certainly running in the ruins plague blamed on Chinese

iii.

Children of Hamelin

Rat infestation, plague, refusing to pay the piper who returns to lure the children leaving only

three- the lame one who couldn't run fast enough to follow, the deaf one who couldn't hear

the tune and the blind child who couldn't see the way.

did they dance to death these children in a hallucinatory trance brought on by spoiled grain

like tripping on LSD or were they recruited to settle lands east or north Pomerania or Poland?

were they dreamers these children ?



# GET TECH HELP FROM ANGELINA MIRAMONTES

My name is **Angelina Miramontes** and I am the Fall 2020 Fromm Gerontology Scholarship Recipient. I'm currently a Senior in Biology with a minor in Gerontology. I'm from San Diego, CA and it's also where I am currently for this semester. I love spending my free time painting and drawing (I recently got into digital artwork too). I would love to chat more with you all during my Tech Assist Hours – Tues: 12-2pm, Wed: 3-4 pm, Thurs: 12-2 pm. Feel free to reach me by email for an appointment at: [admiramontes@dons.usfca.edu](mailto:admiramontes@dons.usfca.edu). I can help with practicing Zoom, Apps, Microsoft Word or if you just want to talk (about anything), I'll be here!

Angelina Miramontes

B.S. Candidate, Biology University of San Francisco

Minor in Gerontology



## A REBROADCAST OF LYNNE KAUFMAN'S PLAY "WHO KILLED SYLVIA PLATH"

*"Who Killed Sylvia Plath" written by Lynne Kaufman,  
performed by Lorri Holt*

**Marsh Theatre Website, Sunday, Oct. 11 at 4:30-5:30pm**  
Free.

### SYNOPSIS

Poet Sylvia Plath returns to her burial place in West Yorkshire, England to view the third replacement of her tombstone. The previous ones have been defaced by feminists who chiseled off her married name, claiming it was her husband, Ted Hughes, who caused Sylvia's death. Did he? Was her suicide at 30 a good career move? Would she do it again? And what does it have to do with us?

To view the performance click the link below:

[https://themarsh.org/shows\\_and\\_events/marshstream/misf-performer-lynne-kaufman/](https://themarsh.org/shows_and_events/marshstream/misf-performer-lynne-kaufman/)