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Kanyakrit Vongkiatkajorn
Wesleyan University

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Interview Three with Arthur “Jerry” Wensinger by Kanyakrit “Yu” Vongkiatkajorn, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut, 2012.

[This interview was conducted primarily in Professor Wensinger’s car as he was driving Ms. Vongkiatkajorn back to campus from his home in Higganum. It begins in his house.]

KANYAKRIT VONGKIATKOJORN: So do you think you could imagine yourself not being a professor?

ARTHUR “JERRY” WENSINGER: What I would have done if I hadn’t been a professor? Well, I think I would have gone into art history, but that’s not answering your question at all, because then I would have also been a professor. I think that I would not have made a very good businessman. My father was, and most of my family are. I’m not interested in surgery too much. But that’s a good question.

What would I have done? I used to be somewhat religious, but I’m not at all orthodox. I was brought up as an Episcopalian, but I don’t think I’d have been a very good church person because I’m not a devoted believer. I would think that environmental law would be a very interesting thing to study. But all the details that would go into that? I don’t think so. I would loved to have been just very rich, and collect and write things, but that’s not profiting the world very much. It’s not good to say that you’re a born teacher; I don’t want to say that at all. I guess I wouldn’t have minded being a farmer.

Vongkiatkajorn: Hm.

Wensinger: Or somebody who grew things. But I think probably the real answer is: I’d like to be an architect. I think that’s probably the closest. Yeah, how about me sticking with that, architect. I'm very interested in modern architecture, but there's nothing around here at all that has to do with modern architecture. You know who Frank Lloyd Wright was, an American architect? Okay. He was one of my first loves, as it were, when I was very young; unusually young, I think, when I was maybe eight or nine. And when I began being interested in books, I bought a couple of books about him. Interestingly enough, Wesleyan was the first institution of higher learning that gave Frank Lloyd Wright an honorary degree.

Vongkiatkajorn: Oh.

Wensinger: But first I'm going to try to kill that nasty fly. Oh, where did it go?

Vongkiatkajorn: Look past the olive oil bottles, on the window pane. Do you see it?

Wensinger: Oh, the window. I can't get in there. Horrible things! I hope the Thai religion doesn't honor the fly, does it?

Vongkiatkajorn: No.

Wensinger: I don't think anything does! [Laughs] The fly is the devil. You know that: *The Lord of the Flies*—have you had to read that?

Vongkiatkajorn: No, actually.

Wensinger: The Lord of the Flies is the devil.

Wensinger: Okay. And I am going to take my bag in to the kitchen, and you have to take a look at what I have to say there. Architect, yeah, go on.

Vongkiatkajorn: Oh.

Wensinger: You're welcome. These silly poppies, they just—they want to grow there. They just decided that they're going to be happy there. They must be suicidal, because they grow there, and they get killed immediately. This one has been waiting until warm weather to open up, and it's about to do it.

Vongkiatkajorn: Mm.

Wensinger: I've learned something again, that if you trim lilacs at the wrong time, there will be no more lilacs next year. So those are things that I didn't trim back. It's only there, and I had trimmed all the tops of those. That's it.

Wensinger: You have a class at one?

Vongkiatkajorn: Mm-hm.

Wensinger: Have you a favorite friend at Wesleyan? Of any gender?

Vongkiatkajorn: I don't know. Maybe.

Wensinger: I mean, are you—you're sociable? Or you stick to yourself, or what?

Vongkiatkajorn: I'm somewhat sociable.

Wensinger: You're pretty sociable?

Vongkiatkajorn: Yeah.

Wensinger: You a party girl?

Vongkiatkajorn: No. A little bit, like everyone.

[Interviewer and Interviewee enter car and drive to Middletown.]

Vongkiatkajorn: So maybe we could talk a bit more about your time at Wesleyan, and maybe some of your later years?

Wensinger: My time at Wesleyan, the later years.

Vongkiatkajorn: Last time, we talked a lot about the late sixties and the seventies.

Wensinger: Well, the late fifties, that would have been sort of my heyday. I came in '55, so those are my first years. And I think I mentioned that the huge difference came suddenly when we decided that we were going to be co-ed. That changed things. I think I spoke quite a bit about my feelings of that. But basically, on balance, it's a fine idea. And it was inevitable anyhow.

And I told you about the fact that I had been on most of the committees, and that the committee that I liked the best was the so-called advisory committee to the president. Most committees, I feel, are just sit around, and you talk, and you make plans and everybody agrees, and then very little happens, usually. But I like committees—maybe I should have been a businessman, or a politician. No, the only committees that count are those where you really see that something is going to happen, and that you know will have a real tangible result. And it's getting rather hot in here.

Vongkiatkajorn: Maybe we could open a window?

Wensinger: Good idea.

So I liked being on the advisory committee to the president. That was in the seventies, early eighties mostly. When you passed judgment on your peers, in a way, or your younger peers (well, the younger people weren't your peers), and decided on tenure issues, it was a very important thing. And I don't know that that's done in the same way today. The changes, of course, are the loss of power of the faculty at Wesleyan, and the extraordinary burgeoning of the administration staff—not the academic staff, but the administration. Well, read my article. I say quite a bit about that.

Vongkiatkajorn: Okay.

Wensinger: I say it is in my mind, recently, more since I've retired than even before. We have graduated from being Wesleyan University to Wesleyan, Incorporated. And I'm beginning to see very little reason why we shouldn't be taxed. I read this morning that Brown University is now voluntarily paying taxes to the city of Providence. I think they have a slightly guilty feeling that they're actually making money. Universities are not devised, incorporated, to make money. This place does, and of course most of it goes into good things. For a while, some of it was going illicitly into certain pockets. Probably before you got here, or perhaps it was settled when you were a freshman. There was a money advisor here, and he was dishonest. The temptation to do that wouldn't have existed when I was here. We had one treasurer. The idea that he was dishonest just never crossed anybody's mind.

But people are beginning to confuse the academic reason for the existence of the university with its being a—I don't know; it's the depth of the commitment to academic concerns that bothers me, the emphasis now on entertainment being a justified or legitimate academic pursuit. And I told you in my old curmudgeonly way that, when I first came here, I couldn't dream of the idea of a major in films. I've slightly changed my mind on that, and I will grant that fine cinematography is a legitimate academic subject. But not sitting in a room with three-hundred people, looking at a movie, and then pretending to talk about it. That escapes me.

Vongkiatkajorn: Okay.

Wensinger: My best friend, locally, Helen, lives near here; I'll drive you past her house. She feels pretty much the same way, too. There is a Latin phrase: *Mens sana in corpore sano*—a healthy mind depends also on a healthy body. I believe in that. I'm all for athletics, definitely. I don't believe in what's ever killing all our trees off. I don't believe in that.

Vongkiatkajorn: I understand.

Wensinger: I can tell you one thing, it's graduation time soon; I got an email yesterday from the president's office, giving me the names of three academics here who are going to be given the Binswanger Prize for excellence in teaching. And they're all fine. But almost never is anybody in the arts and literature given that, because they teach little courses, and they depend on small seminars, and individual tutorials and so forth; they're not the great popular teachers with vast audiences who seem to receive that award. I'm not speaking out of jealously at all; I know I was a perfectly good teacher. But people like me who never had so many students so that we were in the headlines all the time—well, that has nothing to do, it seems to me, with the importance of education.

In fact, the best students, the best times I ever had, and where I think I learned the most, was in small groups or individual tutoring—well, that's the reason that the college system was invented. So I think that the threat of education becoming entertainment is a major threat to serious education.

I've been skeptical for many years about the necessity for every young man or every young woman in the United States, to go to college. I think that thousands, tens of thousands, aren't cut out to go to college. They don't want to be in college too much.

I think education is a one-on-one thing, the old John Dewey idea of a student, a teacher, and a log in the woods where they can sit together and talk. That's a romanticized idea of one-on-one education. You can learn a lot from a really expert lecturer. The enemies of that theory say we can get all of that online anyhow. All I have to do is send in one of their people and tape it, tape the whole thing, and nobody has to go to class. The atmosphere of where you *are* is what counts. After you leave here, you'll look back at the physical experience of having been on this campus, actually being in a room, seeing the real skin and the real blood—as the real essence of education, the value of the teacher.

I think it's the end of the old German nineteenth-century notion of education being huge lecture halls, with students obediently sitting there, taking down every word the so-called great teacher has to say, and then memorizing it, and then regurgitating it on the examinations. And if it's pretty close to what the teacher had been telling you, then you get an A.

Unless, in rare instances, there's a real argument—a counter argument, saying: "I had this great teacher for years, and he was all wrong.

And I discovered something else that I think is truer." Or, "I met somebody else down at the bar, or on a steamship. Taught me more in a couple of days than I got out of a class for a whole semester." Wesleyan had very, very few really big courses when I first came here. Very few. Thirty people in a class was unusual, except in the second division courses, not so much in the sciences, which should also be relatively small. But in political science, history, sociology, psychology—that's where you get the great big courses. That's what people are interested in now, these days. Have you had psychology?

Vongkiatkajorn: I took one class.

Wensinger: Was it huge class?

Vongkiatkajorn: No, really small.

Wensinger: Well, then you probably got something out of it. It's now getting very expensive, of course, for an institution to have their top staff teaching tiny courses. So that's another dilemma. Maybe the teachers that I didn't particularly like so much, were those who are evidently too pleased by their own performances. And you can see what I'm talking about, I think, by their body language, by the fact that they may interrupt, or that they are impatient with their students, or the way they don't like to be interrupted. I believe that one of the most important ingredients in a really great teacher's performance is happiness—happiness at being interrupted, having hands shoot up, and having to defend what they just said.

Places like Wesleyan do not have an obligatory retirement age. I believe more and more that there ought to be kind of a warning by the time you're mid-sixties, saying: "Be very careful, if you think you are good enough to continue teaching here full-time and have earned your tenure." I was taught that it was an insult to have reviews of tenure programmed into a college, but I think that could be done. Come on. If a person is still teaching when he's, let's say, seventy-two to seventy-five, I think there ought to be a good sit-down to talk about that. It's mostly for financial reasons, because a tenured person cannot be told to retire. The good places will urge people to retire. Although in many cases, of course, there are such magnificent teachers that they certainly can continue teaching until they're 102, if they can do it. On the other hand, some faculty members are culpable and sometimes quite unaware of the fact that they're being very repetitive, and are really not teaching very well. That's happened.

What else has changed? I don't know that the quality of education at Wesleyan is what it was in the fifties, sixties and into the seventies. And that goes hand in hand, I would say, with the development of what I would have called extracurricular pursuits being legitimized in the form of major programs. I still cannot see ballet or dance as a legitimate subject, unless the program includes a great deal of reading and a great deal of writing, and a great deal of philosophizing. We've had some very bright dance teachers here, and they taught in other fields as well. But we're not an arts school. I can see art history, absolutely, as a legitimate major. I wonder if just drawing and painting by itself, a program whose requirements are easily met—I wonder about that as a viable major subject. I'm very old fashioned in that regard. Mathematics is one of the great things. I see that as probably the greatest of the majors, along with the major sciences. History—there's never any question with history, because you cannot entertain people with history, by reading books at them. This is hard for a young person to take, but I regret the tendency on the part of some faculty to overpraise the youth, as if they were at least as bright as their teachers.

Vongkiatkajorn: That's interesting.

Wensinger: Potentially, of course they are. They've probably got better brains because they've had more exercise and the right foods and the right medicines. They are probably far healthier than a lot of people. But to convince your students that they really don't have to go to a graduate school, they're already so prepared, so bright, and so forth, is a disservice, I think, to a lot of young people who then get swollen heads and think, "Oh my God! I didn't know I was so wonderful." Flattery will get you everywhere these days. Biology is a wonderful subject, when well taught—so is physics. The hard pursuits are the ones that I think may offer the best, even if the undergraduates don't like their teachers.

I'm all for very hard grading. I think for the first years I taught here, I never thought of giving anybody an A-plus. Then I did, but in my approximately forty years of active teaching here, I can't think that I gave more than five A-pluses. And I gave very few As, and lots of Cs. They called it the gentleman's C, because this was a young gentleman's school at the time. And that meant you were a very fine, average guy. Now Cs, I think, are used as a kind of threat.

Vongkiatkajorn: No, definitely.

Wensinger: I got a C? Oh, my God! I have to shoot myself.

Vongkiatkajorn: But you don't want to get a C. That's very bad.

Wensinger: Is it true? Did you ever get a C?

Vongkiatkajorn: No.

Wensinger: I got lots of Cs when I was an undergraduate. I don't think I ever got a D, but by the time I graduated from Dartmouth I was the number one person in my class. You know, to get an A was fantastic. And they say, oh, well, that's just the domineering school.... Where are you going?

Vongkiatkajorn: Right now?

Wensinger: Yeah, right now.

Vongkiatkajorn: Olin Library.

Wensinger: Oh good. I'm going to park over there, too, because I have two books I have to take back.

Vongkiatkajorn: Okay, great.

Wensinger: And I'll walk you right in there. The library is wonderful, and so gentle with faculty. I've had this book out for two years.

Vongkiatkajorn: [Laughs]

Wensinger: And they keep saying, "Will you please bring it back?" So I called up, "I'm very sorry. Did somebody want it?" "No, but you've had it for so long, we're worried about it."

Vongkiatkajorn: Oh, gosh. What book is this?

Wensinger: It's a book by a man named Linklater. It's the study of the life of Sir Montague Compton Mackenzie, whose wife was a close friend of, guess who? Norman Douglas.

Vongkiatkajorn: Ah.

Wensinger: It's a nice book. So now, I'll have to look for it. Do you collect books yet?

Vongkiatkajorn: No.

Wensinger: Well, when you do, and you probably will, there's a website, called A-B-E; American Book Something, that lists second-hand books. And you just put a title in there and sometimes a thousand or more copies come up. It's wonderful fun, if you're curious about a particular book. I could have been a librarian, I guess. But no, I wouldn't have wanted to be head librarian.

Do you own many books yourself?

Vongkiatkajorn: Sort of; not as many as you.

Wensinger: No, but I mean, do you rely on Kindle and these other book Nook things? I can’t stand them.

Vongkiatkajorn: No, I like reading books.

Wensinger: One of the best things that’s happened on this campus in a long time is the Wasch Center for Retired Faculty. That’s a fantastic thing! We have good talks, some wonderful talks—and a couple of losers.

[Car is parked at Wesleyan]

Vongkiatkajorn: Thank you for your time today.

Wensinger: Thank you for all our work and interest. It’s been great!

[End of Interview]