Interview One with Professor Robert Rosenbaum and Marjorie Daltry Rosenbaum by Maddie Neufeld at Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut, April 17, 2012.

MADDIE NEUFELD: Could you start by telling me about your childhood? Such as, where you grew up, and what your neighborhood was like.

ROBERT ROSENBAUM: When I was very small, our family lived on a small farm in Bloomfield, Connecticut, which at that time was really a farming community—whereas now it’s kind of a semi-affluent bedroom suburb of Hartford. My maternal grandparents lived there on an adjoining small dairy farm. In fact, my mother grew up working that farm when she wasn’t going to school. And my father, who was also a mathematician like me, taught in the town of Milford, which is between New Haven and Bridgeport. It was a long commute in those days from Bloomfield to Milford; 40, 50 miles in a Model-T Ford. I lived there until our house burned down when I was between five and six years old, when we moved to Milford, where, as I’ve said, my father was teaching—meaning it was a lot easier for him to travel. I started school in Bloomfield.

It was an old one-room school, taught by the wife of a neighboring farmer. It was the same school and the same teacher that my mother had gone to as a young woman. After a year at that one-room school, I went to a larger public school in Bloomfield, and then we moved to Milford, as I say.

I don’t have much more to say about the Bloomfield days. Milford had a winter population of maybe four or five thousand and a summer population of perhaps twelve to fifteen thousand, because it’s on Long Island Sound and kind of a semi-summer resort.

Where would you like me to go from there?
Neufeld: Maybe you could talk a bit about your educational experiences growing up—from elementary to high school, and on to college.

R. Rosenbaum: Well, it’s as though it took the family a long time to move from Bloomfield to Milford, and I didn’t get to start school in Milford until the third grade, as a matter of fact. I guess I never went to the second grade anywhere. So I had my third grade through 12th grade in Milford Grammar School and Milford High School. And I remember all my teachers, starting with Miss O’Connor, who was the Latin teacher as well as the vice-principal of the school—I guess I’m starting in high school when I say that. I really enjoyed those years and was a good student, a dutiful student. I also did things like play sandlot baseball with my friends. My closest friend from those days, Jimmy Rose, died just this year, and virtually all of my classmates are gone by now.

We have a fairly big family. I don’t mean just my father and mother and my sister, but my grandparents and my aunts and uncles and whatnot. So in addition to the ordinary school stuff and the after school affairs, nobody worried about whether we had time or plans for recreation. That was up to us to just do, and there was plenty of opportunity there.

I was best in my studies in math and science, but I also had Miss Valentine as an English teacher, and really learned to write under her tutelage. I remember fondly what she instilled in me, so that I was a fairly good writer and reader. Not as good as my cousins who were in the same school. But it was a cheerful growing-up period. I was the school reporter for the town paper, reporting on things that happened at school.
Neufeld: What led you to choose the college that you attended, and what was your undergraduate experience like?

R. Rosenbaum: Because of the fact that I didn’t start school, really, ’til the third grade, and I skipped a grade or two along the way, I graduated from high school at age 16, and went directly to Yale—which is where my father had gone. I didn’t even think of applying anywhere else. My parents were a little bit apprehensive of my going far away—it’s nine miles from Milford to New Haven—but it all worked out fine. I lived at home the first year.

This was really the depths of the Great Depression, and the family income was very limited. Costs were low, too, however; annual tuition at Yale was $450. My room—I roomed with a cousin all through my second to senior year at Yale—$200 a year for a room charge, and $265 a year for board. And I earned some money in college during summers, doing tutoring. I was not successful, really, in athletics, but I played college sports. Yale was divided into residential colleges, and the club sports were organized on the college basis. So I played tennis and learned to play squash, which became a lifelong sport for me. I’ve done well in squash in subsequent years.

MARJORIE ROSENBAUM: Tell her how well. I think it’s nice.

R. Rosenbaum: Also, I earned a good share of my college expenses by grading homework papers for a couple of my professors in mathematics.

What should I say next?

Neufeld: Maybe talk a bit about your social experiences as an undergraduate. What the student body population was like, and friendships that you made?
R. Rosenbaum: Yale was just a men’s school at that time, as was the norm, really. There weren’t very many coeducational institutions in the Northeast—New England and so on. There were women’s schools like Smith and Mount Holyoke and so on, but mostly men’s schools—at least until you got as far west as Ohio, where there were more coeducational state schools. I had a very, very limited social life. I was young for my position in school, and was small of stature, and was not really socially well-adjusted. I made some friends, who became lifelong friends.

One of them was David Swift, who was a classmate, and who taught at Wesleyan for many years, until his death. He was a very close friend. And others, like my cousins, who were also students at Yale in the same class, or a year or two ahead of me, or a year or two behind me. I lived on my campus in my sophomore, junior, and senior years, but I would go home on weekends rather than stay on campus for social life, or for attending football games and whatnot.

This was partly a matter of our having a close family life, and partly that I wasn’t really all that well organized socially, so that I had, as I say, a non-academic experience limited to family life, more than would be the norm—and surely much more so than my sons, when they went to college.

Neufeld: Can you tell about your trajectory into postgraduate studies, and what led you to pursue advanced degrees, and what you did after you graduated?

R. Rosenbaum: Well, I majored in mathematics, and there were very few requirements that would be called distribution requirements these days. You could more or less concentrate in your field and related fields. Let’s see, as a
freshman at Yale, I took analytic geometry and calculus and chemistry, and freshman English, and ancient—no, I didn’t take ancient history. Classical civilization, I guess. And French. In high school, in addition to Miss O’Connor in Latin, I had Miss Dodd in French. I don’t know whether the name of Senator Christopher Dodd in Connecticut is a name you’ve run into, perhaps. Well that was the uncle of my French teacher. And in subsequent years, I had, as a sophomore, two math classes and a year of German, and the classical civilization I already have mentioned. In the junior year, two math courses and a second-year German and a physics. As a senior, two math courses, or actually, these were one math course and one math seminar, and an astronomy course. But as you see, there was nothing that I took in the way of economics, philosophy—

M.D. Rosenbaum: Music.

R. Rosenbaum: Well, I did audit—with some of my friends—a course taught by Bruce Simons, who played the piano, and part of the attraction of the course was that he played for the class frequently. But this was definitely on the side, not really what I now think of as a broad undergraduate experience. However, all was not lost, as far as I was concerned. My cousin and roommate majored in economics, and so since we ate in Pearson College and there were faculty who had suites of rooms in the college and ate in the same place, I was exposed to some of his economics faculty, and probably I learned as much as though I had taken one or two economics courses. But I don’t underestimate the loss that there was in not being exposed to other things, like music as Marjorie says, that in retrospect I wish that I had had more of in my undergraduate experience.
Neufeld: And then what did you decide to do after graduating from Yale?

R. Rosenbaum: Well, the logical thing to do—what else was there to do?—was to go the graduate school. And actually, my roommate—who had a much broader experience than I—was a Rhodes scholar, so I applied for a Henry fellowship and spent a year at St. John’s College, Cambridge, in England, after graduating from Yale. I returned to Yale after that one-year experience, which was really a wonderful broadening. Came back to Yale for further graduate work in mathematics. I got my PhD then, and I saw that Reed College in Portland, Oregon, had a one-year teaching fellowship, which sounded very attractive to me. The idea was that there were to be four fellows, of whom I turned out to be one, who worked with the senior math professor at Reed, to talk about what characterized a suitable curriculum in mathematics for a small liberal arts college that couldn’t afford to offer a terribly broad curriculum, but they wanted to offer something that was appropriate. Since I was always very much interested in teaching, and—did I mention that I did tutoring as an undergraduate?—I applied and was successful in getting this teaching fellowship at Reed. That one year was one of the high points of my career. That is, I learned a lot at Yale, and I learned a lot in England, but perhaps most from the other three fellows in this program, and the senior mathematician at Reed, who became a mentor to me for the rest of his life.

After that year at Reed, two of the four fellows—Louise Johnson, who came from Colorado, and I—were invited to stay on as faculty members at Reed. It turned out that I stayed at Reed not just the one year of the fellowship, but for fourteen years, and thought of myself, by then, as being a
Pacific Northwesterner until, unexpectedly, I was invited to Wesleyan, and so our family trekked back to Connecticut, which had lot of attractions including my parents and my sister still living in Connecticut. Still living in Connecticut.

So the rest of the experience, virtually with no breaks, has been at Wesleyan.

Neufeld: You said you were recruited by Wesleyan—they solicited your employment rather than you reaching out to them?

R. Rosenbaum: Yes.

Neufeld: Can you tell about the hiring process? Who you interviewed with, what kind of questions were asked, what you remember of that?

R. Rosenbaum: Well, the phrase “hiring process” is too big and formal a term for what Vic Butterfield, as President of Wesleyan, used to do. When I grew up in Connecticut, I never thought much about Wesleyan, but my impression of it was as a small, unpretentious, not very well-endowed school, surely a poor relation of Amherst and Williams. It was being pulled up by its bootstraps by Vic Butterfield, the President who started at Wesleyan as director of admissions. He said he would not think of his presidency as requiring him to raise money; that was going to be the job of the Board of Trustees. And he was also not very much interested in big new buildings. Building a great faculty is what he really went after, and he had an unusual talent for searching out excellent prospects.
He used to travel through the United States a good deal, from university to university, making friends with leading faculty members at Cornell, where he himself had gone to school; Harvard, where he had done graduate work, and so on—and always trying to find recommendations for promising young people just getting started. It was an auspicious time for him to do that, right after the end of World War II, when there were lots of new young people in graduate school who he would have the pleasure of being introduced to by mentors. He enjoyed chatting with them, and he’d always keep track of their development. And he really had an eye for promising teacher-scholars, individuals who were both real researchers, scholars, but also really good teachers. And some of these names you may know.

I think of Dick Winslow in music. As Marjorie mentioned, Dick himself was a Wesleyan alumnus, so it was natural in a way for him to return here after going to the Juilliard School. Carl Schorske in intellectual history, probably one of the leading intellectual historians of the 20th century. David McAllister, who was an anthropologist, interested in studying American Indians—also musically inclined. The three that I’ve just mentioned became our closest friends when we came to Wesleyan. They’d been here for a few years before I was invited to come. But there were lots of others Vic had recruited as well.

I think my sort of denigrating view of Wesleyan as not having all that much to offer may have had some validity in the period when I came to Wesleyan, but it surely became a very much more exciting place, intellectually, in all ways, as a result of Vic Butterfield’s recruiting of young faculty.
He hired some senior people, but the ones whom I’ve mentioned, and I could mention many others as well, were just beginning their careers when Vic spotted them and brought them to Middletown for careers which I think they enjoyed very much. Carl Schorske didn’t stay very many years after I came. He was recruited by the University of California at Berkeley, and then by Princeton, and completed his teaching faculty career at Princeton. But lots of the others did stay, as I did. I assumed, leaving Reed to come back to the Northeast, that I would probably stay, but I didn’t have much of a picture of what this would mean in terms of my life here, and for Louise Johnson—a colleague of mine at Reed—who became my wife and mother of our three children. She died after a longish period here. Marjorie was already in the Wesleyan community, and we’ve been married now 30-odd years, I guess.

M.D. Rosenbaum: None of them were odd.

Neufeld: [Laughs]

R. Rosenbaum: But it isn’t all that common—usually, if you get started in a favorable academic environment and stay there for some time, you make close friends and colleagues during that period. But if you come to an institution in mid-life—I wasn’t all that old, but I’d been teaching for fourteen years at Reed—and it isn’t—

M.D. Rosenbaum: With a break, which I think you ought to acknowledge—that there was a war.

R. Rosenbaum: Yeah.
M.D. Rosenbaum: And you were in it.

R. Rosenbaum: That’s right. I was an aerial navigator during World War II. And I’ve also had a couple of visiting appointments—one at Swarthmore College, which I found an extremely congenial place, and one at the University of Massachusetts, a different type of institution.

But my three major teaching experiences, at Reed and Swarthmore and Wesleyan—with Wesleyan being by far the longest period, and then fourteen years at Reed, reasonably so, and Swarthmore, quite short—produced lasting friendships. At Wesleyan, all of the people like Carl Schorske and Dick Winslow and Dave McAllister became very, very close friends, and I considered myself extraordinarily lucky to have been able to make that kind of friendship—plural, friendships—when I really hadn’t done it right from the start.

Neufeld: So you taught at Reed, and Swarthmore, and UMass Amherst, and Wesleyan—and what would you say distinguishes Wesleyan as an institution? What was the culture of the school like? In other words, what caused you to stay at Wesleyan for the remainder of your career?

R. Rosenbaum: Actually, I think of Reed and Swarthmore and Wesleyan as being very similar, in ways that are important to me, at least. And you’re asking a question that I have spoken about frequently since I came to Wesleyan, and which involves issues that mean a lot to me. When I came to Wesleyan, I thought of the Wesleyan ambience and atmosphere as being not as satisfying as what I had experienced at both Reed and Swarthmore—that is, there was
a good deal of leaving Middletown to see the girls in Northampton and South Hadley and Vassar, and so on. The party weekends when they brought the girls here—in which drinking was, if not the main activity, it was at least a fairly important one.

And as contrasted, let’s say, with both Reed and Swarthmore, where there was a lot of intellectual discussion outside of class, and where students put their formal athletics and recreation in an appropriately subordinate position relative to what went on in the main tent at those colleges. The “main tent” is what the president of Reed described as the location of the principal activities there. As a result of the influence of the new, young faculty cadre recruited by Butterfield, the Wesleyan atmosphere was becoming much more attractive from my point of view than it previously had been. And that’s the reason I think of the new-ish Wesleyan and Reed and Swarthmore all in the same breath.

Neufeld: And that was largely due to President Butterfield’s efforts?

R. Rosenbaum: I would say so. Marjorie has had a lot of Wesleyan experience, and she may modify this.

M.D. Rosenbaum: No, I’ll just echo it. But Vic was that kind of a wonderful part of my experience here, too, and I began as a Wesleyan wife. My first husband died many years ago, but I got to know the undergraduate world and the faculty world as a faculty wife, and I saw what was happening to the people who were teaching. And then a lovely thing happened—women were invited to be students at Wesleyan, and everything changed. And when I came into a teaching position at Wesleyan, it was the same time as they were
welcoming girls, so I had a wonderful kind of set of students who were different already. At the same time, everybody was so afraid that, God, it would all fall apart because the girls came.

And all the first awards went to the women, of course!

Neufeld: What did you teach at Wesleyan?

M.D. Rosenbaum: English. And I was the director of teacher preparation. When we had one.

Neufeld: I see.

M.D. Rosenbaum: As they’re thinking of having another.

Neufeld: Yes. So, Professor Rosenbaum, could you tell me about some of your experiences in the classroom with Wesleyan students? How you found the students to be, and what was the nature of the classes that you taught?

R. Rosenbaum: Well, when I came here there were quite a few math majors, but many of them were not what I would call serious students. They majored in math because it was an undemanding major, and they didn’t have to work all that hard at it. On the whole, they came to Wesleyan with much stronger school backgrounds—public school and independent school backgrounds—than Reed students did, for example. But by the time that they graduated, the Reed students had become really mature thinkers, and professionals, and so on—not necessarily in math.
I had lots of students who were majors in the social sciences, behavioral sciences, life sciences, and so on. I still get letters from majors who are doctors, MDs, who took math either because they thought that would help them to get into med school or because they enjoyed it. They were able students, but relatively few of them were thinking of a professional life in mathematics, or indeed in academia. I don’t think of my success as being measured in terms of the number of mathematicians that I’ve helped to turn out, but rather in the number of people whom I’ve helped to think of mathematics as part of a liberal education, in which they’ll all be considering the roles of disciplines as helping them develop into mature people who are helping make this a better world.

M.D. Rosenbaum: And doing it because they love it.

R. Rosenbaum: Yes. And now I think that the Wesleyan students are much more mature intellectually, and that they have a strong sense of what they could do as mature people in our culture. They are stronger than was the case when I came in 1953.

Neufeld: This might seem like an over-simple question, but what role do you think mathematics plays specifically? Or, why is it important to include mathematics in a liberal arts education?

R. Rosenbaum: Well, you have to realize that when you ask me that, I’m a prejudiced person who places a greater weight on that discipline than I do on some others. And despite my having exposed myself to so few such disciplines as an undergraduate myself, I do realize that the interplay of math
and the humanities, the arts and philosophy, and so on—that these things enrich one’s life.

One thing that I didn’t mention is that I have done a great deal of team teaching in my years at Wesleyan, some with colleagues in the math department, some with people from English, some with Marjorie, some—more than with anybody else—with Jon Barlow of the music department.

Neufeld: What kind of courses did you co-teach with your wife and Mr. Barlow?

R. Rosenbaum: Well, with Marjorie and with Jon Barlow, we have taught “Patterns and Chaos,” contrasting the patterns which mathematicians search for, enjoy when they find, embellish and enrich, and those things that defy pattern-making, which may be thought of as chaotic.

I’ve actually taught “Patterns and Chaos” with Jon Barlow, with Joe Reed of the English department, with the biologist who’s died, I’ve forgotten his name. Anyhow, with a good many different people, all of whom like the notion of comparing and contrasting the features which characterize mathematics, or English, or music, or whatever, and seeing how people’s lives are modified by this expanded way of thinking.

Neufeld: On that note, did you feel there was a tension between the sciences and the humanities at Wesleyan? And if so, how was that gap bridged?

R. Rosenbaum: Actually, whatever tensions there were, were really pretty fruitful, rather than debilitating.

M.D. Rosenbaum: And continue to be.
R. Rosenbaum: One of the reactions, which I think of as a satisfying reaction, is that of saying: “Gee, I’ve never thought of it that way before.” If it’s in a class that I’m teaching, a class entitled “An Introduction to Mathematical Thought,” and I have people in there who aren’t all that expert in mathematics technically, but they like the ideas that are relatively unfamiliar to them to start with—their own math courses in school didn’t expose them to this sort of thing—and if they are led to think, “Gee, I’d never thought of it that way before,” or if a colleague on the faculty has the same reaction in a discussion that we have and says something like: “Gee, that’s not the way that a historian would approach that,” and I may say, “Well, that’s not the way I thought of it before, either”—all of this is so satisfying an experience.

If someone says, “Well, this is something new that permits me to put the pieces together in a way that makes me have a more integral notion of the world that I’m living in,” you have a great sense of accomplishment, of satisfaction. Marjorie and I have taught classes of teachers at Hartford Public High School, for example. We found that it wasn’t just that they hadn’t understood anything about math before, they didn’t understand all that much about music before, either. And when they, in essence, said, “This exposes us to a way of looking at the world that is novel and rewarding,” that’s when the teacher begins to have fun.

Neufeld: Can you think of any specific anecdotes or poignant moments in your professorship, or special things that happened in the classroom?

R. Rosenbaum: Well, not an anecdote quite in the sharp sense that you are perhaps thinking, but as you doubtless know, the geometry developed by the Greeks
in the time of Euclid was a feature of classical learning that has remained part of not just Western learning, but the universal learning since then. There is, however, a subject called “non-Euclidian geometry,” and I have rather frequently given my students an exposure to it. In all their past education, they never would have believed that there was something that would be called non-Euclidian geometry. That’s not an anecdote, but it’s an example of what I’m trying to talk about.

Neufeld: Do you remember when you received tenure at Wesleyan? How did it feel and what was that process like?

R. Rosenbaum: Well, I had tenure when I came here, so I can’t help much with that.

Neufeld: Ah. So do you remember the experiences of other professors trying to get tenure?

R. Rosenbaum: Yes, when I started teaching at Reed, I didn’t even know anything about tenure, and I wasn’t thinking in the long range at all. I discovered that I had tenure at Wesleyan when I had already accepted the offer that Vic Butterfield had orally and informally made. I hadn’t known that it was going to involve tenure. I was in the happy position of not having to worry about such things, and I know that for many people, it is a very stressful question—am I going to get tenure or not?

M.D. Rosenbaum: I don’t think you ever thought about that as much as you did about the math itself, and I think that was the whole thing. You were so
involved in loving what you were teaching, what you were learning, what you were sharing—I don’t think you were worried about your work.

R. Rosenbaum: No. It was also a question as to what your teaching load might be. Well, the word “load” implies something that is onerous, to some extent, and I just thought that you do this as much as you have time to do, and that’s it. I don’t know whether you want to call it a stupid approach or a fortunate approach, but I’ve been very, very lucky in not having had problems of that sort.

M.D. Rosenbaum: He had another kind of a problem, which he’s worked out rather successfully. That is that he knew how to do other things in the running of a university, and so there were all these other things that he was asked to do, and did do, and he held all these other posts.

Neufeld: Right, I read about that. Maybe we’ll save that for next time.

M.D. Rosenbaum: But the point is he eventually got back to math—which is where he wanted to be.

Neufeld: So perhaps we’ll have one last question, and then we’ll wrap up.

R. Rosenbaum: Okay.

Neufeld: I understand that you played a key role in bringing advanced studies to Wesleyan. Can you talk about the part you played, and why you felt it was
an important move for Wesleyan to take, and how that might have affected the undergraduate education?

R. Rosenbaum: Well, many of us in the science division—and that would include math, experimental psychology, and so on—felt, along about 1960 roughly, that the way formal education was structured, it was really desirable to incorporate opportunities for faculty to work with young colleagues. That would include some undergraduates who are really intellectually mature, some graduate students, and some post-doctoral students before they get involved in a regular teaching appointment. We hoped to create a team approach to the structure of learning that would permit them to work together as—well, the phrase at Reed was “comrades of the quest.”

That sounds a little pretentious, perhaps, but it is a genuine notion, and without such opportunities to have graduate students and post-doctoral associates with whom to interact, we felt—I’m speaking about a substantial number of faculty members in the science division —there wouldn’t be an opportunity for growth for faculty members without such stimulation.

And there were a considerable number of Wesleyan faculty members who didn’t find that they needed the presence of graduate students and young post-doctoral associates for their own continued growth, but they appreciated, they said, that the situation in the sciences might be different from the story in their own disciplines. And so we set up the Science Development Committee to try to move in this direction, even though Vic Butterfield was very leery of the negative aspects associated with the lack of breadth of a good deal of research.
As a matter of fact, however, if you look at my own undergraduate experience, there was a lack of breadth, as well—and the requirement of breadth didn’t ensure that one had the desired breadth.

Anyhow, Vic used the phrase “advanced learning” to imply that it wasn’t necessarily associated with working for a doctorate, a PhD, or something of that sort. But he did—and Wesleyan was financially able to implement this—permit the development of PhD programs in math and biology and chemistry and physics, and along the way, world music as one of these, because teachers like Dave McAllister and Bob Brown, and Dick Winslow, thought that the culture of their scholarship called for PhD programs in what they were interested in. And along with this, they appointed a Dean of the Sciences to help get these programs started.

Initially, many people were concerned that—and I was, too—that the emphasis on the research, which characterizes what’s meant by a PhD program, might undercut the liberal spirit which one could enjoy here. But several Wesleyan faculty, like Dick Ohmann of the English Department, John McGuire of the Religion Department, thought that one could infuse into the humanities and the arts the spirit of breadth and liberal learning which should characterize mathematics and physics as well.

And we now are, I believe, in a pretty good situation with respect to that concern about over-specialization. Not perfect, but I think we’re in a pretty good shape.

Neufeld: Okay, should we stop there for today?

R. Rosenbaum: Yes.

[End of Interview]