

CU Home



SEARCH

# NEWS & UPDATES

Home » Bob Pollack '61 Addresses the 50th Reunion Class

## Bob Pollack '61 Addresses the 50th Reunion Class

*Bob Pollack served as the 11th Dean of Columbia College from 1982–89 and has never left the faculty of the College. He has been a professor of biological sciences at Columbia since 1978, director of the Earth Institute's Center for the Study of Science and Religion since 1999 and is director of the University Seminars. Following is his address to his classmates, who were celebrating their 50th reunion, at their dinner on June 3 in Low Rotunda:*

Let me begin by thanking the Deans of the College, the folks in the Office of Alumni Affairs and the officers of our class, for setting up this intense and gratifying 50th reunion.

And with that, let me next ask that we all pause for a moment to remember those guys from the Class of '61 who were lost in service to others over the years by one or another insufficiency of good fortune. The classmate I mourn this time of the year is Vinnie Chiarello '61, who came from Brooklyn's Poly Prep, left law school to enlist in the Air Force, and went missing on a mission in an unarmed C47 over Laos in 1966.

It's in his memory that I joined the faculty here who have worked diligently in the past few months to help bring the NROTC program back to Columbia, so that men and women who wish to serve our country in that honored way may once again do so.

I promise you, this short talk is not my idea of a walk in the park — 15 minutes to reflect on 50 years, more than 40 of them spent here on campus. That's about 20 seconds per year. There is only one way in which my being up here makes sense: that ancient and honorable Honor Society, the Sachems, did it.

I was not chosen to be a Sachem. My response to seeing that golden ring with the green squiggles on it was to fashion fake Sachem rings from a brass pipe on a lathe in the Pupin Radiation Lab shop and give them to a group of friends who like me had not been picked. One of these was Mike Selkin '61, '75 GSAS, who just passed away in Maine.

Whoever came soon afterward to my door in Hartley had greater powers than I knew. He said that if I did not recover and destroy those rings I would never get and hold a real job in America.

I did neither, and he was right.

Instead, I have more or less always been here at Columbia. First, as a student; then — with the amazing good fortune of having met and married Amy and become a parent of our great daughter Marya '87, '92 PH — as a professor of biological sciences; then as the 11th Dean of the Faculty of Columbia College; then as the founding director of the Center for the Study of Science and Religion; then as the President of the group of alumni who raised the funds for the Kraft Center; then as an adjunct member of the faculties of Union Theological Seminary and the Department of Religion; then as a professor of the Earth Institute; and then, most recently, as the Director of the University Seminars.

Who knows what amazing jobs might have come my way instead, if I had only destroyed those rings.

But I digress; back to our first days here. I am carrying the 1957 *Columbia Blue Book*, the official student guide. It is Volume 49. The inside front cover has an advertisement for the John Jay Dining Hall, and one for a store called Morningside Liquors.

The editors write, in their "introduction to the Men of the Class of 1961," that "It is with confidence that we say that your next four years will be among the finest of your life."

Freshman week events opened with a "Play Day," with Barnard Freshmen [yes, *freshmen*, that's what it says] on the Barnard lawn.

The 1957–58 social schedule then followed: a Freshman Faculty Tea, a Kick-off Dance, the annual Soph-Frosh Rush, the All-College Drag-dance [you could not make that up], the Yule Log party, the *Varsity Show* and the

### Posted In

parents (107)
fellowships (90)
college (139)
alumni (126)

### Archive

November, 2012 (1)
October, 2012 (11)
September, 2012 (5)
August, 2012 (1)
July, 2012 (1)
June, 2012 (2)
May, 2012 (4)
April, 2012 (5)
March, 2012 (6)
February, 2012 (6)
January, 2012 (7)
December, 2011 (8)
November, 2011 (6)
October, 2011 (5)
September, 2011 (5)
August, 2011 (2)
July, 2011 (1)
June, 2011 (2)
May, 2011 (5)
April, 2011 (6)
March, 2011 (8)
February, 2011 (8)
January, 2011 (2)
December, 2010 (4)
November, 2010 (2)
October, 2010 (2)
September, 2010 (6)
August, 2010 (2)
July, 2010 (1)
June, 2010 (1)
May, 2010 (4)
April, 2010 (10)
March, 2010 (8)
February, 2010 (6)

## Spring Carnival.

The closing article is “The College expands — 1957.” It is not about the size of the entering class. It is about the demise of the gatekeeper’s cottage at Broadway and 114 St., replaced by the sleek brickwork of the \$4 million Ferris Booth Hall. You have probably noticed that Ferris Booth Hall has come and gone since then; it is remembered by a plaque you can walk on as you go into Lerner Hall.

I was not particularly well suited to be one of the “Men of the Class of 1961.” Just the opposite: I had to grow into this place, and I barely made it.

I preparing this talk I recovered my transcript from the Registrar’s office. It was an exciting moment to see it in the mail last month. Then I looked at my grades and was somewhat taken aback. I had a lower grade-point average than any of my students here in the past few decades, barely a B-.

Part of that is our age; grade inflation did not set in until the 1970s. But the real reason, I now know, was my own stubborn insistence on remaining a physics major — not out of love of formulaic descriptions of invisible reality, but only because I had received one of the first Regents Science Scholarships made available in response to Sputnik. I thought that meant I had no choice but to study physics.

That innocence, and the need to earn some money even with the scholarship, meant that my real education in science began in the Radiation Lab, where I worked in under the aegis of I.I. Rabi '27 GSAS, in the laboratory of Charles Townes, under the direction of a graduate student named Arno Penzias '62 GSAS.

Not a bad way to learn physics: Rabi was the father of a whole generation of physicists who had begun to make sense of atomic sub-structure, Townes had gotten his Nobel by then for his work on coherent radiation and Penzias subsequently got his for discovering the background radiation of the Big Bang 14.7 billion years earlier.

It was not the Radiation Lab, though, but the Core that redeemed me. I did much better in CC and Humanities, Art Humanities and Colloquium, than I did in physics or math. It was the Core, I now see, that gave me the language and the sensibility that allowed me to find and be found by Amy, an artist. And it was the Core that, after four decades, led me to write three books and now to be working on a fourth, this one a book on evolution built upon Amy’s artwork.

I am sure you have all noticed by now that the University is once again building, and has plans for a doubling of the campus by a northward expansion into Manhattanville. Buildings are a necessity, albeit not a sufficiency for a university. I had been given my start by Richard Neustadt in CC, Bob Belknap in humanities, Jack Beeson in music humanities and Meyer Schapiro '24 in art humanities. That core principle of pure teaching with no research component will not wind up in Manhattanville.

But those courses did in fact build a building of sorts, in me. And I think I build that sort of building in the students I now teach in the Core, in “Frontiers of Science.” So I hope that the building of physical buildings does not unnecessarily inhibit the building of those intellectual buildings by those of us who teach.

My own work beyond teaching now deals with the just the sort of moral dilemma the Core excels in laying out: articulating the consequences of the global paradox of our success as a species.

At present, humans appear wildly successful in evolutionary terms: With a mass comparable to other primates, we have abundance comparable to insects. It is that majestic success of Darwinian Natural Selection — through the emergence in us of mental worlds — which threatens not only our future happiness, but the very survival of many species, not least of which is our own. That paradox has led me to work with Earth Institute colleagues from many disciplines, to develop and articulate an “ethic of enough” that might have a species-wide resonance in time to make a difference.

At three years per minute I have already spoken for more than half the time since we came to campus in 1957. But it is worth reflecting for a moment on midpoint even so. The middle of the 54 years since we arrived in 1957 would be, of course,  $1957 + 27 = 1984$ .

When Orwell wrote his dystopia he picked 1984 by reversing the last two digits of 1948, the year he wrote it, a year that marked the first freezing of the Cold War. Big Brother’s launching of the first orbiting satellites less than a decade later was the impetus for the scholarship that allowed my parents to afford to send me to Columbia. That’s a good lesson: Don’t be too sure you understand the meaning of any event until a few decades go by.

At our midpoint year of 1984 I was Dean of the Faculty of Columbia College, and so saw, and oversaw, a change that was the precise opposite of Orwellian. The Faculty of the College had voted to admit women to Columbia College for the class entering in 1983, so 1984–85 marked the first academic year with all four semesters of the Core Curriculum entirely integrated by gender.

<a href="#">January, 2010 (2)</a>
<a href="#">December, 2009 (1)</a>
<a href="#">November, 2009 (4)</a>
<a href="#">October, 2009 (2)</a>
<a href="#">September, 2009 (3)</a>
<a href="#">August, 2009 (3)</a>
<a href="#">June, 2009 (3)</a>
<a href="#">May, 2009 (3)</a>
<a href="#">April, 2009 (1)</a>
<a href="#">March, 2009 (5)</a>
<a href="#">February, 2009 (7)</a>
<a href="#">January, 2009 (1)</a>
<a href="#">December, 2008 (1)</a>
<a href="#">November, 2008 (5)</a>
<a href="#">October, 2008 (2)</a>
<a href="#">September, 2008 (8)</a>
<a href="#">August, 2008 (2)</a>
<a href="#">June, 2008 (1)</a>
<a href="#">May, 2008 (3)</a>
<a href="#">April, 2008 (4)</a>
<a href="#">March, 2008 (1)</a>

**Media Contact:**

Sydney S. Gross  
 Director of Communications  
 Columbia College  
 (212) 851-0291  
[ssgross@columbia.edu](mailto:ssgross@columbia.edu)

Opening the College to women was by any measure fair, generous, creative, democratic and open-minded. It also meant an immediate increase in the applicant pool. My outside job as Dean was to square this appearance of women on our side of Broadway with Barnard's needs and interests. The curricular burden had been resolved a year earlier. The Barnard faculty had voted not to merge with the College, in large part because they did not wish to become teachers in our Core.

The extracurricular issues were alleviated if not solved, when the Barnard Phys Ed department joined in the emergence of Columbia Women's Athletics, trading the Honey Bear for the Lion.

My inside job as Dean of the Faculty involved fending off pressure from my superiors who wished to use this boon of bright applicants to increase the size of the College. Coeducation elsewhere had meant as much as a doubling of the size of the undergraduate college, but I took it as my charge from the faculty who taught in the Core Curriculum that the small seminars would be lost unless the size of the College was kept from expanding.

Alumni with sons were almost as unhappy at the increased selectivity this policy brought about as alumni with daughters were delighted. It did not take more than a decade for coeducation to become a fact of history among undergrads, who to this day do not believe me when I tell them that when I lived in Hartley the rule was no women above the first floor, not even your mom.

In the 27 years since that hinge swung the College doors open to women students, the University has in fact many times increased the size of the entering class, each time in response to the College's greater selectivity and each time without loss of either the Core or selectivity. That's been the case so far. But I think all of us who care about the Core must remain vigilant. In the words of President Reagan, we need to trust, but verify.

In the early 1990s, soon after I stepped down as Dean, the Faculty of the College was itself dissolved, by merger into one large Faculty of Arts and Sciences. Since then, those of us who teach in the College or General Studies or the School of Arts or the School of International and Public Affairs or the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences have been under the jurisdiction of the Vice President of Arts and Sciences, as have the Deans of those many schools.

This has presented those of us on the Faculty of Arts and Sciences who teach in the College's Core Curriculum with the responsibility for assuring that the Core is properly supported by the entire Faculty of Arts and Sciences. That, more than anything else that fills my days here as a professor, is what I am doing for the College these days.

I have talked enough. Thank you.