



Villanova University

February 2024

Dear Humanities alum,

Welcome to our ninth year of Humanities for Good (H4G), a book club/reading group founded to give Humanities alumni everywhere an occasion to contemplate the good things together and to return to the intellectual conviviality of classrooms gone by. Whether you're gathering with old friends or new, in a bar or in somebody's home, we hope that your H4G conversations re-ignite the questions that fired your mind and have shaped your life since your studies with us at Villanova.

This season's assignment is our annual Fall Humanities Lecture, given last October by D.C. Schindler. As part of our twentieth anniversary celebrations, we welcomed our esteemed former colleague back to Villanova to do what he has always done best in the classroom: draw the audience into high philosophical reflection with major implications for how we move about the world. The trajectory of his lecture, as he notes, is to see how these metaphysical reflections "impact how we live." While he amused everyone with his microwave in the basement story, he challenged us, too, to imagine what it would be like to see things—all things—for what they really are. His central text is a familiar one to you all: Karen Blixen's *Babette's Feast*.

This one is easy to prepare—no reading, just listening! [The lecture, "Wisdom and Wonder: The Power of Symbols and the Inevitable Meaningfulness of Things," can now be found on our YouTube channel.](#) Below you'll find starter questions for your gatherings, should you need them.

Now in the mix are our wonderful class of 2023, who left campus last May determined to stay convivial and keep the intellectual life aflame. Regardless of when you graduated, we hope H4G is an opportunity to meet and connect with kindred spirits who are asking the questions you still want to ask.

Contact me (helena.tomko@villanova.edu) if you'd like me to connect you to an H4G group near you. And when you meet, send us your photos!

On behalf all my colleagues,
Wishing you all good things,
Dr. Helena Tomko



Conversation Starters

Symbol is not allegory. Allegory connects any kind of meaning to an external common sign, such as justice represented as a woman with blind-folded eyes holding a scale. Such a connection is arbitrary; the whole would retain its sense if the eyes of the person holding the scale were wide open. Symbol on the other hand is linked to the external in such a way that it could not be different. The one belongs to the other by some kind of essential and necessary link.

Romano Guardini, *Liturgical Formation*

- (1) Schindler begins by proposing that we have “spiritually accommodated ourselves to a world of mere stuff—a world that is flat, that doesn’t speak to us or grab us.” His example illustrates the point—a child being distracted by the toy that flashes, beeps, and moves vs. the careful attention of the simple toy that draws a child into an encounter with nature and imagination. Does this capture your encounter with the things that surround you? Does this example ring true of your experience of children?
- (2) Do we shape our stuff, or does it shape us?
- (3) Thinking back to the example of *Babette’s Feast* (familiar to anyone who ever took Person or Epiphanies of Beauty), does it ring true to you that we are symbolic animals—and, as Schindler boldly claims, that “all things are symbols”? Asking the question in reverse may be helpful: Can we live *without* symbols?
- (4) Schindler’s presentation of his argument is filled with the exact wisdom and wonder he is advocating—it certainly hasn’t got old for him! “I’m surprised by it every time,” he says of his delight in *Babette’s Feast*. How do we keep growing in wisdom and wonder? How do we avoid slipping into a vision of the world as mere stuff? What tricks and habits have worked for you?