

Courtesy Sterling Ottesen

The participants in the BYU China Teachers Program visit the Great Wall, 1997. Two of the teachers, Don and Joyce Nuttall, take the long climb to the top. The Great Wall stands as a symbol of formidable yet breachable borders, like the cultural differences between the West and China.

The Great Wall

Carol Ottesen

As early as 1929, David O. McKay traveled to China to dedicate that land for the preaching of the gospel. Under an ancient tree in the Forbidden City, he supplicated the Lord to bless this people, who had suffered so much. He asked the Lord to “send to this land broad-minded and intelligent men and women, that upon them might rest the spirit of discernment and power to comprehend the Chinese nature.”¹ In fall 1997, nearly seventy years later, I found myself in China teaching English for a year under the sponsorship of the BYU Kennedy Center for International Studies. We were told that we were on the Lord’s errand but that the boundaries of language, politics, and culture loomed like the ominous Great Wall we had visited the day after we arrived in Beijing. Nearly two thousand miles long, the Wall looms as a monument to Chinese tenacity and innovation as well as the tyranny and isolation they have suffered. After about three months in China, I found this quote from President McKay and only then began to see beyond the wall and realize that enlarging the borders of Zion (D&C 82:14) had mostly to do with crossing elusive personal borders.

But we had been warned. The first week we were taken to the office of Public Security and took an oath that we would not talk about religion or give any kind of literature about religion to any Chinese national. A monitor would be present in each class. We were there to teach English. We had already been told by our BYU sponsors that we should strictly adhere to this warning to avoid jeopardizing the Church’s position in China.

This venue seemed to fit me—no proselyting, no hours or baptisms to count. I was content because this subtle approach had the possibility of inspiring purer motives on my part and promoting some deep self-examination. And I was fairly comfortable in the role of giver but not quite ready to be a gracious receiver and meek learner.

The first day of teaching, I walked through the doorway to Building Eight, with its typical upturned Chinese cornices, and into the dark hallway. My shoes clicked on the cement floor as I looked for my classroom, heart racing, face flushing with some unnamed fear. Here I was in Jinan, China, at the Shandong Medical University to teach English, and I was about to open the door to face fifty Chinese medical students for the first time. I came with the usual apprehensions about Communism and the vague negative notions so prevalent in the media but had tried consciously to go with what I thought was an open mind. The door creaked loudly as I



Building 8, the foreign language building on the campus of Shandong Medical University, Jinan, China, where the Ottesens taught several classes. Dedicated teachers and students were not deterred by the broken windows, lack of heating and air conditioning, and lack of library facilities.

walked in the classroom. Immediately, the entire class arose and began to applaud. At the podium, under a large picture of Deng Xiaopeng, I stood as they continued to clap. I scanned their faces, unfamiliar, yet somehow very like the faces of my American Indian foster children. Perhaps it was

this synapse or maybe the reality that I was so far away from home and such a warm reception was unexpected, but I could barely keep my composure. I had walked on the Great Wall of China just a few days before, and here I was in mainland China looking into the faces of folklore's "starving people in China" that had made me feel guilty about not eating my peas when I was a child. The wall began to fall down; a border was breached.

But other borders needed to be crossed. I kept thinking of President McKay's blessing. With these constraints and borders, what could I do? I figured my best bet was to begin by trying to comprehend the Chinese nature. Discussions in class were not successful at first because the Chinese students were unaccustomed to raising hands or asking questions and they were shy. So having them write was my first ploy to assess their language needs and to learn to "just love them," as was the admonition given us. The short essays poured in from my seven classes. My husband and I sat in the living room of our small apartment, reading essays (usually with our coats and gloves on) and occasionally shared a particularly touching or significant passage.

One graduate student in neurology wrote about his father, describing the paucity of his childhood in a family of seven. He was from a poor peasant home in the country, and the family slept huddled together on a *kang*, a brick bed. He related, "One of the cold nights my father said, 'I want you to know we will support you children in what you want to do. I want you to be men of light and knowledge.'" My student added, "How could he support us—all he had was love and five hungry children? But he gave us more than we imagined." This sensitive, bright student carried all my bags to the train and was the last face I saw as we pulled away from Jinan.

Another student wrote quite daringly:

Thomas Jefferson said to do what you believe is right and I would like to do that. Jefferson believed that conflicting ideas are a source of strength and it is conflict that keeps freedom alive. But many times I think it is no use to go to my classes because I cannot say what I think is true. I think a country can survive only if it allows men to have free ideas. I often dream in bed of these ideas, but my dream has no color. I believe in the "unlimitable freedom of the human mind."

I had a couple of private moments with this student and he asked me, "Do all Americans think all Chinese are communists?" I nodded that they probably do. He put his hand to his forehead with a small groan. Nothing else.

Song Wei* responded to an essay on education:

I have suffered so many unspeakable sorrows and embarrassments because I feel poverty terrible. But poverty of thought is more terrible than living in

*Names have been changed.

poverty. When I was accepted in this university and came from the country to the gate of Shandong Medical University, the guards would not let me in because they thought I was a beggar. So I had to show them proof. I knew I must get an education to rise in the world, to become thoughtful and find out how to eliminate the poverty and suffering of Mother China.

Many told of the famine of the Cultural Revolution—of grandparents who died because they gave all their food to the young, of boiling grass and tree bark for food. One student told a story about her little sister who became very sick. Her parents were sure that if she had some fresh fruit she would get well, so they took all the money they had from a tin cup high on the cupboard and bought three pears. My student, then just five years old, saw the pears sitting there and could not resist and ate one. She said, “When father came home he raged upon me and was about to beat me when he stopped suddenly, tears filling his eyes. When he did this he turned toward the wall. I don’t remember much about the cultural revolution, but I will always remember that pear.”

A woman oncologist described receiving a dress for the Chinese New Year when she was six years old. The dress had to be taken up all over so it would fit. She wore it once a year on the holiday, each successive year letting out yet another seam until she wore it with material added for her high-school graduation.

One doctor was raised by his grandmother and described leaving her to come from the country to medical school: “I climbed into the wooden cart and she gave me some good advice and kissed me goodbye. Then she ran after the cart crying until she could run no longer on her little feet, which had been bound when she was a child. She called my name until I could hear her no more.”

Essay after essay recorded similar stories. Issues of cultural differences began to fade with the discovery of a sensitive (almost sentimental) people who had suffered beyond the American imagination and yet remained, for the most part, amazingly hopeful and courageous.

My husband verbalized our feelings one morning as we walked past the playing field and saw the freshmen students in uniforms marching to commands from a loud speaker. They moved in perfect unity and discipline. They were not unhappy but instead seemed to emanate vigor and purpose. He said, “I hope we never have to go to war against these beautiful people.”

Our students often visited our apartment, sometimes crowding in and sitting in overlapping layers on floor and couch. And we heard more stories, heard Meng Hui play the Chinese flute he taught himself, heard Li Tao play the violin. Liu Jun brought his girlfriend for our approval. Li Mei brought me a piece of cloth handmade by her grandmother. When I protested such a valuable gift, she nearly cried and said, “Please, take it to America and show them the beautiful things Chinese women do. With this

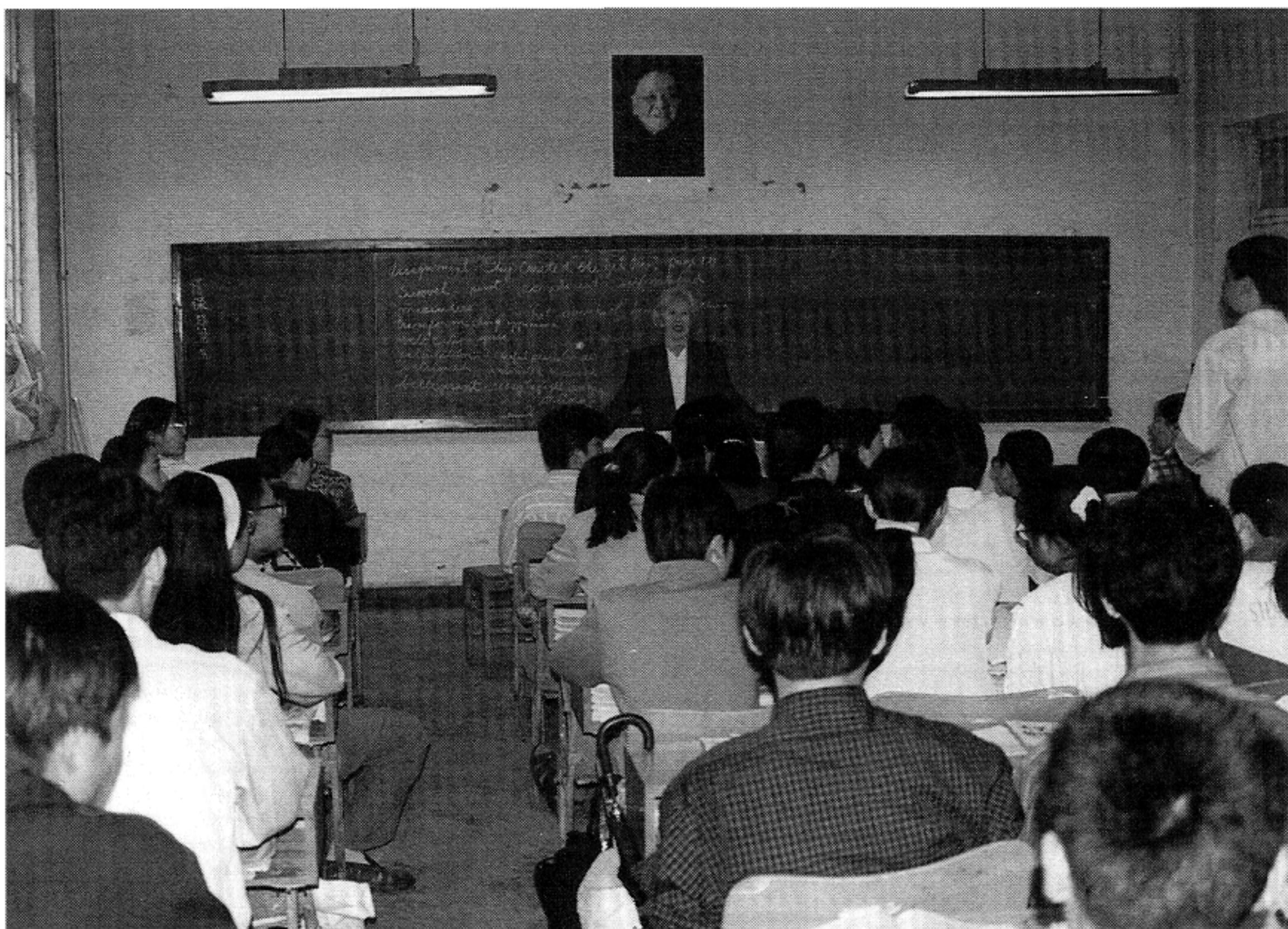


Courtesy Sterling Ottesen

Some of the faculty and staff of Shandong Medical University studied English under Carol and Sterling Ottesen in 1997. At the end of the academic year, the Ottesens invited the class to their apartment. The Chinese made dumplings for the Ottesens, and the Ottesens made applesauce with cinnamon—a new treat—for their students.

gift they will know we are thinking of them.” We were overwhelmed with their generosity and quite unsure why they gave or what they expected. One student gave me his well-worn Mao pin that he said he had worn every day as a child “when Mao was my God. But now he is no longer, so I give you what I once loved as a souvenir of China.” We credited these gifts to our being teachers in a country where they are so revered or to being old and therefore respected or to being guests in their land. But whatever their motives, we began to know their natures, to cross the borders of cultural misunderstanding. Yes, we had come to love them.

Still I felt the presence of *the wall*. How could we help them in their lives? How could we give them the hope, the purpose, some had openly asked for? One morning I woke up with a bad cold. I was tired. A button flipped off my skirt, I felt unprepared for my class, and I was sick of hand washing clothes in the bathtub and drinking bad-tasting water out of a thermos. Besides, I was late. I grudgingly pulled everything together in my briefcase and marched off to class on a run, dabbing at my nose, wondering why I had ever decided to come to China and what good on earth I was



Courtesy Sterling Ottesen

Carol Ottesen teaches English to a class of forty-eight second-year medical students at Shandong Medical University, Jinan, China, in 1996. Over the blackboard hangs a picture of the late Chinese premier Deng Xiaopeng.

doing anyway. As I approached the classroom, I knew I couldn't face the students in this frame of mind. So on the way down the hall, I uttered a quick, desperate prayer that I would be able to give this class what was needed. The class went all right, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Afterward, a group three or four female students approached me. "We've been talking, and we want to ask you a question. We don't understand something. What it is that happens when you walk into our room? It's kind of like a light or like the sun shining in and it happens every time and we want to know what it is." I nearly choked and was glad for the tissue in front of my face. How could this be? I fought a huge lump in my throat and managed to feebly express my thanks and gave them a hug. I so wanted to tell them where the light came from, that I had received a direct gift from Him, the "Father of Lights," to overcome my puny humanness.

Shortly after, the most stark revelation of all came as I read from the book of Ether one evening and saw in neon the most formidable border I needed to cross. Ether has just spoken about weaknesses being given to make us strong and says, "I prayed unto the Lord that he would give unto the Gentiles grace, that they might have charity" (Ether 12:36). Charity, true loving, is not possible for any human without His grace. The only way

I could overcome the pull of worldly tasks and personal pain was to cross the border of humanness into beauty and holiness by putting on the beautiful garment of His grace. The real borders are the walls of our own minds—the fears, the prejudice, the pull of daily concerns, the lack of acknowledgment to Him who can so enlarge us with grace that we have Zion minds, pure and holy. Only by putting myself in a position to receive that grace, only by enlarging my own borders, could I ever expect to be of any real use. But hadn't I known that earlier? I was ashamed to think how often I must relearn, how often an unholy grumpiness gets in my way.

Yan Ling came to our apartment one night pleading, "I have no meaning in my life. I go to school to please my parents. When they die, who will I please? I must have meaning, and I know you have it. Please will you tell me life's purpose?" She had been a frequent visitor, and we knew her well. I took her hands and heard myself say, "Yan Ling, someday you will know. Just remember I love you, and if you like, you may keep seeking." Through tears she protested, "I don't know how." "Something will tell you," I replied. "But that is all I can say."

Often on Sundays we went to the central park of the university for what they call an English corner. The agenda is that we show up and, in a



Courtesy Sterling Ottesen

Medical students gather for a photo at the English corner, a place in a local park where people meet to practice their language skills with native English speakers. Throughout cities in China, such places allow curious people, both students and nonstudents, to meet with Westerners.

matter of sixty seconds, a crowd gathers and begins to ask questions. Our last Sunday in China, a man spoke up aggressively about religion: "We understand that 80 percent of Americans believe in God. How can these smart people be so deceived and believe in something that is simply not true?" I replied that some of the people, including a number of great scientists deduced from the nature of the universe that there had to be a superior mind to create this kind of order—that even this great university had a master builder. He retorted, "But you can't prove these things!" I said that was true and that perhaps there are other ways of knowing. We were a little jittery about religious talk, and we were late for our Sunday meeting with our fellow teachers. So we gathered up our things and began to walk away. While my husband was detained by another student, the questioner ran after me and said quietly so others could not hear, "I want you to know, I don't necessarily believe that there is *not* a God; I just wanted to know how *you* know. How do you know?" We walked quickly toward the gate, where a taxi was waiting for us with the door open. I had no time. What could I say to him? I was torn, as I often was between expediency and attending to that which is most important. But something filled me. I put my hands on his shoulder. "Dear Brother, I sense your seeking heart and want you to know I love you." His eyes began to fill, and he couldn't speak. I was very sure of the consummate grace of that moment.

That day at our sacrament meeting of ten people, I felt the aptness of these words from the lesson: "For I will go before your face. I will be on your right hand and on your left, and my Spirit shall be in your hearts, and mine angels round about you, to bear you up" (D&C 84:88). The more I pushed at the borders of my human limitations, the more amazing were the ways opened to extend His influence.

Breakfast on the run. Carol Ottesen at a street market, Jinan, 1997.



Courtesy Sterling Ottesen

Russell Schweickart, one of the astronauts on Apollo 7, tells of his feelings as he gazed down at the fragile earth:

You look down there and you can't imagine how many borders and boundaries you cross, again and again and again and you don't even see them . . . hundreds of people in the Mideast [are] killing each other over some imaginary line that you're not even aware of. . . . And from where you see it, the thing is a *whole*, and it's so beautiful.²



Courtesy NASA

Because of this new picture of a world with no boundaries, only a dark blue-and-white sphere circling serenely in its orbit, we know even more strongly that borders are of our own making and that if we are to truly become brothers and sisters, we must seek His grace to move into the realm of holiness. Only then may we understand how to enlarge the borders of our love to include not only 1.2 billion Chinese but all our relatives on this small planet.

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1. Clare Middlemiss, *Cherished Experiences from the Writings of President David O. McKay* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 49.
2. Rollo May, *The Cry for Myth* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 298–99.