

1 Francis Koster, interviewed by Carol Quirke at Planting Fields, Oyster Bay, New York on
2 May 28, 2011

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4 Carol Quirke: Can you tell us your name, where you hail from originally, what high school
5 you came from and how you were recruited to Old Westbury?

6 Francis Koster: So to give you my own identification, my name is Francis Koster. I was
7 born and raised in small town called Lakewood, Ohio. I am the oldest of six children. My
8 father was a fireman. Nobody before me in my family had gone beyond high school and
9 most of my family did not have high school diplomas. We were blue collar in a lily-white
10 community on the shores of Lake Erie.

11 I went to St. Edwards High School. I had five brothers and a sister, Catholic
12 upbringing. I went into the service for six months, came out, while I was in the service they
13 said, "You know you really ought to go to college." They put you through testing and stuff.
14 This is the first idea anybody in our family ever had, or anybody said that to them. I did a
15 couple of years of civil engineering and then switched my major to sociology in a co-op
16 program and was in Washington D.C. as a copy boy on the *Washington Post* when I was
17 about 19.

18 The Peace Corps and all of that was just getting started. Some months later I
19 enlisted in the Peace Corps and I was in the fourth group to go overseas. I probably
20 wouldn't be accepted today, but I had been in the military—for whatever reason they took
21 me.

22 I went to East Africa in a country at that point called Tanganyika. I was building
23 roads and bridges, and there was an incident where I had gone to see some Peace Corps
24 nurses—there was a fire while they were delivering some babies—and I rushed in to be
25 helpful and wound up delivering a baby of a Muslim child—a Muslim mother. Which was,
26 in that part of the world, was a death sentence for me because I had violated the modesty of
27 a Muslim woman. I was extricated, by the Peace Corps in a fairly close call along with two
28 Peace Corps nurses, females. And the Peace Corps—it was a big diplomatic scandal. The
29 Peace Corps had to investigate; they called us all to Washington DC. We went through a lot
30 of investigation and so on.

31 I met a woman there named Jane Campbell. Jane was in the hierarchy of the Peace
32 Corps. She conducted parts of this investigation and she ultimately was the one who
33 listened to my side of the story and examined the evidence. Which was pretty clear, the
34 Chinese communists, who were quite active in East Africa at the time, had taken
35 photographs that I took of the mother and the baby that I delivered, smiling. But there
36 were red pinpoints in their eyes from the flash. And they had blown them up and
37 circulated the fact that this Peace Corps person had blinded this Muslim woman and
38 violated her dignity and so on and so forth.

39 It was a big deal diplomatically. So an investigation occurred, and so when I
40 showed that and explained that whole thing to Jane Campbell, and what a heroine the
41 Peace Corps nurse was who was standing there performing a rotation of a fetus inside a
42 female while the fire was around her feet, that I had come in to help out and put it out and

43 so on and so forth. We were exonerated and I was offered the opportunity to go back
44 overseas. I went to Sierra Leone and subsequently finished up my tour.

45 I came back and I wasn't very happy in a traditional school and sent some messages
46 out. And Jane Campbell, the woman who had supported me at the Peace Corps referred me
47 to a guy named Harris Wofford who was the first President here. He was recruiting more
48 mature—not typical—four-year graduate types. There I was with two years of school and
49 some life experience, etc. etc. So I was invited to become part of what were called Student
50 Planners and there were only three or four of us.

51 I arrived here, lived in the stables and was given a job to assist in recruiting and also
52 assist the faculty in planning the curricula that would have allowed for independent study,
53 and what did that mean? What was independent? And what was study? And what was
54 credentialed? And all of that. It was a lively, lively time, really quite esoteric. That was a
55 long-winded answer.

56 Quirke: It sounded as if, just the very little that I read, that even that planning process was
57 extraordinarily contentious. Is that a correct assessment on my part, or what were some of
58 the debates of the planning process?

59 Francis: [5:48] I actually wrote my senior thesis on this topic. The question is: During the
60 planning process was there early vigorous debate or did that surface later? The answer is,
61 it was present right from the get-go. I did my senior thesis on this topic, and what I said
62 then and what I feel today, forty-six years later, is that the state legislature used certain
63 phrases in its enabling legislation which had quite powerful meaning to the students.

64 Which were: students would be admitted to “full partnership” in planning their
65 education, and there were other phrases like that. The definition of “full” and the definition
66 of “partner” was not at all clear and nobody told, for example, the accrediting agencies,
67 which would obviously stand behind the diploma, that the students would have the ability
68 to disregard long-held traditions about who decided what you had to learn, or when you
69 had to learn it, and what sequence, and when you were done. The students, including
70 myself, felt that that was not the faculty’s business. The faculty were right to assess if we
71 had accomplished our learning goals, not their learning goals.

72 And so we, in the early planning days, went through exercises where we would
73 propose learning objectives. They weren’t called that then, that is a different semantic of a
74 different age. To give you an example I was particularly interested in some environmental
75 issues, an interest I have until today. And it wasn’t a very well known thing. Defining what
76 I wanted to study was a study. It was like refining your Ph.d. hypothesis. It takes you
77 months to get that narrowed down. That is what the student planners had to go through to
78 prove to the faculty that they could indeed conceptualize their learning goals. That was on
79 the academic side.

80 On the more bureaucratic side, there are a number of state rules and regulations.
81 For example: dollars per FTE head, number of square foot per student per dorm, number of
82 bathrooms per square foot per floor, number of lumens in the lights, parking regulations,
83 that the faculty wouldn’t be off campus more than “x” days per semester and the stuff that
84 had grown up since the early days of the State University.

85 So the students were saying, “We are here to design our education. You can tell us
86 when we’ve learned this stuff.” The faculty, or some of them, were saying, “Well wait a
87 minute you haven’t taken biology you can’t take ecology or something.” And the
88 bureaucrats were saying, “I don’t understand how you think you’re going to go to the
89 Delaware Water Gap and look at life forms. You have to be in class and in attendance so
90 many contact hours per semester.” So there were different metrics being used to
91 determine whether one was in conformity with the history or the law. The students frankly
92 weren’t aware of the constraint nor their power, and not at all sympathetic to them.

93 Carol: How did that play itself out? You’ve described in light of, it sounds like your own
94 interest with ecology; were there specific battles around which that took place, or was it
95 more generalized anger about this?

96 Francis: The kinds of battles that occurred between the students—and I don’t mean to
97 indicate that the students were a unified block because they absolutely weren’t. One of the
98 major issues was if you read the state legislation, did it mean students plural as a group, or
99 did it mean students as individuals, and it’s unclear. So I read that as, “I am free to come
100 here and decide my own course of study as long as someone with the appropriate
101 credentials says that I’ve learned what I was supposed to learn and I’m out of here.” Other
102 students and other faculty members said, “Well, wait a minute—well, we’re going to ask a
103 group of students of relatively similar characteristics what they’d like to study and then
104 we’ll design something for them.”

105 The women at that point were struggling with the Women’s Movement at that point
106 and so forth, they may have wanted some ability to do that as individuals. The faculty

107 responded with, "Oh, we have a special interest group over here. We'll make up a women's
108 history course. We'll study the following six books and you all have to take it, but before
109 you take that you've got to read this." The debate wasn't just about the rights of students
110 plural. It was a debate about, did it mean individual or plural? From that flows the job
111 description of the faculty. You have to get clear on that right away, and we never did.

112 Carol: You weren't clear on that once the college started, you were a student planner from
113 '66 on? Or from what time?

114 Francis: [11:52] Probably early '68, I have to go back and take a look. It was a year before
115 the campus opened, maybe '67. When I came there wasn't a lot of manpower around, but
116 there was huge pressure from the legislature to get things done. They appropriated money
117 and so on and so forth, so if you could evidence some talent, you got the job.

118 Carol: Can I just ask in terms of the legislature, what's your sense of where that impetus
119 was coming from for them to create this experimental college?

120 Francis [12:35]: I couldn't speak as to what motivated the legislature. I will say —it's now
121 in May of 2011. We just witnessed the so-called Arab Spring, which is when the
122 generationally-based perceptions of what a society should do for its citizens has manifested
123 in the... we had our Arab spring during the sixties and seventies so the youth were
124 clamoring for all kinds of things. So it wouldn't surprise me if some legislatures were
125 saying there might be something to this we need to do something about this, but I can't
126 comment in specific.

127 Carol: Was your attraction to the college primarily that you would be able to develop your
128 own individualized education and I know that might not be the words you used to describe
129 it precisely and did it shift to the politicization that it seems many of the students became
130 quite interested in?

131 Francis: To try to answer the question of what drew me here?

132 Carol: Both what drew you, but it seems as if the college was designed to be experimental
133 but it became experimental politically as well, which perhaps was not the initial impulse,
134 and was it your sense of that as a student planner?

135 Francis: I'm trying to figure out how to repeat the question. I think we have to be careful
136 when we use the word political in this context. I would argue that it was more cultural.
137 That it was playing out in a heated public discourse and occasionally in the ballot box but
138 mostly it wasn't political in the Republican/Democrat, liberal/conservative context.

139 It was segments of the society, which had been disenfranchised one way or
140 another—females, people of color, immigrants and frankly blue-collar people—were
141 claiming the Constitution and the Bill of Rights as theirs too. To that extent it was a lively
142 political discussion. I think the tumult of the time had a lot to do with the fissures in the
143 cultural groundwork.

144 Today we heard from forty or fifty of the first year graduates some of whom had
145 been interviewed in this room. What struck me was there was large reference by the
146 Latino population to what they were going through and forming solidarity as a group and
147 so forth. The same thing was happening within the black community but those were two

148 different movements, they weren't the same thing. For some white kid from Ohio initial
149 impressions were that they were, but they absolutely weren't.

150 Then you had some of our students started a women's center, I remember saying to
151 myself, "I just don't get it, what are they upset about." And I had very long discussions
152 about, "Why do you need this?" Which taught me an immense amount. I've been on the
153 wrong end on a number of tirades justifying why they needed to do what they needed to
154 do, now I'm quite a passionate supporter of that but I wasn't an easy student. It takes a
155 while to shed and to grow. I guess the short answer is that I'm not sure that it was political.
156 I think it was cultural.

157 Carol: Do you remember the names of the women who were involved?

158 Francis: [17:12] I was trying to think it was Pat Sullivan but I don't think it was

159 Carol: Pat Sweeney

160 Francis: Pat Sweeney, Pat Sweeney

161 Carol: Anyone else?

162 Francis [17:20]: Well Deborah Leavy... I got diverted in an earlier statement I was
163 making— three or four women today stood up in their one minute where they're talking
164 about their life since whenever, and they said, "When I got here I was essentially a little
165 white kid from Long Island, seventeen years old and I was terrified." The first one I heard
166 that I knew the personality of the particular individual and I thought, "Well I can see that."
167 Then the second one and the third one and then I thought, "You know, so was I." That was a
168 feeling I had just today, and I thought, "Wow, I was twenty-six years old and I had lived

169 abroad in the jungle and I was terrified. My god, what these people must have been going
170 through.”

171 As we were walking through the grounds during our little break I mentioned to my
172 wife, what must it have been like for someone from 125th Street to come here and look at
173 all this wealth? I remember we had a black student maybe 30-years old, he was a little
174 older than I was, George Robinson, or Robertson. I remember coming in on him one
175 evening, he was a very deep reader, and I asked him where he learned to read and he said,
176 “In jail.” He got to be a good friend and we talked a lot. And I came on him one afternoon
177 and he was weeping. And I sat down to ask him what was—he said, “I’m looking out the
178 window at these beautiful flowers, and nobody in my neighborhood ever saw this.” It was...
179 it was hugely educational.

180 Carol: This is an interest of mine, as a working class student who went to a college, that
181 was not elite-elite, East Coast elite but Midwest elite, that jump was an extraordinary jump
182 for me and I think in some of the discussions there was the assumption that the white
183 students were all middle class. And it seems clear now, we have interviewed two folks
184 including yourself for whom it was not. That is not your background. Do you mind
185 speaking a little bit to the jump from a working-class background to a college like Old
186 Westbury? And if Old Westbury, in a moment—you were calling them cultural divides—
187 but in a moment where there’s a lot of discussion about race and gender, did class fit into
188 this picture at all in any way?

189 Francis: [20:17] The first thing I’d say is middle class is often defined by someone who sees
190 themselves as not having. So if you were sitting here and you saw that they had a car and

191 you didn't, they automatically became middle class. If you didn't have a bicycle the guy
192 with the bicycle— it's a relative hierarchy. Class distinctions didn't really begin to emerge,
193 that I recall, until some of the discussions around the Vietnam War and who was serving in
194 the military and who wasn't. That was the first time that I remember hearing phenomena
195 discussed in class terms.

196 I never even thought much about class, but I do know—this is sort of a funny
197 story—I had a little motor scooter. It was really a tiny itty-bitty motor scooter. It was my
198 transportation and it broke. I was stuck here I didn't have any transportation. Muriel Kaise
199 who worked in the admission office had this old beat-up Peugeot station wagon that had a
200 couple of bad bearings in it. No matter where you went it went: thump, thump, thump.
201 And she drove it all around campus. You could hear it coming from half a mile, thump,
202 thump, thump. Her husband got a job at Newsday I said to her, "Why don't you fix this
203 thing?" And she said, "You know we can't afford it, and I'm just going to junk it. Would you
204 drive it to the junk yard?" And I said, "No, I'll fix it."

205 She gave the car to me; it took me three weeks. I didn't go to class. I pulled it
206 around back of the stables. I jacked it up, put it on cement blocks and figured out how to fix
207 it. Took parts to the shop and said what do you do and so on and so forth. Couple of the
208 guys from building and grounds came over and helped out. And so I had this car up on
209 cement blocks, wheels all off, and behind the dorms. Harris Wofford came by just walking,
210 he had a book in his hands, I remember that. Obviously thinking deeply about something
211 and he stopped and I was on my back, crawling out from underneath this car and he said,
212 "What on earth are you doing?" I said, "I'm fixing the bearings in the car."

213 He sort of squatted down. He tried to see it. So I went under and I showed him,
214 “This is broken, and you...” so on so forth. And he said, “You know, I just never saw
215 anything like this.” I was both enormously proud and aware of something. Both aware that
216 I had something, that I had skills that my dad had taught me. It would be quite common
217 where I grew up— and that he didn’t, but he was a lawyer and he was president of the
218 college. That was an important moment.

219 That was the first time I really—and occasionally the student planners would be
220 invited to go meet with a board member. I remember not being conscious of how I was
221 dressed or conducted myself, but being coached and I remember that. Actually, Harris’ wife
222 was very good about saying, “Oh, I remember my first dinner party and I didn’t know what
223 to do, and until the lady told me that you should hold your thing this way and put your
224 napkin that way, I never knew.” It wasn’t until years later; I thought, “She knew very well
225 she was just teaching me.” You know, a task which my wife still tries to do.

226 Carol: Can you tell me about when there was this divide and the college sort of exploded;
227 you know, Harris Wofford leaves. As someone who had helped to plan the college what did
228 you think about that debate and did you end up graduating from Old Westbury?

229 Francis: I was the first graduate of Old Westbury—graduate number one. The debate
230 raged for a long time, at the beginning as an academic debate. It was a true discussion
231 about what does learning mean? What does teaching mean? What’s the purpose of an
232 education? Who decides who needs to know what? Those are pretty rich questions. What
233 did the state legislature mean? Well, how do you reconcile what this law says with what

234 that law says? For a freshmen, or a young kid to be involved in those when you've got the
235 corporate council sitting in the room.

236 There was a wonderful guy here named Bob Golding, he was, I think the finance guy
237 in the library or something like that. He was a very meticulous and punctilious person and
238 quite humane. The students would say, "Well it says yada, yada, yada," and he would say,
239 "Now wait a minute gentlemen, now let me get this book out." And instead of saying, "Well
240 you just don't understand," he would get the source out and give it to you and say "Why
241 don't you come back tomorrow and we'll talk more about that." I became a college
242 administrator in least at part facilitated by his teaching and he was not on the faculty.

243 But I can tell you, to answer the question about when did the explosion occur. It
244 really wasn't an explosion. It only became visible abruptly. It was a ramp up. The more it
245 ramped up, at some point the forces who didn't want it to ramp up fought back and then
246 you had conflict. I guess that's all.

247 Carol: So this discussion about whether or not it was a betrayal of the mission or not, what
248 do you make of that? Do you feel as if Old Westbury actually continued even though things
249 obviously changed pretty dramatically?

250 Francis: [27:00] See I can't comment on whether they changed dramatically. I was gone. I
251 was a student planner for one year. I was a student for one year. I got my degree. I took
252 another job at the United Nations. The quote, "explosion" was really more when the
253 students who had been admitted as freshmen or who'd served several years, when they
254 began to perceive the loss of freedoms that I thought I had, and in fact had, I got away with
255 it basically. I took full advantage of it and I'm quite proud of my degree, but today I would

256 be considered a challenging student to design a curricula for. That's all, but back then it
257 was a huge thing.

258 Carol: Can you tell us what you wound up doing after? You said you were a college
259 administrator, can you tell us, what college did you go on to work at? And in what way
260 your experiences at Old Westbury infused your professional life, or someone said, "My
261 spiritual life," in any way you'd like to speak of it?

262 Francis: [28:25] It was not just at Old Westbury that there was a great deal of ferment on
263 college campuses. You had Kent State, you had Berkeley, and that was going on all over.
264 One of the places it was going on was a neighboring school, Long Island University the
265 C.Ww Post campus. A new President had been hired, a fellow named Robert Payton. Mr.
266 Payton arrived and the school was self-selected as a more traditional student population
267 and somewhat isolated and Long Island-centric population. Even so, the faculty and the
268 bureaucrats liked it that way. Everybody self-selected, students self-selected, faculty.

269 Well, even that was bubbling up and they were short-handed for any ambassadors
270 between various groups and because of the experience I had been through. Harris Wofford
271 referred me to President Payton as somebody that might be helpful to him. I was hired
272 there and worked there for a couple of years as his first and special assistant to the
273 president and ombudsman. I've written some things about being an ombudsman in this
274 time.

275 At some point, President Payton called me into his office and said, "Look, you may
276 have a career in this but not with a bachelors degree you need to go back and get a
277 doctorate." So I applied and was accepted in the University of Massachusetts in the School

278 of Education in the Program for the Study of the Future. I received my doctorate in the
279 Program for the Study of the Future.

280 Carol: You were saying you attended for your graduate degree...

281 Francis: University of Massachusetts in Amherst under a Dean of Education Dwight Allen,
282 who was sort of a firebrand in the School of Education at that time, nationally, came out of
283 Stanford. While there, I got interested in why does society go through change that people
284 have been warning about for a long time and various leaders didn't hear the warnings?
285 What's going on here? What's the disconnect? Ultimately, I did my dissertation on why
286 leaders don't listen to warnings and explored the psychological, in some case spiritual and
287 other belief structures that enable someone to repress information they don't want to let
288 in.

289 Through a variety of discussions, the topic I picked was U.S. dependency on
290 imported oil. And that it had been warned about since the discovery of OPEC. In the United
291 States the rate of discovery of domestic oil supplies peaked in 1964, we never discovered
292 more oil today than we did in '64. It has been a steady downward so obviously we have to
293 import more. Obviously that was going to lead to foreign policy issues, more conflict
294 abroad, a bigger defense and so on and so forth. I could see it pretty clearly and so I wrote
295 my dissertation on why leaders don't listen to warnings—but specifically about the energy
296 crisis, which had not yet happened. But shortly after my dissertation was accepted, it
297 happened.

298 One of the things you learn while you study why people don't listen to warnings is
299 you cannot say the sky is falling unless you give them an umbrella. You have to say to the

300 captain of the Titanic, there is an iceberg ahead. You just can't keep saying, "There's an
301 iceberg ahead. There's an iceberg ahead. There's an iceberg ahead." You have to say,
302 "Turn right;" you have to give something, you know. It's cheaper, or it's better, or it's
303 cleaner or some, give them what are called supporting rationale that they can use. It's not
304 even that they need to believe it, they're willing to turn right but they have to tell somebody
305 why they did it —the crafting of the warning.

306 That led me to solar energy and wind energy and I became quite well known
307 nationally in the solar and wind energy movement and was ultimately selected to run the
308 solar and wind energy programs at the Tennessee Valley Authority, which I did for a couple
309 of years until President Carter lost his job and I lost mine. Because the energy crisis had
310 occurred and then prices of oil collapsed and then there was no cost justification for solar
311 and wind and I was out of work.

312 I became a pediatric healthcare administrator as a result of starting to write about
313 the dangers that United States would face in the collapse of Medicare in the year 2010. I
314 was writing about that twenty-five years ago. I got hired by a group, and subsequent to
315 that, I was one of the early users of computers in medicine, electronic health records,
316 telemedicine, the use of arbitration instead of lawsuits which is being discussed today. I
317 retired from that career two and a half years ago, I now run a website called The Optimistic
318 Futurist which collects success stories of social interventions so other people can say,
319 "Turn right. There's an iceberg ahead and here's what you can do about it."

320 Carol: Is there anything else you want to share with us about Old Westbury before we
321 finish?

322 Francis: [35:21] I think I mentioned this earlier to somebody, in listening to everybody
323 today I realized that this college had eighty students who got their mail at the same
324 address, or maybe it was more or less than eighty, but they got their mail at the same
325 address but it wasn't the same college for every one of them. Those of us who came from
326 the Midwest, middle class, or lower middle class white backgrounds—we got a huge
327 education about other parts of the world.

328 Blacks and Hispanics got a huge education about the role of women from the white
329 women who basically called them on a lot of chauvinistic behavior, and turned the rhetoric
330 back on them of independence and self reliance and so on and so forth and said, "Why
331 should that only apply to men?" The various people of color got educated in ways they
332 never expected—often without choice.

333 It played out because we cooked our own meals at some points and you know
334 somebody would come in and assume that their meal would be cooked and there was
335 nothing ready. And they wanted to know why it wasn't. Well why do you expect it would
336 be? It was lively times.

337 We had foreign students who would say, "I don't understand, what's this problem
338 with this group who doesn't make much money? Why are they upset? In my country most
339 of the people don't make much money, and they're happy." And then a little while later
340 they would say, "Maybe they're not so happy. I had not thought about my own country in
341 these terms." What I came to realize is by having groups which were large enough to
342 reinforce each other—so you had enough white females who were thinking the same way
343 or about the same issues at least, and enough Hispanics and enough blacks and enough

344 white working class males. We could begin to try and defend our own positions and then
345 have some group call us on it, but we called them on theirs too.

346 That's why I say it was very different colleges; it was an environment for learning
347 that was largely created by who was let in. The deliberate diversity that was created, it was
348 not the formal academic curriculum. Because when various faculty members would say,
349 "We're going to read Plato today or something," and then say, I remember this very clearly,
350 "How does this relate to the fight you had in the cafeteria the other night about who
351 cooked?" People would be thumbing through Plato to find out something about equality.
352 That was good teaching, it was brilliant faculty work, but it was done in the context that
353 had been created by the admissions policies.

354 Carol: Thank you.