
Karl Grossman: Dr. Maguire when you came to the college in 1970, you inherited quite a mess, didn’t you?

John Maguire: I really inherited a mess when I came in 1970, because there had been a really faltering first start. Harris Wofford had come, and it’s always a debate—am I the first president of a real college or is Harris the president? But at any rate, work had already begun on the academic center. So that group of pioneers that he had assembled were over at Planting Fields. And yet there was the work going on here, so since we had a family to move, we moved them into the house because Wofford had left, and left this group, a group with no leader over at Planting Fields. And so Count Taylor, who was a member of the faculty—I think a founding member—was appointed for that one year the director of Planting Fields. Which released us, for that one-year, and that was all we had, 1970-1971 to do the planning of what is now Trainor House, the home of Empire State College.

Grossman: What happened in those years ‘68 and ‘69 that things self-destructed, what is the story you have?

John: Well the story simply was that Harris went around and the more radical a person answered his questions the more certain Harris was he needed him here to be a planner. He just had a handful of other planners—some from prison, some from college. It was too far out, and that is the answer in a word. They also ranged in age because when I came in the early summer of 1970 to be interviewed, the interview was going to be held at Planting Fields in that setting. So I arrived there a little late and I was scouring around trying to find
a place and a young man said to me, “You think I’m a student don’t you?” And I said, “Well, you could have fooled me.” He said, “I’m not a student I’m a curriculum planner.” So here was a nineteen-year-old curriculum planner and may be forty or fifty others like him and they simply were at each others’ necks.

They did not coalesce and it was just an utter mess, and better to start all over again.

And it was the one major meeting I had with Governor Rockefeller, because it was getting late. Harris suddenly left to go to Bryn Mawr. The school had no leader. It had Planting Fields and it was April, so what are you going to do? So Rockefeller himself gave me his assessment, which was, "John, just start over again. Integrate them into your planning. But do not try to do something with that group. Start anew and pull together a team as fast as you can, and do it as swiftly as you can.”

Grossman: [3:31] What was your background in coming here?

Maguire: I had a very conventional background. I had gone to Washington and Lee for college, then married as I graduated, and went for the first year after college to Edinburgh, Scotland for a year on Fulbright, and then came back to Yale, but hated the Divinity School. That is where I was going out of filial piety to my father who was a minister. But just going to Yale was too far north for him.

So I was just skulking around the campus one day when Mr. Leiber said to me, “You look awful.” I said, “I feel awful.” He said, “Why don’t you go to graduate school?” I said, “I’d love to [go to] graduate school”. He said, “Well, you have about three days until the deadline for the application. Get on it.” And I don’t think I slept much until I got through to that Friday. I got it in, got admitted.
So Yale, interesting enough credited the Fulbright year, the first year after college as one of three years towards—what they called then—the Bachelor of Divinity Degree. I was awarded it, and went straight to graduate school. I ended up being at Yale for seven years from 1954 to 1960.

Then went to Wesleyan in Connecticut and again got tapped for administration early on, so that in '67, '68, I was associate provost actually over into the next year as well. Then had an award, I got one of the Danforth awards for being one of the ten top teachers in the nation.

I took that award with my family and moved to California, to Berkeley. Was there a year, came back to Wesleyan a year. And it was during that final year back at Wesleyan when the phone started ringing and in 1970 I ended up here.

Grossman: Who was calling?

Maguire: [5:30] Actually Golding, I believe was his name—I forget—but he was the chancellor.

Grossman: Sam Gould?

Maguire: Gould, Samuel Gould it was.

Grossman: And Samuel Gould had originally envisioned Old Westbury, I mean he was the guy, [who had envisioned it] as an experimental college.

Maguire: Absolutely, it was the rage in all-state systems at that time. Wisconsin had tried an effort at it, and Washington State did, Evergreen State, Santa Cruz in California.
In fact early on, maybe my very second year here, I went for a week-long powwow put on by the National Science Foundation in which the ten pre-eminent experimental colleges were called together to talk about common problems. And there we were, Old Westbury was one of the ten.

It was the challenge from Gould and Governor Rockefeller, who were there together when we talked in New York, was, first of all define what your experiment is going to be. Put some parameters to measure it and go to work trying to create it.

Grossman: And what was the experiment under you to be at Old Westbury?

Maguire: [6:45] I was preoccupied and remain so today—you should know that about me—with racial and social justice. So I decided we would have a college whose curriculum was utterly interdisciplinary. As it turned out in the early years we had four interdisciplinary fields, and then tucked everything in there but they really were coherent.

The theme was “The Riddle of Human Justice.” And I vowed that that would be just rhetoric unless you had people that actually manifested in themselves through their activism, through their action, this passion for social justice. I assembled them as fast as I could get them. We started in the fall of 1971 on this campus with a small group that was prepared to study in that setting.

Grossman: How did you collect this group?

Maguire: [7:42] From everywhere. I had already been in academia for a good decade. I met the young Turks, so called, in various fields. And I am awfully grateful for the eighteen months I had as an Associate Provost at Wesleyan because it was a time where we were
adding faculty so I got to interview a lot. There were several people that were turned down from Wesleyan that were just right for here.

I brought some from Wesleyan with me, [a] larger than usual number from the place I came. I brought from Fisk, I recruited them from Morehouse College. It turned out a big source was the University of the District of Columbia, which was heavily black. Again reaching for credentialed African-Americans had led to a group of people from the Caribbean and we took a large number of them.

One of the things I had not anticipated was that I gave people about six or seven months to decide if they really wanted to stay for the long haul. Where I really gulped was as the year came toward an end and we were getting ready to open. Many said, “It was the most wonderful years of discussion we’ve had but we’re going back or we’re going to this or going to that.” So I wondered if we were going to make it. Everybody became a recruiter and there was fiercely competitive recruiting. We did open, got going, and they rest they say is history.

Grossman: How did you with a startup college, or what was a re-startup college, in effect a startup college, gather students, you had six or seven hundred students?

Maguire: Yes we did. We called ourselves, “The New Old Westbury.” Re-startup sounds a little corny, so “The New Old Westbury”. I don’t know how we did it Karl, except that we did get the right ratios so people weren’t hungry for more teaching than they had. They had certainly enough activity going on that way, so it was heady.
We fought too. One of the things you know, as a person who has been in the left, is leftists fight each other worse than they fight the enemy. So our faculty meetings would run all into the night. It was a terrifically vibrant acting out. I forget, maybe it was the third or fourth year. We had the first of two major strikes that we had at the college during my eleven years. This one was over—I don’t know what it was over. I think it was that the curriculum which I thought was plenty radical and cutting edge—was not radical enough. That was the fight; let’s make the curriculum even more radical.

Also you can begin to see acted out right in the very midst of it, the special-interest activities. Again, tensions would develop between Spanish-speaking faculty and African-American faculty—those were the two primarily. And the whites were harmless because they were so far left I couldn’t recognize them and place them. And yet you had people who were centrists, and yet marvelous, magnificent-hearted people. That was what the struggle was all about.

Grossman: You mentioned ratio, what did you mean by ratio?

Maguire: [11:25] The ratio was that we should have the same faculty and student sizes, and I can’t remember what it was 20:1, 15:1, whatever it was, 25:1 maybe. I don’t think it was that high but at any rate we did have our fair share of faculty.

Grossman: Because I’ve heard these numbers 30:30:30:10. Thirty percent white, thirty percent African American...

Maguire: And ten was other...
Grossman: And ten percent was other. Latino would be thirty percent; the other would be foreign or Native American, and the faculty, my understanding was the faculty was to be, this was the goal, the same 30:30:30:10. When did that start, the 30:30:30:10 business?

Maguire: We began in the summer of 1970 with a ten-day retreat. Never have a retreat that lasts—retreats and ten days do not go together. That’s too long. But anyway we had ten of the most excruciating planning days and we fought over slogans and fought over names. I mean it was more substantive than that. But I do believe the 30:30:30:10 emerged from that retreat. So we could gather around that theme, and that’s how that appeared.

Grossman: How important was that to have? What is the significance of 30:30:30:10?

Maguire: [12:56] It was to try to bring to an end this endless debate over the numbers. To say, “Now wait a minute guys. Let’s be fair about it Black 30, Latino 30, Asian whatever and other,” and so there we were.

Grossman: With 30:30:30:10 no group would be a majority? Is this the importance of it that no one would feel that they were in a minority? Is that correct?

Maguire: It was big enough that no one would feel left out, but it wasn’t so big that one group ruled the others. I will say with some pride that during my eleven years no one group ever did rule over the others. As you fall along together, side-by-side you begin to say, “He’s not so bad, and she’s not so bad.” And sure enough friendships developed. And it was a remarkable, remarkable group.
Grossman: In terms of your background in civil rights, which I think is important because you brought a lot of your own life history to the vision, and working out of the vision. What is your background with civil rights Dr. Maguire?

Maguire: [14:12] I am like the biblical description of a convert. I grew up in the Deep South in Raleigh and Montgomery and Birmingham, Alabama. I was absolutely uncritical about race. I used the N-word every fourth word. I just grew up a regular kind of person.

When I was in the 9th grade, the YMCA director began very subtly to raise the question about Blacks and his question was very simple, “Don’t you imagine there are some blacks every bit your equal, every bit your counterpart?” Kind of planted the seed, planted the seed. Finally, when I was a senior he said, “John, I’m going to give you a wonderful chance and that’s to go to a national week-long convention of young men, sixteen, seventeen years old, all of them have just graduated from college- from high school and spend that week.”

When I got there it was exactly half black and half white. They roomed us together in pairs. It was carefully, carefully worked out. At the end of that period you had no excuse for claiming superiority. Now I still did— I was seventeen years old and had not systematically thought about it. But now the seed was hopelessly, deeply planted. Because by the time I was a sophomore I took a year-long course just called “Race and its Consequences.” Dean [James] Leyburn of Washington and Lee taught it. By the end of that I now believed that—all men are created equal, all women, later I came to expand it. I then went to Edinburgh for a year, and came back to Yale.
Got involved the first week back in Yale in a great struggle over housing. At that time the housing bureau allowed people to advertise rooms for rent with the saying, "No blacks need apply." Bill Kaufman had just come back to school, he was a pal of mine. I said, "Let’s have a demonstration." So we called the school together, it still was just a day or two before school began. We went morning, noon, and night. And in a week Yale said, "I don’t know why we ever did that in the first place or we’ve done it ever, but we are now taking it off." That was my first success, heady success in 1954 with a public demonstration.

Then of course the preeminent thing for me, it’s the one you find on Google or wherever to this day. 1961, when the original Freedom Riders came down from Washington in May through Atlanta then on through Birmingham and Montgomery got just beat up hopelessly in every place. And were succeeded in a matter of days by this group from Nashville, Tennessee and they got beat up again but collected themselves to go. It looked as if it were over, and the people in Birmingham and Montgomery certainly thought it was. But we had decided—Kauf’ and I—to quickly gather a group, black and white, five of us, we added two more in Atlanta, and set off to Birmingham and then to Montgomery—where we were ourselves arrested. And then it was on, from that point on. That summer of 1961 was filled with people coming from all over the country to challenge segregation in interstate commerce. [Segregation in public transport crossing state lines.]

That was my first teaching year at Wesleyan and I continued to be on the side of righteousness all the way through that period to accept appointment by President Kennedy to the Civil Rights Commission of Connecticut. Every state has eight or nine commissioners and so I did that for a while.
In a way I was truly ready and what was beginning in myself was that kind of radicalism, I thought why not in curriculum? Why this way of organizing the way we do? In single little narrow bands, silos of knowledge. Why not more open, more discussion and—the significant thing for me—more involvement with the surrounding community.

I think if you look at the original charter papers of Old Westbury you'll find this emphasis on more student and faculty engagement with the surrounding community just underscored. In fact many of the questions that we imagined people would take as their presenting questions were questions we said would come from the community. Now little did we realize we would be settled on a six hundred acre estate under the trees with all the greenery, with the beauty of Old Westbury.

But we recruited students that came from Harlem that came from the southern part of... all over, from New York, who came out on train, from all over. It's very interesting, going back to 30:30:30:10. You might say “Well where did you get 30 percent of white people who were willing to gamble on that?” Answer—wonderful women in the community right around the school who had gone to Vassar a year or two way back when. Got married, got pregnant, but had never finished their degree and said, “Here's this gorgeous place right here in my community. I'll just go over and finish up my degree.” So even the student body was just vastly, vastly varied and it was a simple—it was a marvelous thing.

Grossman: I found in my thirty some odd years here, that because of this mix, the people mix. Was that your reflection in your years here?
Maguire: [20:13] Oh, absolutely. That's what makes Old Westbury special—there is just nobody—yesterday when I arrived someone told me just talking about what's happened in these thirty years, this woman squared her shoulders and said, “And I want you to know that US News and World Report says that we and Evergreen State which is our sister school are the most varied and diverse colleges in the country.”

Now how they knew that, I don’t know but it was a nice placeholder, it was a nice fact. All the teachers I think, because many came from very ostensibly straight situations, Florence Howe came from Maryland, Al Raybould came from the University of Chicago.

Sam Von Winbush came from Fisk University, he had been at Wesleyan. John Caughlin had come from Haverford College. They did come from everywhere and they were a marvelous group.

Grossman: In terms of your family background now, maybe my recollection might be wrong, was it your grandfather who was involved in politics in the South?

Maguire: He was the shortest-served governor of Alabama—I think maybe still in history. I think he served seventeen days because whoever he served under went to jail, or got called away or died. I don’t remember the detail. But for seventeen days Lieutenant Governor Merrill became Governor Merrill [Perhaps Hugh Davis Merill.]

He by the way was a modest man, and so he never strutted or claimed that much for himself. But I certainly claimed it for him as I went on about where I came from. That meant of course, you could not imagine a more conservative—racist man—even though he was a gentle man he was simply a radical segregationist.
Grossman: How did your family take your path, which obviously was diametrically opposed to their path over many generations, regarding race?

Maguire: [22:20] It was one of the hardest things they ever did. My mother told me that my father who had moved up through the ranks in 1944 became—they call them executive secretary rather than bishop—effectively a bishop for the Baptists of Florida. He had such amazing immediate post-war success in having Baptists streaming to Florida, all these GIs. He would say, “We created four churches last week, three churches last week.” It was in constant motion. And he would impute that to the Holy Spirit.

I would say to him, “Did you ever hear of demographics?” And he would glare at me.

He also was a segregationist. Everybody was a segregationist in the South. He had worked his way to the point where he was going to give a talk to the entire Southern Baptist Convention that by that time after the war had reached out to the west coast and included Arizona, California, Oregon. It was a big thing, perhaps ten or twelve thousand people. It was a large, large gathering.

The news that we had been arrested in Montgomery for going down and trying to share a cup of coffee, we thought we were going to be arrested in Jackson. We had bought our tickets and were on our way we were just sitting there waiting for the bus when in swept the Army guy, because the place was still under martial law as you recall. It was so tense at that time.

Later in the trial by the way he was asked, “Why did you do that? You beat up everybody, but in this case you just arrested these people.” He said, “We just had had
enough, we just thought if we get them through and out of here and on their way that’s it, that would take care of that.” That was just too much for them, and we got arrested.

But the word got to my father just ten minutes before he was to address this group, the largest most important speech he had ever given. And my mother said he turned absolutely grey, matched his grey suit, he was ill and he went on and did it. When they got home, to Jacksonville, Florida a cross had been burned in their yard. It was very, very serious.

Here’s the significant thing; that was now 1961. In 1964, in May of ’64 Dr. King was involved in a big campaign, a very significant one in St. Augustine, Florida. And among the people who came down were Mrs. Peabody, the mother of the Governor of Massachusetts, Endicott Peabody, whose father had been the rector of St. Paul’s School—it really had a number of very distinguished people. Martin was invited to leave and come east, up east for a weekend to receive a degree from Wesleyan from Yale and from Jewish Theological Seminary.

About a week before that, Mrs. Peabody had arrived; a phone call arrived to my house. It was my mother saying, “John we’ve been watching the news, dad and I have been looking at your friend Dr. King and he’s about to collapse he is just so tired and wan. Would you tell him he can come to our house and spend the night in our guest room?” Now that is like moving—in a matter of those few words—she was prepared to say she would have opened her home—if nobody knew that he was coming—if he came quietly and slept and went back. I presumed that I had an understanding at least with my mother, that she
wasn’t going to countenance what I was doing, but neither was she going to inveigh against it.

A few years later, when we were here at this place my father said to me, “John, we should put this behind us, let’s go forward, move forward.” But I only had a few years with my father—he died at 87 in 1987—of having his blessing. It meant a lot to me and it was a hard time getting it. My mother never said much more. At least in the last years of their lives, my father said to me, “I’ve never told you this but your mother and I are proud of you.” Now this is [to] a grown man who is now the president of Old Westbury College, it has taken that long, but at least I had it.

Grossman: The friendship you had with Dr. Martin Luther King when did that begin?

Maguire: [27:27] That began when in that same period of transition in college. When I was a sophomore I had gone to college quite early. I was only nineteen years old. I saw one day in the kiosk at our college a sign that said come to the seminary—the seminary involved was Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania, right outside of Philadelphia—and explore with us for the weekend being a Christian minister.

Since my roommate and I had never been north of Richmond, we suddenly became both interested in the Christian ministry even though I really didn’t in my heart have it. We went there and when we arrived that Friday morning, the person said, “We’re going to have you sleep and be billeted with our own students. Maguire you’re from Alabama; we have a student from Atlanta, Georgia. Why don’t the two of you get together? He’s a second year student here. And you’ll like him because even though he’s only a second year of a three
year program, he's already been named the president of the student body.” And it was
Martin Luther King Junior of Atlanta Georgia.

He had just come from Morehouse College. He, like I, had come young, sixteen years
old to college. He was three years older than I was. So when I was nineteen and Dr. King
was twenty-one we met and then began a series of things that got tighter and tighter and
tighter. So that finally in what turned out to be one year before King’s death in 1968, I had
agreed, since I was then Provost of Wesleyan University, at that time Associate Provost, to
get started a Martin Luther King archive in Atlanta, Georgia not realizing that before the
year was out in fact, having worked out the details of it in the summer of ’67 in April of ’68,
he would be killed. That was a long friendship and it was a glorious friendship and again
another transformative element—no doubt about it—in my life.

Grossman: What kind of person, it’s rare to find someone with a personal relationship with
Dr. King. Can you elaborate on what type of human being Dr. King was?

Maguire [30:00]: Yes, Dr King—I saw myself in him—nothing big and dramatic like King
but in the true man. He had been born middle class, never thought he would get involved
in the Civil Rights movement even when he came to his first pastorage in Birmingham,
Alabama. I’m sorry, Montgomery, Alabama, at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. He was
just going to be a middle class Baptist preacher, a fabulous one but, nevertheless a
middle…. He hadn’t been there four months when Rosa Parks in December refuses to go to
the back of the bus. That sets off the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

The Montgomery Improvement Association had been in existence for a number of
years. They had a President who was a sleeping car porter named Mr. E.D. Nixon. Nixon
was wonderful, he said, “I can organize but I can’t speak. We’ve got to have the best public
spokesman in all of Montgomery to represent the Montgomery Improvement Association,”
and they leaned on King to do it.

Here’s this young guy, just out of his seminary, just actually short of his doctorate by
that time, who decides reluctantly that he will take it. And I watched him get drawn deeper
and deeper into it. I watched the philosophers—he was particularly intrigued with Hegel,
loved existentialism, Gandhi influenced him, as well as Thoreau a great deal. The whole
issue of passive resistance as it was called became his technique and I just identified and
identified with it.

I do believe that along about 1965—you already had Birmingham by that time, you
had the Voting Rights Act, Johnson had begun this thing. Just after they signed the Voting
Rights Act, King went out to Los Angeles because you had the first of the great rebellions, as
it was called—riot—huge thing. Thirty something people, I believe, were killed by that. He
got out there and he went into a pool hall. Now by that time King had already been in
Atlanta, Albany, Montgomery all these campaigns. The young men said, “Who the Hell are
you boy”. He thought somebody was pulling his leg and realized that these young people—
in 1965—didn’t know who he was.

That meant that the faith-based religious vocabulary that King used to guide his
work in the South—that he had to embark now on a perspective that involved a language
that was not solely dependent on faith. He never abandoned the faith language but he had
to now develop an alternative or an additional or expanded vocabulary, and that he did.
Then he became deep. He went to Chicago and had a terrible time there, struggled and
struggled and was really given to mild, but slightly protracted, several weeks, depressions that began to show up more, but so did his thought become deeper.

By that time the Vietnam War was upon us so he began to think how does the Vietnam War relate to the work I'm doing here. He began to expand the vision and make it worldwide. Though it may be a little hyperbolic for me to say, I do believe at the end—at least, I catch people's attention by saying—I believe that in the end King was the most important social visionary of the twentieth century, and I do believe that. That was a searing, searing loss in April of '68.

Grossman: You had regular contact with him through the years.

Maguire: Absolutely, he came frequently to Wesleyan where I was during the sixties. We became wonderful, fast friends.

Grossman: You have two doctorates? Two graduate degrees?

Maguire: No, I have one degree in two fields. When I was in Yale, Yale was so enamored with the success the University of Chicago had had with its Committee on Social Thought, which is as you know is interdisciplinary which I'm sure absolutely had something to do with the decision about interdisciplinarity here. By the way I just want to pause a minute to say, at Old Westbury the mission statement you must have it or can find it somewhere but it's "Old Westbury is an interdisciplinary—interdisciplinary came before racial—is an interdisciplinary college for all people that has as its rough goals 30:30:30:10, and has as its mode of instruction multidisciplinary work," something like that. So we had gotten that far, and in a way there was a framework.
I’ll jump ahead if I may a little bit. After I had been here about four years I was called to a meeting and I knew something was up because the Chancellor Ernest Boyer at the time said, “I want to come up with my best vice chancellors and meet you, and talk to you, and get to know about Old Westbury.” But it turns out it was a hot box meeting because word had come that we have got to have some single disciplinary subjects, not interdisciplinary. We could have two kind of—you could continue interdisciplinary but you must begin to add single disciplinary work. Fields like education and business, when have you heard that before. So reluctantly we did begin those right alongside the interdisciplinary, and they’ve existed to this day somewhat along side each other there. I don’t know the exact mixture of those things by now. Then sociology was added but taught by interdisciplinary kind of sociologists.

The spirit of Old Westbury pulsed through the whole place, but the curriculum after only four years, or maybe five at most, could no longer remain interdisciplinary, it just wouldn’t work. It was one of the first of the Great Recessions it was about ’75 at the time. Young people who had been going to community colleges here on Long Island, in Farmingdale, Suffolk, and Nassau, then going off to Binghamton, Albany other upstate schools public and private, Syracuse, Colgate, could no longer go. And they wanted a place to finish their junior and senior years. It was like an iron poker that just pumped you on the head. They said, “I don’t care what you think President Maguire.” And I could see in that very meeting—that tense meeting—nobody ever said but the message was, “Listen my man, either you add these fields or two things; One, You will not grow, we will just freeze you and we’ll freeze you [to] death.”
Now if I had been really smart and money had been plentiful, I would've said, "Well give it a try because there's plenty of room to grow here its not as if we were constrained by physical surroundings." So that was it, "Either you grow, if you get our approval in growth you will grow in disciplinary fields" and implicit underneath that, "If you don't— farewell."

Grossman: I was asking about the two focuses of your graduate work because one is divinity correct?

Maguire: [38:33] Correct, I actually studied in three fields. I mentioned the University of Chicago—I did an interdisciplinary doctorate. It was about the uses and abuses that the theologians had made of psychoanalysis. So primarily the dissertation was about theology and psychiatry, so I myself have always been interdisciplinary.

Grossman: That's why I'm asking you. It seems like an odd combination to many people, psychiatry and divinity—not psychology and divinity but psychiatry and divinity. If you read some of the work by Freud he was a secular person.

Maguire: Sometime I knew about it, of course I even knew in college about work in psychology and religion. So there is a long history of uniting those two, but sometimes I did inner-outer. I had a rationale that accounted for why I did it but I was so grateful for the work on the individual self, which was the psychiatry part, and the theology part, which was work on the community, the corporate, the collective.

Grossman: How did you get into that combination, did some professor inspire you, and did some reading?
Maguire: [40:06] Yes, curiously enough the psychology side was not inspirational. But there was a young teacher of psychology of religion, so it was not just psychology vs. theology. He was right in the divinity school. He was straight on the latest thing. He had us first of all in the first weeks of the course read Freud, Jung, and all the classics. Then he had us go to the latest things from Chicago, Mayo Clinic, wherever in psychiatry and somehow that stuff ignited me. I began to see some connection between the two and finally went to my teacher and said, “Can I write on that?” He said, “If you do it if you set up your discipline right, your problematic, yes you can give it a shot.” Three hundred and seventy-seven pages later I turned in a dissertation.

Grossman: So the degree was what kind of doctorate?

Maguire: A Ph.D., awarded by the Graduate School of Yale, not the Divinity School, the Graduate school of Yale.

Grossman: And it was in?

Maguire: Theology and psychiatry. I actually got so deeply involved in that side of it that for an entire year I donned a white coat every Tuesday and actually saw people under John Doller’s supervision, these were people who were going to be clinical psychologists or do psychiatry as a part of medicine.

Grossman: The other thing, which always intrigued me, when I read, that was the combination was that so many religions reject psychiatry and so many people in psychiatry reject religion.
Maguire: But you know this is where the Old Westbury vision proves itself because, today
the boundary at the leading edges of contemporary thinking, in fact in my place in
Claremont I moved beyond it and came to call it trans-disciplinary. Interdisciplinary still
means you got this and this, and the problem is, how are you going to put the two together.
But trans-disciplinary uses concepts—notions from as many fields as possible but they
move them beyond single disciplines to the solution. Trans-disciplinary thinking I do
believe is the call to arms of the new way of thinking.

Grossman: Trans-disciplinary, and that would be again different from interdisciplinary?

Maguire: Yes, interdisciplinary is just a stage on the way.

Grossman: Western intellectual thought and process really developed this disciplinary way
of learning, of understanding. Was that a mistake?

Maguire: No, it was absolutely a necessary phase. I absolutely do believe in stages and
therefore have no embarrassment of having called the work at Old Westbury
interdisciplinary. Actually trans-disciplinary is a challenge too. If you try to say we’re
today—characterize the graduate higher education enterprise it remains overwhelmingly
disciplinary. It gets narrower and narrower, and deeper and deeper. I have no doubt.

But the trans-disciplinary is gaining ground. It’s beginning to challenge that. In a
little place like Claremont Graduate University where I was present for seventeen years; it’s
a way of doing graduate work in an individualized basis, and the projects, dissertations are
amazingly varied and I think much more productive.
Grossman: The other thing too are in these academic cubbyholes, those who are in that cubbyhole saying, “You have to see the world from the point of view of a political scientist…”

Maguire: [44:39] Trans-disciplinary helps break down this rigidity regarding the rightness of one’s own discipline.

Grossman: In terms of your accomplishments at Old Westbury, you were here eleven years, what would you regard as the most important things you were able to do here?

Maguire: I do believe that the foundations that we started, and I look back thinking that was an amazing time, the year of planning. I mean just every morning we started at 8:30 and went to 6. We were like office workers in that regard, and then would have evening meetings. That was an exhilarating year.

While it’s nibbled here and changed radically there that vision of a much wider age range than usual, much more diversity in the histories that the students bring with them, a faculty that is overwhelmingly interdisciplinary in its thinking—even though they’re disciplinarians—there’s no doubt about it on the Old Westbury faculty. I do think that we got it started the right way.

I do worry about radical cuts and financial support for higher education generally. I’m thinking or hoping that the Governor Cuomo of New York goes back and rekindles a little bit of that if he possibly can. In California just in the last week, headlines have said Governor Brown finds billions he had not counted on, not enough to do twenty-six billion dollars in deficit, but six, seven, eight billion. Brown is talking about, “Let me use that then
to take back some of the horrific cuts that I have proposed for the California state college
system.” I hope Cuomo would do the same. The balance between public and private is still
very different in New York. The number of public school vs. private schools is still heavily
skewed towards private in New York, overwhelmingly skewed toward public in California.

Grossman: The kind of approach you’ve taken to diversity and to experimental or
interdisciplinary or trans-disciplinary education—is public education more compatible
with both visions or can these things be as successfully done by private institutions?

Maguire: To the contrary—again setting is everything. I think when you answer a question
like that you have to think, first let’s talk about context. The state of California and the state
of New York are two radically different contexts. The economics are different. There are a
number of factors that are involved. I will say in my own situation small private colleges
within California are able to move more swiftly than the big public behemoths. It is reverse
here, because under pressure, when there is pressure for higher enrollment—it’s the
public that must respond here in New York to that. That’s where the change is made. I
guess the answer is, find where there is the greatest opportunity for change, whether it’s
public or private and put your energy there.

Grossman: We’re speaking at a time, its thirty years since you’ve been here, the United
States has for the first time a black president. Your central theme of dealing with the riddle
of social justice, now in certain ways has, well the acceptance of an African-American as the
President of the United States wouldn’t have been conceived when you were a boy in the
South in the 1930’s. On the other hand there are streams of racism in this country, which
persist, and sometimes one wonders whether everything can flip back.
Maguire: It is flipping back. I would say that Barack Obama is mixed race. And of course you may recall in the campaign one of his great challenges was to convince people that he was black. John Payton who is the Director of Council of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund tells of being in Washington, on the days of the inaugural, cold as it could be for Barack, so getting inside as soon as he could and going in and seeing groups cheering and carrying on.

And looking twice, and realizing those groups were white and they were not cheering Barack’s inauguration, which had occurred earlier in the day. They were already planning to get him. For every revolution there is a counter-revolution and right now we are experiencing all around the counter-revolution to Barack Obama.

I do believe the extent at which the Tea Party and Republican Party swept the last off-cycle election was really against Obama. Again very few presidents—he lays low, he’s not you think about Bill Clinton or somebody else who is a Democrat president but who is not black, so Barack Obama lays low generally. He will now have to bring out the speaker in him again and may again gain re-election. No election unleashed such pride in our ability to do it and at the same time crystallized such negative opposition it seems to me as Barack Obama. It’s something to be living at this moment because the history is not told. Obama may be a one-term president.

Grossman: In terms of what is described as racial tolerance at long last, do you see a potential significant reversal?

Maguire: Yes, I do absolutely and it’s been going on a long time. After the first plateau of success of the Civil Rights Movement—and I would take that to be in the seventies or early eighties, the time we were discussing now for Old Westbury—there started the backsliding.
There is the push ahead, but there is the going back. Sometime they’ve been about an equal tension still push ahead, a little sliding back.

Right now we are not pushing ahead and we’re vastly sliding back. I do not believe in circular history, if anything it’s a spiral but it comes back around again. I think that right now this period is a time where progressives more than ever, ever before have got to stand up and be counted, have really got to go on line in support of a—new American Revolution.

Grossman: Which would be about what, a new American Revolution?

Maguire: I’m going speak about that tomorrow in my commencement address. I will talk about it tomorrow. New American Revolution is actually a phrase of a friend of mine, but her big emphasis is it is also international. I think that is a new theme that technology makes international, just accelerates internationalism. I think it should just be called the next world revolution probably. I don’t have a title for tomorrow so I don’t have to say the phrase.

We are quickly coming to a point where people of all ages are being really called upon to make a decision. Look if you are a progressive re-affirm it—assert it, live it—as you’ve never, ever done before, even if you are seventy-eight years old.

Grossman: The key to Old Westbury in this regard was and has been about mixing people. Creating contact between people coupled with them not just being in ivory towers studying, but with activism, engagement, on a global scale. But you have to wonder here, despite living in a more global society, we involved the United States in civil wars, and
we've been for several years, there seems to be even as the world gets smaller, some very growing divisions.

Maguire: Absolutely, well the fact of the matter is I do believe not only in the United States we have greater disparities than ever before. I keep in a folder that when I see an arresting statistic, and I’ll just give you one right now, that 1% of the United States population controls 30% of the wealth. 10% percent of the US controls 77% of the wealth. So that means that 90% of Americans are living on 23% of the wealth.

That's ultimately undoable for the long haul, unless people really just do gulp and go backwards vis-à-vis the kind of lifestyle that their own parents knew. Yet at the same time the economy is becoming ever more global. So here's the paradox, I guess the way I’m saying is the next world revolution is going to be full of paradoxes and one of them is—the call—is to begin the Old Westbury way, with people right around you, in this neighborhood on Long Island, in New York and yet know that it reaches to Cairo, to Benghazi, Indonesia wherever. That's the paradox, how do you make your life assume meaning in a world that has that paradox. That what you do impacts all over the world and yet the place to do it is in the local—local, global.

Grossman: So many peoples think their way and their culture is the right way and the right culture...

Maguire: You will see more of that because the more we do get global the more people will just feel pressed and pressed. I think that ultimately despair, the sense that my life doesn’t add up too much—I don’t affect big policy changes—that kind of spirit brooding, spirit of being disconsolate is afflicting the entire United States.
Grossman: Your dream for Old Westbury as the years of the future unfold, where having really laid the foundation for this place, what is your dream for where it goes?

Maguire: [57:40] To become a community, I’m repeating the original mission. I do think that if you make the adjustments to harsh reality to some measure, but keep underneath that original, original vision I swear I do believe that is the way to go.

Grossman: And the original vision being?

Maguire: Of an institution that would be radically mixed, trans-disciplinary in its mode of study, work on projects and those projects need to emerge around you, to give you a hand at it. Understand how at this time, and here would be a big difference in thirty years, the awareness of the international, global dimensions of things. I must say that computing—and that is a whole new world—opens up possibilities to be engaged in ways we weren’t thirty years ago. It is somehow to move with the globalization but to keep the sense of life spent together.

One of the things about the phones, a paradox I think, is that everyone’s talking to someone on the phone but they’ve never been more disconnected from the whole reality. To recover that global sense of community is with everything that was there to begin with, is I do think, the way I think we all ought to go.

Grossman: But how to get there?

Maguire: Right at the corner of where you are, just, just take on this growing understand of how far ranging your insights may go and be, but keep working on them just keep working on them.
Grossman: Thank you, that’s all we need.