

Michael Beug
Interviewed by Eric Severn
The Evergreen State College oral history project
September 8, 2021
FINAL

Severn: This is Eric Severn talking with Michael Beug. Michael, you're in White Salmon again, correct?

Beug: Yes, I am.

Severn: And I'm in Seattle. We left off after you had taught your first program. One of the things that I wanted to talk about this time around is from a fairly early age, you had this political awareness, this social awareness. I'm wondering how your academic interests and this interest in social justice, political awareness, was shaped or re-formed or—you can just fit in with Evergreen those first years for you.

Beug: I think it would best to say that it fit in well. I don't think coming to Evergreen made a great change in my approach or how I was thinking. Actually, the one shock to me that I don't really talk about publicly is how little sense of community there is and was at Evergreen, compared to the college that I'd left, Harvey Mudd College, where there was a lot of genuine community. Faculty got together regularly to talk. Evergreen was far more isolating, really. People were in their program, and it's become, I think, in recent years, far more isolating than it even was then. You've got your team, but other than that, that's your main interaction.

Severn: Interesting. I remember talking with Chuck Nisbet a few weeks ago and he made the point that he thought literally the first year of Evergreen—the second year to an extent, but really the first year—was a time of real connection, real community building. Faculty were talking with one another. There was this real sense of trying to figure it out together. He said that he felt like after that first year, it really changed a lot. That sense of community disintegrated a little bit. How does that square with what you're saying?

Beug: I came the second year, so I didn't see the very first year. Then I was thrown into the contract pool, not in a program. I was in a very different situation than would normally be the case. I was literally the only person that came without connections to other people at Evergreen. Everybody was all pretty deeply connected.

I knew one person who'd been a senior when I was a freshman at Harvey Mudd College. He had the same training as me, and that's why I was really surprised that Evergreen hired us both. They hired

him first and me later. But he came from Reed, where he'd had four years of teaching experience already.

Severn: What were the things to you that gave Harvey Mudd the sense of community that Evergreen was lacking? I've actually never thought about this but there does seem to be—I can see how while on one hand the program structure at Evergreen does foster community within the programs, but I can also see how that can be very insular, too, and have all these little silo communities that don't actually engage. What do you think?

Beug: That was my impression was all these little communities that don't engage. We built a strong connection within your program, but not with other programs. That's something in later years that I worked on addressing with a number of colleagues, where we had at one point four programs that had a joint lecture once or twice a week. We had a common base and then we went on our slightly different directions.

For me, I was teaching Ecological Agriculture at that point, but we had a number of other social justice-related programs, community development programs, and we all met together. We had economists and historians and literary folks and scientists all together once a week. There would be about 10 or 12 faculty in this joint lecture, and that, I really liked. But I don't think that's ever been repeated.

Severn: Would the faculty seminar together with those larger programs? Would just the faculty get together and talk about, what are you all reading, and that sort of thing? Or was it just you come together and that was the moment of connection?

Beug: We came together, and we did not share faculty seminars because we had, for the most part, different books that we were dealing with, so our faculty seminars would be around the books. Since the books weren't in common, for the most part, it didn't make sense to do the faculty seminars together.

Severn: Sure. You had a role in the Organic Farm, correct?

Beug: I did have a role in the Organic Farm—later on, not at the beginning.

Severn: What was that like working through that?

Beug: I got approached to teach in the program because, as a chemist, they needed somebody to teach soil science. I'd never studied soil science, knew nothing about it, but I just stayed one chapter ahead of the students. [laughter] It's really chemistry and geology, which I knew a bit about.

Since I was four years old, my family had a garden. My wife's family had a garden. As soon as we were married, we had gardens. My grandmother used to give me a bad time. She said, "How can

you be teaching Organic Farming or Ecological Agriculture? You've never been a farmer." I would visit the family farm in the summer. But it was really not about teaching people how to farm, but how to build sustainable communities. That's really what the Ecological Agriculture program is about.

Severn: You come back to this a lot. You've got all this other stuff that you've done, all these other disciplines that you have your hands in, but this idea of sustainable communities, a broader sense of social justice, this seems to be one of the larger themes that brackets most of your thinking. Is that true?

Beug: I think so, yeah.

Severn: That does seem to be one of the ideals of Evergreen. That seems to end well with that for sure. You had mentioned that you thought there wasn't a powerful sense of community in those early years, but that has even gotten a little bit more disconnected over time. What do you think those changes were about, or are about?

Beug: I think a lot of the changes happened when we quit moving offices. When people moved around and you had new—and more and more faculty quit coming to campus, except when they were teaching. Every day of the week, I was there at around 8:00 in the morning and I was there till at least 5:00 at night. Sometimes I'd be there half the night, too. I spent my time at Evergreen, but increasingly, I saw my colleagues not spending their time at Evergreen. I found that pretty distressing, frankly.

Severn: They were just coming to teach and hold office hours.

Beug: Yeah, if they even held office hours at all. I know they were supposed to, but most doors were just closed all the time in the later years.

Severn: Really?

Beug: Yeah.

Severn: I'm trying to get at those first five years that you were there. Were there any standout formative experiences for you, things that happened those first five years that changed your perception of what you were doing as a teacher, what you were doing within your discipline, and just how you were thinking about all this stuff?

Beug: Hmm. Oh, I don't know how to answer that one, I'm sorry.

Severn: That's okay.

Beug: The thing I loved about Evergreen is getting together with people, coming up with new ideas, and then teaching them, and teaching around those new ideas. As much as possible, I did something each year as different as possible from what I did the previous year. For me, it was a tremendous ongoing

academic experience and tremendous ongoing learning experience, so I focused on learning the things I was going to be teaching and learning new things.

Severn: Did you feel like you were taking on the role of both faculty and student at Evergreen? I know that some of the other faculty I've talked with, that's one of the things that they appreciated about most.

Beug: Yes. Absolutely. If I had taught somewhere else, I'd be teaching chem lab and chemistry all day long. I went away and taught for six months at the University of Hawaii-Hilo and it's very different. You don't get to do all the things that I got to do at Evergreen that Evergreen faculty get to do. For me, all the different people I got to meet and teach with and work with were a very important part of life. I'm really glad I came to Evergreen for that reason.

Severn: Here's something that's also been on my mind. I want to say it was the last time we talked we had briefly discussed the idea of a hierarchy within a discipline. I think with the sciences, it's a little bit easier to articulate what that looks like because you have certain steps, certain foundational building blocks, that you need to go through in order to get to the next place. With math, it's fairly obvious. I think with science, it's fairly obvious. That's a little bit more ambiguous in the humanities—what you need to know, what constitutes a body of knowledge to do advanced work or something like that.

Beug: The interesting thing to me that I learned in teaching at Evergreen is how similar the arts and the sciences are in the basic training you need, moving from beginning to advanced.

Severn: Tell me about this. This is fascinating. What do you mean, exactly?

Beug: I saw the same kind of progression. My oldest son majored in film and video, so I watched how he went through. He did take a year off to take all science. My youngest son did a double major at Evergreen and got two bachelor's degrees, one in computer science and the other one in environmental studies.

But they all had this really broad training that they built upon. One son is essentially a scientist, the other is essentially an artist, but the progression was very much the same in moving forward in their fields. Often, they were working with exactly the same faculty doing exactly the same thing, even though one's a scientist and the other is an artist.

They both worked with Bill Ransom and loved working with Bill Ransom, for example.

Severn: That's really interesting. I guess I'd never really thought. I feel like there's a sense within the humanities where it's about acquiring—one, you have to learn what the canon is, where the limits of the body of knowledge are. That can take a lot of time. It's difficult. I always just imagined that that was a little bit straightforward in the sciences over the less abstract, but maybe I'm wrong about that.

The other thing, too, I think acquiring a set of tools within the humanities always seemed like there was just more—how to say it—the tools themselves were a little bit more easy to exchange. You were working with trends, in a certain sense, and it seemed like maybe there was something a little bit more concrete about what the tools were in certain disciplines within the sciences. Again, I'm not sure that's right. I'm just curious because I was thinking about this.

Beug: In both art and science, there's some basic physical skill-building that goes on. I've talked a fair amount about that with Terry Setter. I assume he's still at Evergreen. I don't know if he's retired yet or not. Just the progression that he expected his students to see within the art versus the progression or what I expect the students to see in the sciences is extremely similar. I'd say the same with visual arts, the painters, the people who are painting. There's a lot of skill-building. You have physical skill-building as well as the mental skill-building.

Severn: Yeah. I'm sorry to keep pressing this but is there a specific example? I think I know what you mean but I'm not totally sure.

Beug: There's a lot. At least in chemistry, the key to doing well in chemistry is being good at mathematics, for example. You have to have a good, strong math skillset, and then chemistry comes really easy. That isn't something you would normally think about with chemistry.

I'm thinking about when I took some classes from Marilyn Frasca when I was a dean on drawing. She's an artist. She kept putting me off and putting me off. She finally had me come and it was a day they were doing life drawings. She hands me this huge easel and some charcoals, and I had to sketch models. I had a blast, but I'd never done anything like that. Never even thought about it. But then I went on to take some classes from Marilyn and learned more about artists and how they perceive.

I have a brother-in-law who's fascinating to be with. His art has hung in the National Gallery. He's been written up in the Italian art press. Just in talking to him, I see a lot in common with the way scientists think and scientists proceed. It's very different from when I'm talking with literature folks or philosophers or sociologists.

Severn: Where it makes a lot of sense is in the visual arts especially. I can totally see a very clear skillset that you build on. That makes a lot of sense to me. But I was just thinking, do you think you can say the same thing about literary studies? Philosophy is maybe a little bit trickier because there's such a built-in historical trajectory that in a sense, it's already there for you. You start here and you follow this conversation. But literary studies are tricky, or even creative writing, or maybe history to a degree. Do you think that what you're talking about crosses over to those disciplines?

Beug: Hmm. Those aren't the kinds of questions I've thought about a lot. I'm very pragmatic, just in getting from point A to point B. And not very philosophical. [laughing]

Severn: But you're a big reader. You love literature. I don't want to be presumptuous here but in thinking about social justice, there's obviously a pragmatic element to that, but also, there's a built-in philosophical, ethical, moral orientation to this work.

Beug: Absolutely. But when I'm studying Nietzsche—and I did like Nietzsche—it's all so convoluted. That's why I abandoned it. Versus pragmatic. I'm very pragmatic.

Severn: But you don't find a complicated novel convoluted. We were talking about this a little bit. I want to say you mentioned Dostoevsky. I could be wrong.

Beug: I've read a lot of Dostoevsky.

Severn: Yeah, and I think you mentioned you really loved Dostoevsky. Dostoevsky may not be convoluted, but he's certainly not a pragmatic writer.

Beug: No, I take enormous pleasure in reading Dostoevsky's work, Conrad's work. Conrad's work is really deep. There's a lot of layers and meaning there that I tend to miss, quite frankly. I was quite shocked to realize some of the allusions that were in his work. By getting advanced placement as an undergraduate, I filled all my courses and took overloads in the humanities and social sciences and economics. I did not take extra courses in chemistry, physics and math. Playing in the Pomona College Symphony was very important to me. It was a five-credit class for Pomona College students. It was a zero-credit class for me, but I did it.

Severn: I don't want to go off on too much of a tangent here, but I do find it interesting, and I think it does pertain perhaps to certain things about Evergreen. But it seems like what you're getting at is that there's a difference between a work of literature with depth, human depth, and abstract perseverating that doesn't really go anywhere.

Beug: Sort of like reading Kant. [laughter]

Severn: It depends on who you talk to.

Beug: That's my opinion. [laughing]

Severn: Sure. Is that right? Is that what you're saying? That there's a sense with these novels, these novelists. Part of what you appreciated about them is that they're dealing with human depth. They're not doing this other thing that turned you off about philosophy over the years, where there's this perseveration that isn't really getting at something other than itself. Is that fair?

Beug: Yeah, I think so.

Severn: Okay. You have brought to your work, and it seems like, again, this interest in that humanity, community, seems to be a big part of your orientation towards social justice and thinking about your work in that context. Is that right?

Beug: It's been increasingly so.

Severn: How increasingly? What are you moving toward?

Beug: I'm just increasingly alarmed about where this country is going, and the lack of community, the rise of Trumpism. It alarms me tremendously the active attempts to end democracy in this country by both the Supreme Court and the Republicans. I'm just horrified by what's going on.

Severn: Yeah. Here's a big question. Do you think that Evergreen as an institution is a good place to prevent that kind of thing? Is there work going on there that's—you know?

Beug: Obviously, I'm using Evergreen as an e-mail as one of the three e-mails that I monitor daily, but the conversations that I see at Evergreen are just so far to the left. I'm way to the left, but people who are very close to each other and should be very close to each other are beating themselves up over tiny details, of not being left enough or whatever enough. That alarms me.

Severn: What do you think a healthy corrective to that would be, especially at a place like Evergreen?

Beug: If people were once again on campus and interacting with each other . . . I think human interaction is incredibly important. Nowadays, I live a pretty isolated life. I have a pretty constant string of both Evergreeners and friends coming to visit, but I don't go anywhere anymore. I really value that social interaction.

When I was still able to come to campus—I can't because I can't leave my wife long enough now to do that—I'd just try to walk around and see old friends and visit. But if I found even one person to talk to in the last couple of trips to Olympia, it would be a miracle. All I see is closed, locked doors as I walk hallway after hallway in every building there. I still have better connections with a lot of the staff because they're there, but the faculty are gone. They're absent. AWOL.

Severn: This is also pragmatic. Part of what you're saying is just human encounter, whether it's in an institution or out in the broader world, that counts for something as substantial as some of these more abstract ideas.

Beug: It tends to be humanizing.

Severn: Yeah, I think that's very true, and that's needed right now for sure. Mike, I'll put the ball in your court here. Is there anything else that you want to say about those first couple years at Evergreen and your work? Obviously, this is a short interview, and we're bringing it to a close, but if something else

comes up for you in the next couple weeks, we can pick up where we left off. But is there anything else in particular that's on your mind?

Beug: I went through phases at Evergreen. I did a number of things. I served for two terms as Assistant Director for Recreation. Those folks were shocked as hell wondering what they were going to do with a scientist over there. They didn't tell me that until the end when we had the going-away party. It was a tremendous experience for me and for them both.

But the second and third year, when I was working with Steve Herman, we were doing incredibly important national work, setting the groundwork in terms of environmental studies. My wife was very active in the anti-nuclear movement and became—

Severn: Mike, can you tell me specifically what that work was so we can get it on the page here?

Beug: With Steven Herman, we were looking at the effects of DDT on forest ecosystems, the effect of heavy metals on forest ecosystems, the effect of fluorides on forest ecosystems, like PCBs. We got a lot of publications and generated a quarter of a million dollars in grant income, so that students had summer stipends and could do research. It was important stuff, and it was recognized nationally.

But then, doing the next phase, I decided that rather than tell people, "These are things you shouldn't be doing," I would switch to teaching about things they should be doing. That's when I started teaching Sustainable Agriculture, Ecological Agriculture, Community-Related Studies. I was still required to teach chemistry roughly every other year. As often as I could, I did something else in the community development area. Like Humans and Nature in the Pacific Northwest, this huge program with 120 students and this huge faculty team. That was a really important program to me and a heck of a lot of fun.

Severn: This idea of rather than telling people what they shouldn't be doing but instead offering what they should be doing, is that how you were framing this?

Beug: Yeah.

Severn: Okay. I think that's really interesting for a couple reasons. One, that's a worldview, in a certain sense. Correct me if I'm wrong, but that's a way of dealing with the world and people that is different than walking around criticizing people. Right?

Beug: Right.

Severn: But I also wonder if this shift that you're talking about was significant in your thinking of teaching? Pragmatically, yes, but also what you're doing with students, if that was a turning point for you?

Beug: I think so. I think I became much softer edged in my teaching of the sciences. That made a huge difference. I think I became a better teacher.

Severn: Students responded to that better. Is that what you're saying?

Beug: Yep.

Severn: It think that's really interesting. Is that something you talked about with the faculty, you thinking this way, or was this something that was your own thing and you just had in your mind?

Beug: No, pretty much my own thing in my mind. But I would find faculty that inspired and that I wanted to work with, and then we would teach together. Obviously, there was a lot of common interest and commonality in our thinking. But I've never been really good about being explicit about those issues.

Severn: The thing we're talking about?

Beug: Yeah. It's more of an implicit approach.

Severn: Interesting, so you feel like these are more intuitive shifts that down the road you tend to articulate rather than immediately?

Beug: Right.

Severn: Do you miss those early years?

Beug: The most important years for me, I guess, would be the mid-years at Evergreen.

Severn: How come?

Beug: Because that's when we still had pretty good community; when I still had artists next door that I could talk to. They would be in their offices, and we could get together for coffee and visit rather than the office closed and locked, which is what I saw more often in later years.

But by the middle years, that's when I had started to soften my teaching and broaden my teaching. Although I consider the two years with Steve Herman probably my most important contribution to the world versus to Evergreen or building myself.

Severn: Mushrooms are getting a lot of press these days.

Beug: Yeah, huge. Huge.

Severn: They really are. What's the deal?

Beug: Two things. One, I write about them and teach about them because I want to see people more connected with nature; understanding the interconnections; recognize that we're in the Sixth Great Extinction event in the history of the Earth. We've lost one million species so far. We're going to lose many more, probably including all primates. All because we're unwilling to deal with the massive overpopulation of this country and unwilling to deal with sustainability issues.

That's my biggest concern right now. My original research was atmospheric chemistry as a freshman in college in 1962, a long time ago. Now it's—well, it's not too late. It's too late to avoid much of the damage from global warming, but it's driven by overpopulation. We don't recognize that. Nobody's talking about that.

We're so worried about anti-abortion, and the major religions still, for the most part, ban sex education, ban contraception. They want their religion to overpower all others, and their people to become the dominant people. Scientists are thinking, we'll find a technological solution. We'll grow more food per acre, and we've succeeded. We went far beyond Erlich's "population bomb" in terms of population, but we have far less starvation than we had 40 years ago. But now we have Covid because we have far fewer forests, far too many people. Covid is just like global warming. Massive overpopulation has brought it to our doorstep.

Severn: Makes it easier to spread, transmission, all that stuff. Is that what you're talking about?

Beug: Not only that but it's an animal disease. We haven't left the animals anywhere to live. We're interacting closely with them in every single environment.

Severn: Right.

Beug: I've got a 350-pound black bear hanging out half a block from my house. People see it almost every day. The mountain lions are coming in and eating everyone's cats. I'm living really close to nature, and I realize there's too many of us doing that. I'm one of them, it turns out, but at least I moved here planning to farm.

I had my vineyard, my winemaking. I no longer manage the vineyard, but I'm here because I started a vineyard in 1980 and was very proud of the wines I've made until two years ago when I just said, "It's time to hang it up." We've just gone too far, and nobody is talking about the population issue. I listen to Biden. I listen to everybody. It's not there.

Severn: We're moving away from Evergreen, but actually, at the risk of going on a tangent, I think this intuitively to me feels like a fine conversation to end on, because it's very relevant. But I think all I ever hear about population is the problems of a declining birth rate in relation to the economy. There is some talk about that, but that's got nothing to do with what you're saying. It's very economically focused.

Beug: Right. We need a declining birth rate globally. Look at the average age. Eighteen, 19 years old is the average age in many countries in the world today. That's a recipe for utter disaster, and it tells me we're not going to solve the global warming problem. Haven't got a prayer.

Severn: You want to leave us with a happy note and good news?

Beug: I'm incredibly excited about the traction my book is getting. It's going to get more people out in the woods and thinking about nature and connected to nature. That's my public face. That's what I'm doing in public, but what I've been talking now about is why I'm doing some of these things, and the way I'm doing it. I'm trying to give people an alternative. By giving them an appreciation for nature, I'm trying to get them to think about, hmm, what are we doing to nature?

Severn: That's important stuff for sure.

Beug: I found another new species last week. [laughing] I'm still discovering new things. At least once a month, I find something new to science.

Severn: That's something. I'm going to stop the recording.