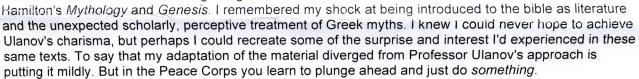
Alumna in Action: February 2008

Bringing Barnard Into The Peace Corps: Lee Norris '57

In 1996, I finally made it into the Peace Corps. I was 61. Maybe because I'd been an editor (Peace Corps logic), I was assigned to Moldova's second-largest university to teach literature to upper-level English students preparing for teaching careers. I had a 40-year-old B.A. in English from Barnard, and I'd never taught anything in my life. For the required Soviet-holdover course known as "Analytical Reading" my department chair gave me *carte blanche*. "Anything you give them will be valuable," she told me magnanimously. What on earth *could* I give them?

I'll draw a veil over the first semester. But during the long winter break I spent days thinking about how I could stimulate both critical thinking and imagination from students who had known little but rote memorization questions from Soviet-approved writers. One morning I woke up with the sudden memory of my 1953 first year English course with Professor Barry Ulanov.

Professor Ulanov was dark, intense, a spellbinding lecturer—and a jazz critic on the side. Perhaps it was his approach, but two of this teacher's most memorable reading assignments were Edith



Over the next few weeks, I, too, assigned a few chapters from *Genesis*. On the first day we were to discuss them, I came in early to class and taped a big roll of cheap wallpaper, underside up, onto the tops of the long wooden tables, which I rearranged into a large U. I handed out colored pencils and crayons. Dividing the class into groups of three or four, I gave each group the task of drawing the stories consecutively, beginning with the Creation, and ending somewhere around the Flood. My students were astounded. "Do you think we are in *gradinita* (kindergarten), Mrs. Norris?" one young man asked huffily.

Within five minutes, however, everyone, working both individually and cooperatively, had become wholly absorbed in producing amazing visual interpretations of "their" section. I asked each group to tell the story of what they'd drawn, then asked them to retell another group's story, pausing to review unfamiliar vocabulary. I used this same technique next with Hamilton's Greek myths, and with memorable results both times. Reading, drawing, and retelling worked in tandem to create visual and oral support for a second reading, and for the following week's critical-thinking questions on creation narratives.

For our first short paper, back in 1953, Professor Ulanov had asked us to compare Alfred North Whitehead's *The Aims of Education* to Hamilton's *Mythology*. The memory of that paper gave me the impetus for my Genesis/Greek myths exam. My instructions: Compare the character and personality of God as described in *Genesis* with the character and personalities of both Zeus and Prometheus in the Edith Hamilton stories. "Support your comparisons with specific examples from the two texts," I added. This was a new concept. Even so, my students told me afterward that although the hardest, it was the most interesting exam they'd ever taken.

