

**BEER BREWING AND SPEED RACING:
AN INTERVIEW WITH FRED ABLONDI**

Interview conducted by Caitlin Stevens – January 2010

Caitlin Stevens (CS): *What was your undergraduate college major? When did you become interested in Philosophy?*

Fred Ablondi (FA): My major in the end was Philosophy. It was several different things before that. I know it started out Chemistry, at one point was Religion, and I probably thought about two or three other things along the way, but my Spring semester Junior year I took a seminar in Kierkegaard, and I thought, “This is what I want to be doing. These are the sort of things I worry about.” And so I had a lot of ground to make up, because that was only my third philosophy class.

I took three courses over the summer in summer school at William and Mary, and then I took almost all philosophy classes that senior year.

CS: *I know when I decided to major in Philosophy I had no idea what I was going to do with it, but I didn't really care at the time. Did you ever worry about that?*

FA: No, I was very much the same way. My thought was, I'm enjoying doing this reading, and it was reading that were tackling issues I was worrying about anyway, so this is how I'd like to spend my time.

I will say even when that I was a Chemistry major for that first semester freshman year, I knew I wanted to go to graduate school. I just always enjoyed school so much that I didn't want to stop just after college. I guess I had that in my mind, whatever my major had been. So when it became philosophy, I just said Philosophy graduate school.

CS: *When you decided to go to graduate school did you have teaching in mind?*

FA: That's a really good question. I must have known that was going to be the end; I had that much awareness, but there was so much less information about graduate schools then there is now with the internet and the different rankings and all that.

I definitely wasn't in the know. I went to a professor just asked, “Do you have a place you would recommend?” and he said the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

I had no idea about different schools being sort of noted for different things. I knew I was interested in the history of philosophy. I do recall getting a brochure I sent away for, I think from the University of Nebraska, and it had their course listings for the previous and coming years and I couldn't believe it. It was all classes like epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of language. You know, I said where's the class on Marx, where's the class on Plato, I thought, I don't want to go there. So my interests were showing up even if I didn't realize it at the time.

As for teaching, I was always the type of kid in church who when the homily was bad I would always think about how I would give a better one, so I think it was in me. I knew how I wanted to teach.

CS: What did you think about going to school in D.C.?

FA: Well, my parents' home was in Maryland, so I commuted. It was an odd experience being a commuter, because one of the most important elements of graduate school is the bond you have with your fellow graduate students. You just need people to complain with, and to go out and have a beer with, shoot hoops with, because it is such a marathon process. There are a lot of times you want to give up, and you just need other people who are going through it too. I'm sure it's the same way with medical school, law school. Going through it together helps.

So being a commuter, I didn't know a lot of other students. I wasn't getting the full feel of it. I didn't pick up right away on what was required of me. You know, an assignment would be 10 pages of Aristotle so I'd set aside 30 minutes a week, read the 10 pages, and think, "Ok, I'm ready for class."

Well, the professor had given us this big bibliography and had expected us to be going through it, going to the reserve room checking out these articles and these books and doing it on our own, and I had nobody telling me to be doing that. I didn't have a bunch of friends around me going to the library.

CS: You alluded to this earlier, but I think philosophy's kind of challenging for a lot of people because it does require that reflection, and it does become very personal to deal with existential questions. Was that ever a turnoff instead of something that stimulated your interests?

FA: No, it was always real stimulation. I don't think all people who go into philosophy and even those who do well have those sorts of "I've always worried about and wondered about" things. I think some people just have a real knack for it and find it fun, but I was among those for whom life is just really, really confusing, and I become more confused everyday, so I need some help.

I couldn't not think about those important things, I wouldn't know how to turn it off, even if I wanted to, and some days I'd like to. There's a great Bob Dylan line that says "I've never gotten used to it. I've just learned to turn it off." And I think, "I've never gotten used to it. And I can't just turn it off."

Kierkegaard is perfect for 19-20 year-olds who are having meaning of life, what-does-God-want-from-me types of questions because he was an incredibly introspective man, who, so the story goes, wrote philosophy 12-14 hours a day. He spent it standing up, just writing all day long.

CS: I guess he couldn't turn it off either.

FA: No, and as I came to see, Kierkegaard is very much a 20 year-old's philosopher. For me, as bad as I can be about worrying, I'm had to say, "Ok, lighten up buddy. Have a coke and smile . . . just relax."

CS: *So you have 5 kids, what's that like? What does life at home look like?*

FA: Eileen just turned 15, Tim is 12, Elizabeth just turned 9, Matthew is soon to be 7, and Christopher just turned 4.

Especially after they have their first child, people say to me, "How do you do it?" But the first one's the only one you really have to say that about. It's just such a shock to your life and your routine to be on somebody else's schedule whether you want to be or not. And I'd always wanted to have a big family, and I remember thinking months after my oldest was born, "I guess not. I guess I'm just not cut out for it. She's going to be an only child. Just, I can't do this."

I really felt I'd sort of let myself down. I had a dream for a big family and I was having trouble with just this one. But really, not that it gets easier, but 2 is not really harder than 1 and 3 isn't harder than 2, etc.

The thing that always made me sort of a little melancholy is when the youngest was 2 or 3 and I'd see someone with an infant and think, "Oh that's never going to be me again." But now I see that, and I think, "Yeah, that's probably never going to be me again."

CS: *And you're ok with that.*

FA: And I'm ok with it, yes. I still like seeing babies, but I'm alright with it.

CS: *So I've heard around school a little bit you're into speed racing and beer brewing. Can you tell me a little about that?*

FA: You bet. I'd always been a racing fan, motor racing and some motorcycle. I'd been to Formula One races, and I always wanted to go to the Indy 500, still haven't done that. But there was this one defining moment in 2002, maybe 2003, where I was watching some show about NASCAR and there was a real, stereotypical NASCAR fan, you know, Dale Earnhardt t-shirt, and it just hit me, I don't want to wear someone else's face on my t-shirts. If I'm going to cheer for someone, I want it to be for me. So I said, "What the heck, I'll give it a shot," and over the next year or so, I bought a racecar, what's called a mini-sprint. I did that, got in way over my head, and would have been a complete failure had not some of the people in that group have been so nice. They didn't know me, didn't have to help me, were racing against me, but decided they were going to help me out.

So my first year was frustrating, second year went better, and in my third year I crashed. I was racing on Good Friday—I figured that was a bad omen—but I was going into a turn, turned my steering wheel, and my car just kept going straight, went up into one of the barriers, and flipped over, and even with all the help people offered, my car was too damaged to put back together.

CS: *But you were ok?*

FA: Yeah, just a bruise on my leg. When you look at the car it seems like it should have been a lot worse, but I was fine, and I kind of got it out of my system after that. You know, I did it, I was satisfied, no more itch.

And the beer brewing story: My first job coming out of grad school was at St. Anselm's College, and the chair of the department was a beer brewer, and he would do crazy stuff like at Halloween he would brew a pumpkin beer (he said it was horrible). He was always experimenting, doing chocolate beers, and stuff like that. And when I got the job at Hendrix, he gave me a beer-making kit as a going away present, and I started off slow.

It can be as easy really as just getting a can of malt syrup and pouring it in boiling water. You can start to add hops, grains for flavoring. So I'm still not doing really complicated stuff. The last one I did was an Oktoberfest at the beginning of last summer.

But it really is very easy. You get a kit, and it tells you everything to do. Two years ago at the end of my son, Matthew's, last year of nursery school, he was out of school before my other kids so we were spending a lot of time together, and I thought, "That'll be a fun experience, brew some beer with my son." So we made a Pilsner together, and he really enjoyed it: lots of stirring and the pouring, so it's kind of a tradition now. A lot of the other kids, some neighbors, came over and helped with the bottling. There's a little device you use to squirt the beer into the bottles, and they enjoy that. So it went from a family thing to now a little neighborhood thing. It's funny, the end result is not the beer drinking. The process is the fun part.

CS: *Do you ever think you could start a beer company?*

FA: Well, it's so easy to do, but it can get so complicated so fast when you take it seriously. There's a lot of, literally, chemistry involved.

CS: *Wasn't there an idea you had for a philosopher's beer?*

FA: Yes, regarding the philosopher George Berkeley. In one of his later writings he was talking about the virtues of tar water, which, as far as I've been able to tell is what it sounds like, water from some Irish swamps, black and icky looking, but apparently he believed it had medicinal benefits and wrote this treatise on all the good reasons to take tar water. So I wanted to call it Tar Water Ale, and on the ingredients I was going to have it be, "X, I know not what," for John Locke's famous definition of substance.

CS: *Do you think your study of philosophy has influenced your worldview, your political stances, everyday conversations?*

FA: I really don't think so. And I don't know if that's a bad thing. Whether or not it should have happened, it hasn't. I went into philosophy having that very real experience of reading Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein, and I found that sort of approach to wrestle with these really big questions spoke to me. I thought they might answer my question about the "meaning of life," and while I liked those philosophers I thought, one day I'd stumble across *that* book in the library, pull it off the shelf, and I'd say, "Yes finally, the

book that has all the answers for Fred Ablondi.” Everything would kind of fall into place.

And I know that’s happened to other people who study philosophy, maybe even others in our department. They found that work, that philosopher, that makes the world make more sense. And I don’t know if it’s still on that shelf, and I just haven’t gotten to it yet or what. But partly, I think what happened to me, is that I sort of fell into 17th century philosophy without even trying. It wasn’t because I thought they had the answers for me. I found and continue to find very little in Descartes that satisfies any personal issues for me. In fact that’s an overstatement—when I say “very little,” I mean, I doubt there’s anything in Descartes where I think, “Yeah, I want to think about the world that way. That seems to be a good insight.” I just found the history of the 17th century so fascinating, the way some people might find the French monarchy fascinating or the history of the Civil War fascinating.

It’s only been very recently, over the last few months, that I’ve reconsidered this question you’re asking. You know, do I want to do more than spend my life studying an interesting story that really doesn’t get to the stuff I’ve wondered about. That said, I really don’t expect to come up with political or ethical views from something I’ve read in philosophy. I just don’t get them from there. I’m not saying some people don’t, or people shouldn’t, but it just doesn’t work that way for me.

CS: What about your job itself? Would you encourage your students or even your kids to take this route you’ve taken?

FA: I have with some of my students. It’s not a route for everyone. I do not think that every philosophy student, by virtue of being a philosophy major, should go to graduate school for philosophy. There are practical reasons—there are a lot more philosophy grad students than there are philosophy jobs, and it’s been that way for two or three decades, and a lot of people I went to grad school with got their degree and had nowhere to go, couldn’t get a job. It’s a lot of time and could be a lot of money to spend and then in the end, in a sense, have nothing to show for it.

You really have to want it. I’m not saying it has to be your life’s passion. Philosophy’s not my passion. My wife and children are my life’s passion. But you’ve got to really, really be sure you want it. I went to school with a lot of people who dropped out, and they will tell you, “I’m so glad I dropped out.” They got a job making more than they probably ever would have in philosophy and ended up being a lot happier than they would have been as well. But we’ve had such good students in my time here. One who went to Stanford and who’s now teaching at Oklahoma State, one from Washington University who’s teaching at Wake Forest, and at least two who are now in the finishing stages of their dissertations at very good places and both will surely get jobs. And those were the roles for them, but I do think it’s a small percentage. Having said that, I have no idea why the two professors I talked to about graduate school didn’t discourage me. They should have because I was not a very good student. I was a B student, taking these courses just because I really enjoyed them. I had spent so much time being grade-conscious in high school, and I just couldn’t do it again. I thought, “We just got through with this. The whole point of being miserable was to get here [to college] so we could enjoy the fruits of it.”

So in terms of my grades, I was unprepared for grad school. In terms of my philosophy background, I was really unprepared; I didn't know a lot, and got very, very lucky. I don't do this, but one could look at my life and say there's evidence for divine providence, or a guiding hand at work. You know I mentioned I applied to one master's program, got in, and if I hadn't gotten in it, I would have shrugged and said, "Oh ok, I'll do something else." It wasn't like, "I'll apply again next year." It was one shot, that's it. Got that master's degree, wasn't sure what I wanted to do, and thought "It can't hurt, I'll apply to a PhD program. I applied to seven, got into one, so I went. But again, if I hadn't gotten into that one, I would have said, "Oh well, I guess it wasn't for me." Go do something else. Got into 17th century philosophy with two wonderfully helpful philosophy professors, one of whom if it hadn't have been for him, I don't think I would have gotten a job. I realize I was very, very lucky. Even with this job. I was at the end of a 3-year position and it was April and I wasn't having any luck. I thought, "Well, I'll just have to look for something else. This was fun for three years, but I'll have to look at other options." And Hendrix advertised for a job for someone who had experience teaching in a freshman interdisciplinary class, specialized in 17th and 18th century philosophy, and had experience teaching philosophy of mind. And those were the three courses I had taught at St. Anselm, so I could not have written a better job description if I'd written it myself. This was a perfect fit.

I remember that in my first semester here I had a young lady who was taking my Philosophy of Mind class. She came in and we were talking and got off on another topic, and it turns out she was born in Mississippi, and this sounds so strange now, that was the most exotic thing: I know someone who was born in Mississippi. The most southern I'd ever been for any length of time was Williamsburg, VA. And here I was now meeting someone who was born in Mississippi, wow, and now of course I realize how provincial I was then.