

Interviewee: Richard Leo Enos [E]
Interviewer: Heather Palmer [P]
Transcriber: Elizabeth McGhee Williams
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Transcript

E: My name is Richard Enos, and I teach at Texas Christian University.

P: Great. And I'm Heather Palmer, and I teach at University of Tennessee in Chattanooga. So here are the questions that we are to follow that are about RSA, of course, because it's the golden anniversary. When did you first join RSA?

E: You know, Eric [Detweiler] was talking to me about that, and I was trying to remember because I know that the organization started around '68, so my best guess is in the very early '70s. I started graduate school in '69. I know how old that sounds. But—

P: And where was that? Forgive me. I should have researched that.

E: I went to graduate school at Indiana University in Bloomington. But I was very interested in rhetoric as an undergraduate, and I just fell in love with it. And Indiana was my number one choice to go to. So I was heaven on earth with that. And in that program, which was—I'm in English—but in that program was an option for rhetoric out of the communication area.

P: So it's separate from the English department that you were in?

E: Right. There was really no rhetoric in the English Department then. Now they have a wonderful rhetoric program out of English at Indiana. So that's a roundabout way of saying my best guess is about the early '70s.

P: Okay. During graduate school for your master's or your PhD?

E: I did both. I started with an MA at Indiana, and then I went right through to the PhD.

P: Okay, do you have any singular, kind of inaugural moments of being there that stick out in your memory? Or was it all hazy 'cause it was the '70s? [laughs]

E: It was all a blur to me, Heather. [laughs] No, what happened was I fell in love with classical rhetoric. I had had it as an undergraduate, and I really enjoyed it. And I grew up in a very traditional Italian inner-city family. So, of course, I was an altar boy. And, of course, I did Latin.

P: So the resonance was—

E: So it all was a part of my personal history—to have all these connections. And I loved all that. So my major interest started out in Roman rhetoric because I had some background in Latin. So I minored in classical studies, and I minored in ancient and medieval history. But toward the—I started to get more and more interested in Greek rhetoric, so I just started studying Greek rhetoric.

P: And do you find—so what drew you to Greek rhetoric? What was compelling? What was the pull from, say, Roman back to Greek?

[some ambient chatter in background during next few minutes of the recording]

E: Well, I really loved the study of history. And all my friends who were in classical studies saying, “Oh, I know you like Latin, but boy, Greek is so much better.” And they always say all this kind of stuff. So I just say, “Okay, okay.” So I thought, “Well okay, while I’m working on my dissertation”—you can’t work on your dissertation 24/7. You just can’t. I mean, you’ll burn out. It’s not even healthy for you to do it. So I said, “Okay, can I just sit in on a Greek class?” Just sit in. And I fell in love with it. So when I started teaching, my first position—I was at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, and they have a wonderful classics department—so I just said, “Can I just sit in on the Greek classes? Just to sit in.” And they all said, “Sure, fine, no problem.” So I developed that more and more, and then I got a real strong interest—I’d always had an interest in argument, so I did a lot of work on legal argument, forensic. But I got more and more interested in orality and literacy. So there was a natural move to the English departments. And then Richard Young and I developed a very good friendship because we were both at Michigan. One of the important textbooks in our field, the early ones, was called *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change* by Young, Becker, and Pike, and they were all at Michigan. So I got a chance to meet these wonderful rhetoricians. Richard Young and I developed a life-long friendship. He’s 86 now, and we still talk on the phone maybe two or three times a month.

P: Right. And that’s what I see as so wonderful about RSA is that you just see these people who have been meeting here for, heck, 50 years now.

E: It’s a wonderful group of people. There was a very famous professor who founded—he was one of the two founders of the journal *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, Henry W. Johnstone, Jr., and he said to me, and he was in philosophy, he said he couldn’t get over how nice the people in this group were.

P: Yeah, very supportive of even just this cross-pollination and interdisciplinary research.

E: And that’s why when we started, it was—the name “society” was with deliberate intent as a kind of a group of friends.

P: Oh. Okay!

[05:09]

E: Yeah, and I'm going to talk about this at 11:30.¹ But essentially, Richard Young proposed that. So it's not an association, it's not an organization.

P: So how are those connotations different? So I'm thinking—

E: Like if you were to think of a society of friends, if you were to think of a group of colleagues.

P: Okay. A collective?

E: A collective. I guess if you were Roman Catholic you would think of Jesuits, the society of Jesus. It's this kind of colleagues in the truest sense of, like, the Latin word for that means "friend." Like your *conlega*, your friend.

P: Right! So like a life-long vocation, all those resonances—

E: Right. And when these people started this, they really were friends. Their common denominator was rhetoric, but they were just—they really enjoyed each other's company, and they selected that term on purpose.

P: That is a really great story.

E: And there's a letter to that effect. It's not just the folklore.

P: Right, right, okay.

E: Where they picked this.

P: The specific word. Yeah, okay.

E: Yeah.

P: And then—well, I guess you just did that: "How would you describe the organization when you first joined it?" But did we answer the question about how you first learned about it? I get you were in graduate school, but do you remember—

E: Well when I was an undergraduate, I was interested initially in speech communication. And I've always loved history, so that was just that. In fact—well, I always have. And then one of my wonderful professors who taught till he was 80—Bruce Loeb's is his name—and he was at the small college I went to in California, and he then went on to spend all of his career at Idaho State. But I remember in one of his argument classes, he says, "And many of the theories go back to Aristotle." I said,

¹ The talk in question was a part of session F15 at the 2018 RSA conference: "The RSA Fellows Remember: 50 Years in Retrospect, the First 25 Years."

“Really?” He said, “Yeah, and he wrote this work called the *Rhetoric*.” And I’m going, “Alright!”

P: [laughs]

E: And then that was all I needed.

P: Yeah. Well that’s interesting what you then do with some of your work about, “Hey, let’s think, you know, beyond and through Aristotle.”

E: Yeah, ‘cause I wanted to do this work, people to realize—I know this sounds obvious, but there was this history of rhetoric before Aristotle.

P: Right.

E: And Aristotle did change everything. I mean, that’s true. But I wanted people to realize that there’s this kind of early, emerging prehistory, and there were many prominent thinkers who preceded him.

P: Yeah. And not just Corax and Tisias. That’s some of the prehistory we go to—

E: Right. Yeah. And so what I really enjoyed doing was going back. I found this other thing—I studied it at the American School of Classical Studies in Athens.

P: Yeah, I wanted to ask you about that.

E: I would say the summer program that I was in was the single best educational experience of my life. And I stayed active—I want to think I stayed active in the association. I’m on the managing committee right now for the American School. And I wanted to see if there was more evidence about the early history of rhetoric than just appears in books.

P: Oh, yeah, right. Materiality and—

E: Yeah, and so I had this great professor who introduced me to the study of archeological evidence and ancient writing on durable material, like marble and wood and stone and paintings and everything. And so I studied epigraphy with him, and at first he thought, “You know, I don’t think there will be much.” And then I said, “Well, let’s see.” And it turns out there was just a wealth.

P: Right. You really think of, sort of, the ground zero of this material transformation of consciousness through evolution of communication technology. That is so exciting! [chuckles]

E: Right. So the rest of my career, in fact, one of the things I want to do, and I don’t think I can do it this summer. There’s like a 5% chance. But maybe before the end of

next summer is, I want to go back to an ancient site that has not been well-studied, that was a center, I think—I'm arguing was a center for the study of rhetoric. We'll see. It's called Halicarnassus. I don't know if you've ever heard of it before.

P: I can see the name in print. I've read around it.

E: Well it's a Greek city, but it's part of modern-day Turkey, and it's on the Turkish peninsula. So, the history of it hasn't been—for our field, hasn't been very well-chronicled, but I think there's enough evidence to show that it was important. And when Cicero studied, and he left Rome and he went to study rhetoric in Greece, which he did for two years, one of the areas that he went to after he went to Rhodes and Athens was he went to Asia Minor—which he called it, that's what he called Asia in the *Brutus*. And he named some of the cities that he went to. He didn't name Halicarnassus. But I think he might have [traveled there] because his brother was a governor there. So anyway, my hope is I can go back either this summer—I've been to Turkey before, but not to this site—and if not, maybe spring, maybe May next year.

[10:25]

P: Yeah, and at the end I kind of want to come back to the role of historiography and sort of, like, material history.

E: Right.

P: You know, in our field, right? With all the new materialisms and the direction that things are going. Okay, so let me tag back to some of my questions—

E: Well, I probably distracted you—

P: No! I'm so fascinated with your work. Okay, you may have already talked about some of this stuff: some of the key people you remember meeting or working with during your early years. So you've touched on a few, sure.

E: Oh, yeah. There was a very wonderful professor named Everett Lee Hunt and he wrote an article, Heather, called "Plato and Aristotle on Rhetoric and Rhetoricians," and he wrote this in 1927.

P: Oh! I was going say, "Why have I missed that name?"

E: No, it's—well, he was also very—he went to be a dean at a wonderful small private eastern school called Swarthmore.

P: Okay, yeah, I know where Swarthmore is!

E: So, in the 1960s he was going to be a guest speaker at this conference that my school was hosting. So you can imagine how old he was, and he was very spry. And he said at the end of his talk, he says, "I'll stay as long as anybody wants to ask questions."

P: Okay.

E: Well I kept that poor man there forever.

P: [laughs]

E: But after that—so I saw these early great scholars, and there was this other wonderful scholar who was on leave at Stanford. He had been at Cornell. His name was Harry Caplan. And Caplan had done a great translation of an early treatise on Cicero or an early treatise on Roman rhetoric.² And it's amazing how these odd things happen—he had left his hat there. So my professor said, "Would you drive over to Stanford?" And I said, "Sure, 'cause I'd love to meet him." So a friend of mine and I did, and we got to talk to him for an hour. So after meeting those two people, I was pretty convinced.

P: Right. That this was the—the group of people that you wanted to be in?

E: Yes. And there were others, like Wilbur Samuel Howell, who were just great.

P: Yeah.

E: You know, it's funny though, 'cause like as an aside—because when people study some of these people, they think of them as, like, historical. When I say, "Yeah, I was at a cocktail party with Burke once." And they go, "What?" Like, "What?!" [laughs]

P: Yeah!

E: Like, they're real people! And Toulmin. And I—he was giving this talk, and I was asking him some stuff after. 'Cause when you teach it, the students always think they are these kinds of historical people, and they forget they are real people.

P: Yeah, I guess students think of them as fossils. I tend to think of people like rock stars. People like you, or even somebody as young as Debbie Hawhee. I get tongue-tied.

E: [laughs]

P: And I'm her same age! I'm 47. But I love her work, and I love your work, and I tend to get a little, you know, tongue-tied by all the rock stars!

² Caplan translated the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*. That translation is volume 403 in the Loeb Classical Library.

E: Well, I'm flattered. She's a terrific researcher. I read her first book, which was about rhetoric and athletics in ancient Greece.³

P: I use it all the time with my students because it's so elegant. I'm like, "This is what we're shooting for." [laughs]

E: Did you know she was a great basketball player?

P: At UT!⁴ [laughs]

E: National champions.

P: That's right! She's just so interesting. She took that discipline and then she just—

E: And she applied her knowledge of athletics, as well as rhetoric, to ancient Greek and athletics and rhetoric.

P: And her habits of being. Her disciplinary habits of being. I just have so much respect. So, okay, you've kind of answered this stuff. What was RSA doing when you first joined? Okay, maybe major projects and goals. I mean, is there any way we kind of can trace out sort of its disciplinarity? Like, maybe reflexively, how did it consider itself as a discipline? Was it defensive at all? Did it have to protect its—

E: You know what, I think this is one of the beautiful features of this association, is that we had a fairly rigid view of what classical rhetoric was and the history of rhetoric.

P: That's what my understanding was. Yeah.

E: And then many scholars, most of them were women, said, "Well there's such a thing as a woman's rhetoric, and it doesn't fall into the normal way, so people tend to think it's not rhetoric, but they're wrong, and here's why they're wrong." And they made great arguments. So there wasn't a resistance. There was just—once the argument was presented, it made sense. And so what has happened—'cause Ed Corbett and I went together to the very first meeting. Heather. This was, like, the—and Andrea [Lunsford], she'll verify this; she's here—for the Coalition—the original title, which I'm not going to get right, is the Coalition of Scholars for the Study of Women in the History of Rhetoric. And I'm—that's pretty close. And they modified it a little bit more to do, say, feminist rhetorics now. But we were saying, Corbett and I, "Well, maybe we shouldn't—maybe we're not welcome to go because we're men," but we sat in the back, and we were absolutely encouraged to go.

P: Well, because you know the women's studies departments would not let men take intro to women's studies classes back then, in like '72. So no wonder you guys were like— [laughs]

³ *Bodily Arts: Rhetoric and Athletics in Ancient Greece.*

⁴ I.e., the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

E: Well, I wasn't sure. So I said, "Well, let's just sit in the back," and we would decide. And it was just the opposite. They embraced it. People like Cheryl Glenn, who I—when I first heard her talk, and I think she'll tell you this, it was in 1988, and she was a grad student at Ohio State and she was giving a talk. Penn State used to have a summer conference every other year. And I met her there, and I went to her talk, and I thought, "Boom. She's gonna be something special."

P: She's on it, yeah. She's still doing good work. I use her work in my women's rhetoric classes all the time. I do have a question.

E: Sure.

P: Okay, so classics. I've been to a couple of classics conferences. And when you compare it to, like, this conference.

E: They're not the same.

P: No!

E: It's like night and day—

P: That's like blood sport sometimes or something. I mean, you'll be on some of these panels and—

E: Yeah, and it's not been good for them.

P: Okay. That's what I was going to ask you.

E: Now, I think things are modifying with that group. See, 'cause sometimes, and this is going to sound odd, but when you get somebody in classics who's writing about rhetoric—okay, they do know, obviously, classical studies and philology and ancient history—but many of them who are writing about rhetoric have never studied rhetoric. So what you know from having studied it is new to them. So they will write wonderful scholarship, but there'll be these gaps because there's this area of scholarship done by rhetoricians that they are not familiar with.

P: Right. And, like, just broad lines of inquiry as far as epistemological questions—

E: Right. See this is all new to them. Like they will cite—it's very common—like, they'll cite George Kennedy 'cause he has a connection there. And they'll cite one or two. So sometimes when I review a book, I'll say all the good parts, but I'll say this would have been even better had they known about this, this, and this. So I'm not slamming the book at all, but I am at the same time showing them that there's a shortcoming. It would be even better if they had known of this research.

P: Okay. And thank you for that. I'm always trying to look at the relationship between the classics folks and the rhetoric folks and what is that divide? Is there a divide? Is it just different lines of approach, or—

E: Well I think the temperament—I think there was this bright line back in the day. But I think, Heather, that's changing a lot because there are a lot of people, like more in your group, who are more open and willing and eager. And it's a very healthy—it's becoming a much healthier environment. Like when I went to the American School of Classical Studies, one of the professors said, "Well your application, it was so different, so odd." I think they were going to say weird, but they said, "We just wanted to see." And nowadays, they know that there are more people.

P: So you don't have to keep proving the worth of the field over and over?

E: I don't think so, because there's just so much good work coming out of rhetoric. And see that's the thing, at the end of the day, it's hard to wave away good work. You know, 'cause then you just start to look silly if you're saying—

P: They can't trace the philology down to the, or something like that—

E: And for what they do, it's great. But it's not everything, and there's just other areas.

P: Yeah. Okay. I have been curious about that because I started to try to study Latin when I was way in my 30s, and the brain, neurologically—

E: No, no. I'm gonna give you the best advice. Watch this.

P: [laughs]

[19:55]

E: Promise this. You can email me and tell me if I'm right or wrong, but watch this. There are great Latin texts that introduce the language, like Wheelock is the most famous. You can get that at Barnes & Noble, anywhere. And it's gone through a gazillion editions, okay, and it's really user-friendly. This is what one of my old teachers told me, and it's absolutely true. If you say, "Every day," but take the weekend off and holidays off—so Monday through Friday—"I'm gonna spend 15 minutes studying this, and at the end of 15 minutes, even if I think I've done nothing, I'm done." Now if you want to do more, that's your own business. But come hell or high water, watch what happens. You will shock yourself.

P: Okay. 'Cause it was way intimidating when I sat down to do it.

E: No, no, no, don't. Just take little steps. "Okay, here's what I'm gonna do. And I don't think I learned anything today." But you'd be wrong. Because it is starting, and your mind is going to respond to a different way of thinking.

P: Right.

E: But you will—and this is what Brother Dominic, who was a Christian brother, which is a Catholic religious order, taught me when I was studying in Italy. And he said –'cause I was studying Latin, but I was starting to get more interested in Greek—and he said 15 minutes a day.

P: With the Greek?

E: Yeah. But the same is true with Latin. And if you studied Latin, Greek is much easier than if you don't do it.

P: Okay.

E: Even though they are different. And people say, "What?" You know? But you will be surprised. 'Cause once you get your mind used to doing it in that way, inflected languages, then the next one becomes easier and easier.

P: Okay. Yeah, because French was my—my grandfather was actually a French linguist.

E: Well, yeah! Good.

P: I don't know why my brain's wired that way.

E: Well, yeah, just say, "Come hell or high water, for a month, I'm gonna do this. And then I'll see where I am at the end of the month."

P: Yeah. Right.

E: You can email me back and tell me if I'm wrong.

P: So this is from Brother Dominic? [laughs]

E: Brother Dominic. He was a professor in a study program in Italy. And he was one of the ones who—

P: What—oh, sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt.

E: No, no, that was it. He was one of the teachers. He was wonderful. He did marine archaeology. What he did was, he would go and the thing he was working on was when Romans crossed over this river—we do this to this day—they would throw a coin in for good luck.

P: Yeah.

E: So he was excavating in the riverbed all these artifacts that had been tossed in by ancient Romans.

P: Oh, right. So he was of a religious order but also an archaeologist?

E: Yeah, yeah. 'Cause he was a professor. The Christian Brothers are a teaching order, and they have schools—universities like Saint Mary's, which is in California, and La Salle, which is in Philadelphia. And that was his area. He was in archaeology.

P: 'Cause I know my grandfather loved Teilhard de Chardin—I know I'm getting way off of it, but he was, you know, an existentialist priest who was also an archaeologist?

E: Yeah, 'cause they have a research area. Maybe its English literature or it's history or something else. But that's what Brother Dominic's was.

P: Right, right. Okay, I've got to tie it back to my questions here.

E: Okay. How are you doing for time? Are you okay?

P: Yes, we have another ten minutes. And you've kind of covered some of this, but what are some of your most important or prominent memories related to RSA? I guess recent or distant or—

E: Well I think this is going to sound obvious, but it gave us a place to share our research and to meet people who were also interested.

P: Okay.

E: And because in other conferences, whether it was in communication or English or something, *maybe* there would be one or two panels in the whole conference. So imagine this conference and having only one or two panels that even approached rhetoric. And then we had to—it was sort of like, "Well, who could get on this one panel?" Well, so there just wasn't enough opportunity to get, you know, a chance to do your work. So the beautiful part about this is this was all about rhetoric, and when you look at the purpose statement of the association, in sort of its broadest sense, they purposefully tried to say there's a spectrum, and it's all welcome. There's not a hierarchy. It's a spectrum.

P: Yeah. So, like, was there any drama? There's not been any fights or dramatic moments with people, like, throwing— [laughs]

[25:00]

E: Well, see here's the nice part. If you develop a good relationship with groups of people—like I could say that I don't agree with *this*. But they know that we're still friends,

I just don't agree on *that*. And so in the old days, it was wonderful because people would see, like—maybe somebody like Jim Berlin and I would get into arguments, but we were great friends. And it set a nice tone, I think, because people could see, "Well, just because you don't agree on this and that doesn't mean that you don't respect each other and that you aren't interested and like each other."

P: And we should be able to practice that because, after all, we're supposed to be the scholars of this 2500-year-old art of ethical deliberative—

E: Well, we could be—I mean, our association encourages it. People I think who are petty and vindictive and stuff—they don't last very long around this.

P: I was going to say I haven't really seen any—I've been at other conferences where I've just been shocked at people's inability to deliberate, you know, in any ethical or open manner.

E: Right.

P: And it's really just that throwing down the ego kind of thing. I honestly—I've been coming to this for ten years now, but—

E: Yeah, well that's what brings people back is it's both rigorous but comfortable. I guess that's the way to say it.

P: Right.

E: 'Cause if somebody doesn't agree, you're going to hear it. But you aren't hearing it in a mean-spirited, vindictive way, or scornful. You aren't going to get that.

P: Uh-uh. It's been more like, "Let's rotate this a bit, and look at it from this angle."

[both laughing]

E: That's good. I haven't heard that. Okay, that's good. I'll remember that. Okay, so how are we doing?

P: Okay, we have two more questions.

E: Let's fire away.

P: How do you think RSA will change in the years to come? [laughs]

E: Well, I think it's becoming bigger.

P: Oh my gosh, yeah.

E: And we don't want it to become in a way that's so big that we lose the personal touch.

P: Like MLA or something.

E: But we don't want to exclude anyone. Well, yeah. And I think MLA has realized the problems that they've created. And I give them credit. They've realized that their exclusivity has hurt them, and they're working hard to change that.

P: Yeah. I've noticed that the last—yeah.

E: You know the current president of MLA is a rhetorician.

P: A rhetorician. Yeah, and I was so surprised.

E: Anne Gere. Yeah. She came to me when—she'll tell you this—when she was a grad student at Michigan, and I was beginning to teach. And she asked me if I knew anything about Jamaican rhetoric, and I said—I remember I was bending over backwards—and I said, “Well I really don't know anything about that.” But she was just *interested*. Now there is a lot of work in Caribbean literature now, and it's *really* important and popular, so maybe there *is*. But back then, we didn't have any knowledge. But that was—I remember when she was a grad student in the English department at Michigan.

P: You're a rhetorician, so you're supposed to know about all the things. *All* the rhetorics. [laughs]

E: “Don't you know about this?” Yeah.

P: [laughs] Yeah. But, changing in the years to come, you know, your vision?

E: Well, I want us to keep—I want us always to be welcoming and inclusive. But I don't want to lose, and I mean this in the most positive way, the sort of intimate, friendly nature that we—that got this thing going. So we have to really be careful we don't just turn into an organization. That we don't just become this bureaucracy. That we keep this comradery. That's the biggest single thing. And we have a super session coming up tomorrow,⁵ and essentially, that's—they're going to ask that kind of question, and that's what I'm going say, more or less.

P: Right. So we're getting bigger but we need to kind of retain—

E: We want to keep our identity, you know.

P: Well, the “society” part of it, and all those kinds of—

E: That's my hope, my personal hope, that that's what we do.

⁵ See footnote 1.

P: Well, that sounds like a good place to end. Right?

E: Alright then!

P: Great.