

*In Memory of John Mersereau (1935-2009) Director of the RC, 1977-1985*

*This tribute was offered by Cindy Sowers at a Memorial presented by the Residential College Faculty after the passing of Professor Mersereau.*

What does one life give to another life? I remember a conversation I had with Professor Mersereau shortly after he had arrived at the Residential College. We were sitting in the Halfway Inn. I had just completed my Ph.D. in Comparative Literature, and it would have been hard to find someone more ignorant of the world than I was. So when Professor Mersereau mentioned the situation of poets in the Soviet Union – there was still such a place in those days – I had no idea what he meant. I had never heard of anything like what he described so briefly, so definitively – as if elaborate detail were unnecessary. At that time, I confess, I inhabited a world of talk, a world of theory that had no place for the experience, say, of Joseph Brodsky. Such was my ignorance, in Ann Arbor; at the Residential College.

Then, about a decade later, in the fall of 1988, quite by chance I came upon a conference at Rackham called “Religious Movements in Eastern Europe.” I was curious; I attended; and my ideological world was stood on its head. Scholars from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and the Soviet Union presented evidence concerning the role of religion in challenging the political ideology of communism. And then, the revolutionary events of 1989-1991 changed history. The present moment of those days was change itself; but neither the past nor the future were at all what I had believed them to be. Everything had to be revised. I kept thinking about Professor Mersereau’s remarks so many years before; the conversation in the Halfway Inn is still so vivid in my memory. It took me ten years to understand what he had meant. But at last, I understood. What did one life give to another life? It was truth.