Our fall seminar is an opportunity to develop the inquiry into human life and human endeavor that begins in our humanities classes and to expand that inquiry across a range of disciplines. We seek to find and explore the crucial questions or investigations that span the disciplines and also underlie our pursuit of all worthwhile activities. The fall seminar is thus devoted to the common ground and common themes of knowledge. In the spring, we will examine the ways in which different disciplines approach these questions differently. Most Fridays, you will have a short reading assignment, which is either already linked below or will be posted ahead of time on the seminar stellar site. Also posted on the stellar site each week will be a question for you to address in a paragraph or so (no more than one page), which you will hand in at the start of the seminar. We’ll begin with lunch and then, after about 40 minutes, begin the discussion. Concourse faculty will lead the discussion, but we want you to be active participants. Come hungry – physically and intellectually!!

I. Welcome Picnic

September 5

II. Familiar Words; New Meanings

September 12
What is education (do we live in a cave?)?
Reading: selection from Plato’s Republic

September 19 – NO CLASS (career day)

September 26
What is Knowledge?
Reading: Walt Whitman: When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer
Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Bacon (selections)

October 3
Motion and Energy
Reading: Aristotle’s Physics (excerpts)
Galileo Galilei, Dialogues Concerning Two New Sciences (excerpt)

October 10
Evidence and Proof
Reading: Euclid, Book IX Proposition 21
Plato, Republic (excerpt)
Carl Sagan, The Varieties of Scientific Experience (excerpt)

October 17
Definitions, Models and Truth
Readings: Andrew Abbott, Method and Discovery
Plato, Meno (Meno’s paradox), Republic (Book IV, tripartite soul)

III. Justice, Morality and Human Nature

October 24 (family weekend)
The Civic Role of Religion
MIT Chaplains
Readings: Hobby Lobby decision
Zacchary Fine, “My So-Called Opinions”
Invocation at MIT Commencement
Survey of Incoming Freshmen

October 31
What is happiness?
Reading: Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, prologue (section 5)
Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, Book I, chapter 7
TED talk: http://www.ted.com/talks/dan_gilbert_asks_why_are_we_happy.html

November 7
Science and human nature
Reading: Primo Levi, The Periodic Table (Hydrogen, Potassium, Carbon)

November 14
Love
Reading: Love Letters (selections)

IV. Problems and Promises of Modernity

November 21
Modern science and modern life
Reading: Yuval Levin, “The Moral Challenge of Modern Science”
Mark Helprin, “The Acceleration of Tranquility,” Forbes Magazine

November 28 – NO CLASS (Thanksgiving)

December 5
The Modern Temper:
Reading: Wallace Stevens, Sunday Morning
(http://masi.cscs.lsa.umich.edu/~crshalizi/Poetry/Stevens/sunday_morning.html)

December 12
The Limits of Knowledge
Readings: Bible (selections)
David Bentley Hart, The Beauty of the Infinite (excerpt)
Sean Carroll, “Quantum Time” (From Eternity to Here)