

A Professor's Life Well Lived

Remarks for the Memorial to H. Mike Awalt

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A great part of what I say in the next few minutes is wrapped like kudzu around the heart and mind of Mike Awalt and Ginger Osborn, because we were for over 25 years like Siamese triplets on the third floor of Fidelity Hall. We three shared our lives, our hopes, our secrets. We laughed, argued, and grew old together. That was our very deliberate plan- hatched together, just the three of us, almost three decades ago in Mike's office.

As I have heard Ginger tell our students a hundred times... 'Someone, someone irreplaceable, has given you the current shape of your life and much of the content of your heart.' There's no doubt that for all of us present this afternoon, Mike was such a person. I am so grateful that his family is letting us share in the celebration of his remarkable life...a life that touched so many persons with warmth, wisdom, and joy.

For years and years, Mike, Ginger and I would share with each other something we were reading. Sometimes we would sit down in one of our offices and just talk about an essay or passage for an afternoon. Students and other faculty would often bob in and out joining the conversation for a short time, or its full duration.

It was Mike who gave me a passage from Kierkegaard's essay, "The Part Divine Providence Had in My Authorship". I want to read it, because I realized even then how well it fit Mike, and today it seems wholly appropriate as his own voice.

“And now I come to an expression about myself which I am accustomed to use of myself when I talk to myself, ... I am “a spy” ...a “spy” in a higher service, the service of the philosophical idea. I have nothing new to proclaim; I am not a holy man; I am not an authority to be followed; in fact, I never go to work straightforwardly, but with indirect cunning, I bait and entice others to philosophy; actually, I am just a spy who in his spying, learns all about the human being and its conduct, illusions and suspicious characters; but all the while, it is he himself who is under the closest inspection of all (p. 87).”

There are hundreds of incidents that stand out in my mind about Awalt’s warmth and affection for our students. Judging by the films that he used over and over again, it’s clear to me that he identified most with Professor Charles Kingsfield in *The Paper Chase* and John Keating in *Dead Poet’s Society*....Kingsfield for his use of the Socratic method and Keating because of his love and passion for his students; encouraging them in their individual life dreams. But there can be no doubt that it was **Mike’s own unique alchemy** of these models that yielded such an extraordinary and gifted mentor of literally hundreds of students....and a great cache of awards and accolades.

Mike believed that teaching is the most noble of endeavors and that, at its best, it transmits civilization one test, one paper, one class at a time. If every single student in his class spoke up, that class was a resounding success. If students sat mute or kept to themselves, that class was a dismal failure. In fact, Mike could sometimes allow a class to sit for what seemed like an eternity, until someone responded to a question he posed or a text they read. He prospected, found, and mined the deep core of courage in each of his students and provided them the means of self-discovery. He believed that the Delphic command to “know thyself” depended on the courage of each person to share her thoughts, ideals and values with others without fear or apology.

I've had to resist telling a thousand stories about Mike's wonderful humor, care, and insight. I will tell only this one.

Mike and I were in Florida together at a conference in April 1998 when he received the Ernest L. Boyer International Teaching Award for 1997. After we arrived back in our room that night, the phone rang and I received word that my younger son had been struck by lightning while leaving the field after a Belmont soccer team practice. It was too late to get out of Jacksonville that night, so Awalt had to listen to me, console me, and cry with me through the night. Although we often talked about our kids many times before, this night gave Awalt a chance to share with me his deep feelings about family and children and the crimson tie that binds them eternally.

What delight he took in Brad!...He would bust his buttons in the most unpretentious way possible, while beaming with pride about Brad. And then, he felt so utterly gifted to have not only Connie but Jami, Susanna and Russ, Steve and Tiffany!.....but my goodness..... he never enjoyed anything like the role and place of Paw Paw and his beloved grandchildren!

Johannes Climacus is the pseudonymous author of the *Philosophical Fragments* and its companion piece, the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Kierkegaard took this name from a Greek monk (c. 570-649) who was the abbot of Saint Catherine's Monastery on Mt. Sinai. Kierkegaard uses the voice of Climacus to express his famous notion of the leap of faith. For Climacus, faith in God is an agonistic and fearful struggle leading to the ultimate decision whether one will cast one's entire person and destiny onto God or not. This awesome choice filled with fear and trembling cannot be mediated by proofs or reason; these are crutches and substitutes for faith. It is a sheer leap from the doubt that is rooted in the paradoxical nature of

life, to the faith and trust that the Ultimate loves us. That all this is expressed in a work entitled, "Concluding Unscientific Postscript" is no accident. The word "Concluding" has a two-fold meaning, since it refers 1) to the conclusion of Kierkegaard's writing career on the one hand, and on the other 2) to the conclusion of the monumental work *Philosophical Fragments* in which Kierkegaard expressed the idea that philosophy by itself is unable to bring meaning and hope to our lives.

It seems fitting to me to conclude my remarks today with this leap of faith that I now make in affirming that Mike has found in his own continuing identity both solace and transcendence beyond this time and space.

Awalt invented, designed and taught the course entitled *Death and Dying*. He thought and wrote about human suffering, loss, and disaster, but he had a most distinctive view of these trials. He saw them as offering those left behind the means of becoming more fully human, of finding meaning, of promoting their growth and flowering into something both deeper and richer than they would otherwise be. In short, he believed in us, in our capacity to remake ourselves in the face of terrible tragedy and senseless loss.

We cannot now let him down. We cannot now, especially now, afford to forget his complete confidence in us. We are, each of us, pledged to keep the faith he had in us.