

## **Remembrance**

### **Arlin G. Meyer Funeral**

**February 11, 2017**

Earlier this week on late Monday afternoon, two days before Arlin's death, the weekly Lilly Fellows Colloquium met to discuss part of a book entitled *Teaching and Christian Imagination*. The book invites readers to consider teaching in terms of three extended metaphors grounded in the Christian Scriptures. The metaphor that we explored last Monday was the image of the teacher as gardener and the classroom as a garden. During that conversation, my mind drifted to memories of Arlin Meyer. When I first came back here to Valparaiso in 1983 to take a teaching position in Christ College, my dean was Arlin Meyer. As I was settling in to my new office early one morning, I discovered that Arlin was watering and otherwise tending the garden in the Mueller Hall courtyard. As I watched Arlin do this as part of his morning ritual every day for as long as the weather permitted it, I thought it was simply his own way of unwinding and centering himself. But during Monday's colloquium I came to realize that this gardening was really a preparation for what was in a word Arlin's life work: teaching.

Almost everything that Arlin Meyer did at Valparaiso University he understood as a form of teaching. He was therefore the most hands-on dean in the history of the University. And Arlin had very big hands. He read all the applications of potential Christ College students himself so he could get to know them even before they arrived by reading their application essays. On the first day of classes he could be seen in the central hallway of Mueller Hall directing bewildered first year students to their appropriate classrooms. He arranged the furniture in the Commons, made sure that all the classroom doors were unlocked, and of course put on the coffee for the faculty and staff. Each semester he would personally do a transcript audit by hand for each and every student to insure they were on schedule to graduate on time. He knew every single student by name, and he knew where they were from, and he knew what their majors were. He even knew who the students would be dating before they did. Such a seemingly omniscient and gigantic human being could be a formidable presence to undergraduate

students. So Arlin never had to threaten or even cajole to exert discipline. He only had to stand there. Delinquents shaped up quickly in his presence.

This hands-on administrative style extended well beyond his twelve years as dean of Christ College into his equally long tenure as the founding program director of the Lilly Fellows Program in Humanities and the Arts. In addition to having to build a national network of church-related colleges and universities, which now numbers around 100, Arlin selected, supported, and mentored scores of Lilly post-doctoral teaching fellows. Five such fellows were present at the colloquium this past Monday. And the book I mentioned that we were studying together was co-authored by a woman whom Arlin had recruited to serve on the board of the Lilly Fellows Program.

Like some of the undergraduates in Christ College, the postdoctoral teaching fellows were sometimes startled or intimidated by Arlin. More than one new Lilly Fellow suddenly discovered, on the summer day they were moving into their house in Valparaiso, Arlin Meyer standing in their as yet unfurnished living room. Astonished of course, and expecting the worst, i.e. that Arlin had come over to inform them that their fellowship had been revoked, they soon became relieved and pleased to learn that Arlin had simply dropped in unannounced to help them move into their new home. He probably carried too many couches in his life. And too many other burdens better borne by others as well.

Once Arlin had defined for himself the primary tasks of leadership, and once he had construed those tasks as forms of teaching, nothing could distract him from attending to them. He was, for example, oblivious to money. When his beloved administrative assistant Elene Amundsen would occasionally look in his desk drawer to find something or other, she would discover any number of uncashed travel reimbursement checks dating back two or three years. If you had asked Arlin how much money he was making, he could not have told you. There was something almost otherworldly about his lack of concern for material comfort, a fact that seemed marvelous to some but sometimes troublesome to those who had regularly to share some of the resulting discomfort with him.

Arlin had about him a kind of massive imperturbability worthy of the great Roman historian Tacitus who thought that steady composure under all conditions was the supreme virtue. Arlin was always for Christ College a kind of calm center in the midst of sometimes stormy seas. His neighbor and colleague and good friend Al Trost who was always filled with intimations of disaster once proclaimed to Arlin while he was dean that Christ College was about to collapse and was surely on the verge of extinction. Arlin simply changed the subject. Indeed, Arlin's major two strategies for dealing with vexing news were either to change the subject or to seem to suffer from a momentary hearing loss.

Yet Arlin was occasionally moved to acts of sudden and heroic intervention. He once saw from his Linwood office window large machinery advancing on a row of trees that Arlin had been assured would be spared during the landscaping operation needed to create a new parking lot. He rushed from his

office, interposed himself between the bulldozers and the threatened trees, and refused to move until the Caterpillar monsters had withdrawn. And at that moment he did seem larger than life, this time the protective gardener rather than the cultivating one. And those trees still stand as a memorial to Arlin's sometimes ferocious tenacity. He was like that great figure Athey Keith in Wendell Berry's novel *Jayber Crow* who risked life and limb to protect his beloved oak grove from the menacing and inexorable forces of mechanized agriculture. If you did not know Arlin and want to know what he was like, you could do worse than to read that novel and get to know Athey even though fictional characters always come off inferior when compared to Arlin. Reading *Jayber Crow* would be the kind of thing that would have pleased Arlin. In other words, if you want to honor Arlin, read a novel, preferably one by John Updike or Peter DeVries or Wendell Berry.

Imperturbability and determination, as his family knows even more than his colleagues, sometimes shaded into—dare I use the word?—stubbornness. In other words, as Arlin would have been the first to admit, he was no saint. Actually, he probably would not have said this, because he so seldom revealed anything about himself or his own self-understanding. He was like the man in the famous comic sketch by Dave Barry (no relationship to Wendell) who could spend an entire afternoon with several of his closest friends without once mentioning that he had been told the day before that he would by the end of the week have to have one arm and both legs amputated. But although his reticence and opacity could be frustrating, his great silences were often signs of virtue. I never heard him speak ill of anyone. He embodied the familiar adage that discretion is the better part of valor. And he always cared much more about others than he did about himself.

Imperturbability and inscrutability are not traits that ordinarily awaken deep affection in others. Yet seldom in the history of Valparaiso University have so many loved so deeply for so long a particular teacher, much less a particular administrator. Arlin's grandchildren adored him, and still do. And Arlin had a special gift with children who grew to trust and love him very quickly. So too with Arlin's children and their spouses, with Arlin's students, his colleagues, and his many, many friends. Tributes from around the country have been pouring in to Linwood House this week, from former Lilly Fellows and from deans and provosts and department chairs from scores of church-related colleges and universities across the country. The favorite term of endearment among the Lilly Fellows is to refer to Arlin as the gentle giant. The former provost of one large Catholic university on the East Coast said that Arlin's invitation to him to serve on the Lilly National Network Board and his subsequent friendship with Arlin thereafter were at the very top of his memories in higher education.

And then, of course, there is Arlin's beloved wife Sharon. Like all marriages, theirs was driven by its own peculiar dynamic. One dimension of their teamwork profoundly shaped Christ College, which had virtually no entertainment budget while Arlin was dean. And Arlin was both lavishly hospitable and

stringently parsimonious at the same time. This seeming contradiction was possible to maintain only because of Sharon. She made over the course of the years that he was dean enough ham roll-ups to feed the proverbial 5000 and have many more than twelve baskets left over. And Arlin mobilized the full range of Sharon's many gifts. She often served as the hostess to visiting scholars or to job candidates, showing them around the town of Valparaiso and fielding whatever non-academic questions they might have about either the university community or the whole northwest Indiana region. Arlin and Sharon were a team from beginning to end.

So how did this calm, quiet, large, and mysterious man elicit such deep and widespread affection? In many ways, I suppose, but primarily I think through his unique practice of the hermeneutics of love. This is a fancy way of saying that Arlin knew in his bones that we must love in order to understand. And he exercised this principle both on people and on texts. Arlin understood something vitally important about teaching literature that was as much a product of his Christian formation as it was of his professional training. It is good to teach students how to read, but it is much better to teach them to love reading. Indeed, for Arlin, without the love, one could never really learn to read well. Love is never sufficient by itself for understanding. But without love, without that special hunger for unity with the subject under study, certain truths about a text will remain forever obscure regardless of the amount of disciplined attention lavished upon them. And love takes time. What some mistook for excessive deliberation, an almost lumbering Meyer movement through various texts, was really a planned effort to maintain the proper pace of love as it blossomed through discipline into critical appreciation and then eventually ripened into profound understanding.

Because of this hermeneutics of love, applied by Arlin equally to books and to students, the pinnacle of his teaching experience from his vantage point was located in Cambridge England where he spent two years as the Director of Valpo's Cambridge Program. The cohorts of students he taught there still hold annual reunions at the Meyer home and elsewhere after over forty years. And because Arlin was always such an Anglophile, he would have welcomed today, I think, being compared to the central character in the best-selling British novel of the 1930's and 1940's, a beloved teacher named Mr. Chipping (known affectionately by students as Mr. Chips), who taught for many years at a British boys' public boarding school located in the fictional village of Brookfield, in the Fenlands and who came into his own as a teacher only with the help of his wife.

Like Chips, Arlin Meyer resolutely, or should we say stubbornly, resisted many social and technological changes that to his mind came between him and his students and colleagues. He much preferred walking around campus in order to talk to folks face to face over using that device he never mastered, the telephone. Indeed, he never did learn how to check his voice mail messages from off campus. And as for the internet and email and all of the rest of those contraptions that to him fostered a

harried way of life and that threatened to fray the bonds of community, these to Arlin seemed somehow inimical to learning in ways that he could not have fully specified but that he knew in his heart. Distance learning to him was a contradiction in terms.

So Arlin will remain for all of us to some extent a monument of warning against the hasty, the inconsiderate, the slapdash, the tawdry, the careless, the gimmick, the shortcut, the perfunctory and the superficial. He belonged largely to a vanished world, but it was a world that most of us here in this room today once loved almost as much as we still love Arlin.

And so it is that we today bid adieu to our own flesh and blood teacher , a gardener of souls, who first appeared almost a hundred years ago as a fictional character in the Anglo-American literary world that Arlin Meyer loved so much.

Goodbye, Mr. Chips.