

Albert Dragstedt

Let others probe the mystery if they can.
Time-harried prisoners of Shall and Will—
The right thing happens to the happy man.

John Albert Dragstedt was born on Nov. 11, 1933. He died “suddenly and peacefully” on Sunday, October 30, 2016. He taught World Classics now called Collegiate Seminar, philosophy, Greek and Latin, and a variety of courses in the Integrated Program, later the Integral Program of Liberal Arts. In the classroom he was often an enigma to his students. To his colleagues he was always an education.

Many here present could deliver a eulogy worthy of Albert. Probably none could do it so well as...Albert himself. He was a great lover of speech and a deliverer of great speeches, sometimes great big speeches. Naome, Mrs. Dragstedt, wanted a Brother to speak. Asked, I demurred. But mention Albert and I think of the Theodore Roethke

poem he introduced to my class some years ago. I said I would be happy to recall Albert for us.

From classes they took more than 50 years ago, two students independently recall him asking Could Beethoven's Fifth Symphony be played so inaccurately that it became Beethoven's Fourth? I had at the time little to no idea what the question meant. I know now that it was a question asked by a philosopher Albert was reading at the time. Albert loved a good question and made it his own.

Picture him in some larger classroom or hall where the Faculty Assembly or Senate met or visiting lecturer held forth, Albert rising to launch one of his infamous questions that looked at first like a question and then, as his explanation extended itself, like a mini-lecture, and then finally, after all, when you had begun to see what the deeper issue really was, once again like a question.

A story I heard suggests that perhaps it isn't entirely inappropriate for the college to remember Albert here in this

chapel. Albert, living solo in a converted garage. The walls of his quasi-monastic retreat lined with books. Albert, I recently heard with astonishment, was on the point of seeking admission into the Church of Rome so that he might enter contemplative life. That is to say, an even more contemplative life. And then he met Naome, his future wife, who saved him, saved him for herself and, eventually, for their son, and saved him for the college where he taught from September of 1964 till June of 2013, a year shy of 50 years service in one small place. If Albert was a kind of a monk he was not the wandering kind.

Now get comfortable on your hard seats so that I will see when you begin to fidget. These recollections will touch only briefly on Albert's larger life, his life outside the college; they will not address his scholarship, matter for a *Festschrift* or symposium. The eulogy will be long, but not long enough.

On campus, he publicly professed a thoughtful and activist brand of Marxism. Off campus he led small study groups, directed-reading groups for men and women of

good-will, joined marches, carried signs, wrote (under a pseudonym) scathing hit-pieces for a journal whose name was not revealed to me. Here, to judge by his actions and his speech, his ultimate belief was that the world of humankind was a deeply mysterious play of forces, in which persons were not pawns of history but persuadable agents entangled but not trapped in a web of causality which they could be brought in some measure to understand.

We probably all know of his knowledge of languages—Greek (classical and koine, NT Greek), Latin, French, German, Russian, Danish (to read Kierkegaard). I heard him discussing Hungarian pronunciation with a Hungarian colleague. He was a great reader, he read deeply, he read broadly, and he wanted to read what an author had written in the words the author chose to write. And so he learned the languages.

And he learned the languages of scholarly fields that were his colleagues' fields, not, or not officially, his own. He was forever zealous to learn. The e-mails circulating through

the college faculty e-mail server after his death was announced fell many of them into a pattern. Albert, having learned of a professorial or professional passion of the writer's, would earnestly ask a telling question, based either on the writer's recent article or book, or on some outstanding unresolved issue.

For example, a colleague's remembrance:

Some years ago I got my dissertation work published...and was resigned to having it collect dust on library shelves.

[But] one day Albert requested a copy—I never knew how he found out about it. A few days later I found it returned outside my office with the enclosed note on an index card:

“I enjoyed your book, which posed some questions. Did silent prayer and silent reading (Ambrose) come about at the same time?”

Albert, still the monk, thinking about silent prayer and silent reading. And putting the question to a fellow academic and a monk.

Another colleague:

I was fresh out of graduate school when...I had a conversation with Albert Dragsted about Marxism versus Postmodernism. ... I raved about a book...titled *The Academic Postmodern and the Rule of Literature*. Two days later, I bumped into Dragstedt in Garaventa:

“I couldn’t find the book at the library,” he said.

“I will lend you my copy,” I replied.

Two days later, I found the copy of the book I had lent him [back] in my box in Dante. I was flummoxed. I went looking for him in Garaventa.

“Why did you give the book back to me?” I asked.

“I [finished] read[ing] it,” he said.

[Taken aback] “What did you think?” I asked.

“He wastes a lot of time with people who aren’t worth it,” he said. “His book on Romanticism and Nationalism is much better.”

Albert the Post-postmodern revolutionary conspiring with a fellow revolutionary. Another colleague, female—it matters slightly:

One day, Albert lamented not being able to find a copy of *The Preacher and the Slave* (Wallace Stegner, 1950, story of Joe Hill, union organizer and song writer), so I sent mine to him. After that, each time we passed, Albert smiled warmly and bowed slightly--lovely thank yous from a lovely man.

Albert the union man to a union woman.

The e-mails included heartfelt remarks:

Among Albert's many characteristics that others have described, I would note his sense of humor: it was both acerbic and biting and at the same time gentle and compassionate, in a way that I find hard to describe. Saint Mary's has lost one of its true giants. I count

knowing him as one of my greatest privileges in my 30+ years at the College.

Another:

His effect on students was long-lasting -- they often kept puzzling, and figured out what he meant hours, days, in some cases years later. Here is what one of his former students (my son, whom I was proud to have educated by Albert) said on his Facebook page in reference to Albert's passing:

" I think it was one of my greatest triumphs as a student when he admitted, rather grudgingly, that one of my arguments was 'halfway plausible'."

So too it was with many of us.

We have heard these stories and we will tell them again at the reception and as the years roll 'round. Albert the Polymath, Albert the colleague, the fellow-traveller along the path of those looking for light in the shadow play of earthly politics, a student in the stacks of the Library of Babel. Is it a co-incidence that the library's recently announced and newest search engine is called "Albert-plus"--

our newest federated search engine, **Albert Plus** is a sweet combination of the library holdings PLUS hundreds of thousands of online articles all accessible on one platform.

Smart of them I thought: name the library after Saint Albert the Great, a Dominican polymath, and name the search engine after our own Albert.

Albert, the resource, was more about formation than information. And, more specifically, formation in the liberal arts, especially the arts of discourse. His contributions to symposiums on the liberal arts were once treasured. The college, if it were smart, would set up a Dragstedt Institute for the Liberal Arts, devoted to an on-going examination of the arts of speech and their place in a college curriculum. But the college is less smart now than it was when Albert was around.

Much of what he brought to the college he delivered to the Faculty Dining Room. A sub-genre of Albert Stories could be called Albert at Lunch. Here's one:

...One day when just the two of us were left at the table I leaned in and wondered out loud what he thought was the essential point of our seminar enterprise. I settled back to soak in what would surely be a multifaceted and probably long exposition. Albert barely paused and then said: [the point of the Seminar?] to teach students how to construct and carry an argument. And [he stood up] and off he went.

In the Roethke poem quoted earlier, Albert's students came to see, "happy" had nothing to do with shallow giddiness and much to do with "happen." Albert seems to have happened onto the college. Doing so he raised our self-esteem and our external reputation. He brought the institutional college much credit as a place where ideas were taken seriously and no one who took them seriously was excluded on grounds he was not of the Communion of Faith. He himself was here, I think it fair to say, all in all a happy man. That did not mean that he was pleased with everything he saw. Much in this world, as he saw it, was out of joint.

Whatever his positive beliefs, Albert in large measure agreed with good Catholics about all that is not God. He agreed with good Catholics that the kingdoms of the earth are not the Kingdom of Heaven. Even including, I dare say, any earthly Commune established or imagined by the militant followers of Marx. Albert never ceased to call out the injustice that issued from any system, Capitalist or Stalinist, and expose the smoke and mirrors that hid their workings

from us. He was engaged, like the apostle Paul, in a struggle against the power of Evil.

“For it is not against human enemies that we have to struggle but against the principalities and the ruling forces who are masters of the darkness in this world, the spirits of evil in the lower skies.” Ephesians 6:12

What enables us to continue the struggle, Paul goes on to say, is Love. And love is one of those right things that happens to the happy man. Albert’s love for his wife, his love for his son, his pride in their accomplishments—these he let be known. And his love for his students? I remember Albert’s mourning a particular student, who died young. Bruce, a brilliant character, a scholar of Greek and Latin, a singer of ribald songs, and a lover of Russian Orthodox church music became himself a beloved tutor at Saint John’s College. At a small memorial gathering, Albert was quiet. Prodded, he said that History was disordered if it could let a student die before his teacher.

And there must be a moment to recall Albert's piety towards his own teachers. A student of the great Leo Strauss, Albert opposed the political hijacking of Strauss's name by some of his former students turned right-wing adventurists and the resultant villification of Strauss by pundits on the Left. Of the perpetrators I heard him burst out, "They may have taken classes from Strauss. I knew Strauss."

It is customary for Catholic eulogies to close with an imaginative picture of the deceased at rest in the heaven of the saints. Albert, a bit wary of Jesus but always in pursuit of logos, perhaps seeking a principle of logos higher than logos, was I guess every day astonished by the power of human thinking. I imagine Albert seeking out the celestial auditorium where Saint Thomas is holding forth, lecturing on Agent Intellect, a profound human faculty about which Albert once here on earth expressed some misgivings. St. Thomas expects and welcomes the question from the front row seats: "Yes, Albert. What is it this time?" And Albert will rise.

One more Albert story. An alumnus in one of Albert's first classes here, when asked, recalled almost without pause: Chatting before our Junior Year Math class in Newton's calculus, Bruce and I were discussing Bach's Saint Matthew Passion. Albert was there, sitting in on the class. When we paused, he asked, "Do you have to be a Christian to bury Jesus?" We were baffled, puzzled. A year or so later I realized that the question referred to an aria late in the oratorio, *Mache dich mein herze rein*.

The words in English say (I will not sing): "Make thyself clean, my heart,/I will myself entomb Jesus./For he shall henceforth in me/For ever and ever take his sweet rest./World begone, let Jesus in."

"Do you have to be a Christian to bury Jesus?" His question—Albert's questions were never simple—probably was riffing on the non-believer's query, "Do you have to be a Christian to love Bach?" and joining to that a question about how to understand the life and death of Jesus. What does burying Jesus mean? It was a gentle, respectful question of non-believer to believers. A question one believer treasured

for 50 years. But Albert did not ask questions that were not questions for him too.

Albert, I trust, lived the life of the happy man.—The
happy man

[Or he] sits still, a solid figure when
The self-destructive shake the common wall;
Takes to himself what mystery he can,

And, praising change as the slow night comes on,
Wills what he would, surrendering his will
Till mystery is no more: No more he can.
The right thing happens to the happy man.

Rest in peace, Albert, our friend and our teacher.

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