

Teaching to find common ground, not battleground



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Reading the alumni magazine from Seattle Pacific University I learned one of my most influential professors had passed away. Dr. Raymond Wells taught courses in Religion and Philosophy for many years. He and Dr. Walter Johnson were central teachers who inspired me to choose a double degree in Religion and Philosophy. That choice had a profound effect on the course of my life.

Ray (Dr. Wells and I were on a first-name basis) asked me to be his teaching assistant one semester for an Introduction to Philosophy course. I felt honored to sit at Ray's desk, write on "his" blackboard, lead discussions and even grade papers. At the end of the semester I was hooked on teaching. Ray would often in-

vite me up to his tiny office high in old Tiffany hall where we would share his spiced tea invariably spiced with philosophical conversation.

In my senior year, taking indepth courses on ancient and modern Philosophy, Ray also encouraged my wider explorations in Comparative Religion. His course on World Religions was a seminal moment in my educational journey. A whole world of thought opened for me. I still remember writing a term paper and giving a class presentation on the Chinese philosopher Master Kung, usually called Confucius. His practical, humanistic wisdom felt like a breath of fresh air during the gradual emergence from my own narrow, biblical beliefs.

Ray's courses helped me expand my worldview. Though I was still taking courses on Christianity and Biblical History, I was also reading scriptures that spanned the landscape of religion: the Qur'an, Vedas, Upanishads, Gita, the Tao Te Ching and Analects of Master Kung. Some of those texts remain on my

bookshelf to this day.

As I was completing my years as an undergraduate, I discussed with Ray the possibility of remaining at SPU to teach. I think he was genuinely pained to tell me there were no positions available. He wished me well on my graduation and plans for seminary. I lost contact with Ray, but never lost that deep connection to his good-hearted nature and encouragement. Even after so many years, and now that he's gone, I continue to value essential life lessons he taught.

Every day at the beginning of class, Ray entered the room, greeted us, and went right for the chalk. It became a joke among students that Ray would draw the same thing on the board every time. It was what he called a "Continuum"—a long, arching line from one end of the board to the other. The rest of the hour would consist of an interactive lecture during which he would fill that continuum with a constellation of "balance points" covered in chalk dust. No matter what he was presenting, Ray showed us,

through that simple graphic illustration, that ideas were connected, balance was at least possible, beliefs and worldviews were related, and so were the people who espoused them, whether they knew it, liked it, or not.

One definition of continuum describes "a continuous sequence in which adjacent elements are not perceptibly different from each other, although the extremes are quite distinct." This was the genius of Ray's teaching style. He could take virtually any branch of Philosophy or religious tradition and place it somewhere on a continuum related to some other branch, tradition or idea we normally wouldn't connect. This gave us an image to take with us and think about. People are not as disconnected as we imagine. We're all on the line, the arch, the continuum somewhere. Many disagreements, lots of conflicts, but it's finding the relationships that matters, discovering the com-

See COMMON, Page 2D

Common

Continued from Page 1D

mon ground instead of battlegrounds.

In one class on the philosophical tradition of Existentialism (an individual's existence and relationship with the world is primary), I wrote a term paper on "Martin Buber and Soren Kierkegaard in Dialogue."

It was deeply meaningful to discover the balance points, on a continuum of thought, linking these two great thinkers.

I was identifying levels and layers of meaning in the relationship between Jewish and Christian approaches to the world, as well as Buber and Kierkegaard as individuals with unique stories. My own ex-

perience with diverse points on the continuum of faith was opening my eyes to a much larger field of view.

One further memory of Ray comes to mind. Though he could be a little absent-minded at times, he was most often intensely present, listening closely as one of his students struggled with a concept. Even with the heaviest philosophical ideas, he would make it real and more personal.

You had the sense Ray was on a similar search for wisdom, the same continuum with you. The mark of a truly effective teacher.

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