

Commemoration of Robert Belknap
St. Paul's Chapel, Columbia University
Robert Pollack
September 12, 2014

A doodle from Bob Belknap on the inside last page of today's program reads "Try to think of something." Here goes.

I have two stories to tell, and then a poem. I hope these will hold his memory for us here today.

I met Bob Belknap in 1957, his second year as an Instructor in Humanities A. The section I was in seemed to me filled with guys who had actually read the books assigned, not over the weekend, but in a prep school somewhere. Not me. My parents had not finished High School; they worked throughout the Depression, and the Coney Island Library did not bring me to the Classics.

In those days you got your final grade after the close of the semester on a postcard. you gave the blank card to the instructor, addressed it to yourself, and watched the mail for a week or so.

The postcard from Bob Belknap said I had gotten a 78 on the final essay, and a B in the course. He also wrote in pencil below, "The exact middle of the class." This was a gift to me. It meant I could get past the fear of being so far behind that I would necessarily be in the bottom half of the class. No matter that neither was I in the top half; I was ok. I found that postcard two weeks ago; its message had changed my life.

The second story comes from a conversation just before Thanksgiving 2013, fifty-five years later. He had invited me to succeed him as Director of University Seminars, and we would often enjoy each other's company in our offices in Faculty House. "Bob," I asked him, "how many years have your family celebrated Thanksgiving?" Knowing that Belknaps were on the Mayflower, I expected a big number, in the hundreds of years; I waited to bask in the reflected light of his ancestry. "Oh," he said, "about five thousand, or ten thousand years." "How?," I asked. "Well" he said, "you don't think I am going to remember my Mayflower ancestors and not my Native ancestors too, do you?"

In that he taught me how much of our country's history is built on the forgotten cultures of Native peoples. He also taught me to think again before valuing any of my ancestors over any others, and in the largest sense, to remember that as a person it is my life, my decisions, my actions and my thoughts that define me; not my DNA.

Two intersections with Bob Belknap, half a century apart. The same result: gratitude, love and an astonishment that such a person could have entered my life. That's the reason for the poem.

W. H. Auden wrote "*September 1, 1939*" when Bob was ten and I was not to be born for another year. Here are the last two stanzas.

...

All I have is a voice
To undo the folded lie,
The romantic lie in the brain
Of the sensual man-in-the-street
And the lie of Authority
Whose buildings grope the sky:
There is no such thing as the State
And no one exists alone;
Hunger allows no choice
To the citizen or the police;
We must love one another or die.

Defenseless under the night
Our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light
Flash out wherever the Just
Exchange their messages:
May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.

from *SEPTEMBER 1, 1939*, W.H. Auden

Bob showed, and still shows, that affirming flame. Let us never lose sight of it.