A Part of All That He Met

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In 2004-2005, the first year I was on the faculty here, the College’s Course of Study featured a quote from Bill on its deep gold back cover: “Have you, in meeting the new and strange, sometimes discovered that it is actually akin to you, or even more than akin: an unsuspected part of your own self, as if you had found a hidden room in the house where you were born?” I clipped it out and hung it on my office file cabinet, where it’s been hanging ever since, so many years that it’s sun-faded to a pale orange. I love it for the way it reminds me of what we should be *doing here*—both at Kenyon and in life: keeping ourselves open to the new and strange, helping others stay open to the new and strange, in part because encountering the new and strange beyond us helps us continue trying to understand what remains strange or unsuspected or hidden *within* us. And I love being reminded of that because I learned it from Bill, both academically and personally.

I met Bill on a February day much like this one, in 1993, and I met him by chance: someone in Ransom Hall assigned him to be one of my interviewers for a scholarship. I was so certain that my time as a Kenyon student would center on English literature and creative writing that I would probably not have ventured toward Classics at all had I not been sent to Bill’s tiny office in Ascension.

You remember that office, right? One wall had a window and a heating unit under it, and every other wall—even most of *that* wall—was lined in floor-to-ceiling oak bookshelves packed as full of books as any shelves I’d ever seen. I don’t remember whether the door could even open all the way or whether his file cabinets blocked its path. I do remember the intricate

choreographies that went in to being in the office with him, the way you might have to vacate your chair in the corner while he finished making tea, or the way having more than one person in the office with him at the same time required a reshuffling of books and papers and sometimes a typewriter off the second guest chair. I remember, that first day I met him, seeing books stacked below and around the *light switch* and I remember feeling, as we talked about books and writing, that I was meeting someone I needed to know, though I didn't know what that meant. When he asked who my literary role models were, since I wanted to be a fiction writer, I said, "Hemingway!" with all the eagerness of someone who loves strong, clear prose and has not yet thought carefully about gender. "What about George Eliot?" he asked me. "I've never heard of him," I replied. "*She* is one of the greatest of nineteenth-century writers," he said, his slight emphasis on "she" giving me my first taste of the gentle, careful, non-condescending way he could give a correction.

I was 16, and he was 61. I had no way of knowing that I would get to have him in my life for 33 more years—or what a manifold blessing his presence would be. All of that time accumulated, experience by experience, small moment after small moment, advising meetings turning into day after day of intro Ancient Greek turning into an unexpected second major turning into visits to Gambier while I was in graduate school turning into a friendship and a mutual regard deeper than I could have imagined. What I think I can only see clearly now, decades after it started, is the way meeting Bill was meeting someone akin to me, or at least someone I hoped I might be akin to, someone who I sensed from the beginning could help me encounter unsuspected parts of my self.

A couple of years ago, I took a trip to the College's Special Collections to spend time with the William E. McCulloh box. (That there was a William E. McCulloh box in the archives

was surprising to him, which itself is characteristic.) I had been trying, more or less desultorily, to locate the source of that quote from the back of the ’04-’05 Course of Study, and the next thing I knew, I was pulling files of photos and writings out of a grey archival box. Lo and behold, it turned out that the quotation came from his 1995 Bacclaureate address, “Mnemosyne’s Daughters.” (That was his second Baccalaureate, by the way. His first, the first ever given by a faculty member, had taken place in 1970.) The lines I had long loved and taken as a touchstone were not the end of a sentence; it continues, “have you discovered that this new, strange room was even ‘meant for’ you, or you for it?” Near the address’s conclusion, he tells his soon-to-graduate audience, “I personally hope for you that you have found many new rooms in which you are—strangely—at home.”

That is one of the effects he had on and for us, isn’t it? To help us find more and more new rooms in which we could be—or already, strangely, *were*—at home. To help us find our homes in the world. Bill gave me George Eliot, though I didn’t read her until later, as he gave me so many of the authors I love: Maxine Hong Kingston, Rainer Maria Rilke, Wendell Berry, not even to speak of the classical authors so many of us studied with him, Plato and Herodotus and Sophocles and Longus and Menander. Even in offering encouragement about work or life, he wouldn’t just tell me “Keep going” but instead would quote from Gerard Manley Hopkins’s poem “The Windhover”: “shéer plód makes plough down sillion / Shine.” And in offering gift after gift out of his immense intellect and his equally immense heart, he was taking me seriously, offering a kind of unconditional regard that helped me understand and believe in a richer, more capacious version of myself that I could cultivate and *become*. He didn’t make me want to be a better or different person. He helped me want to become the most ethically sound, intellectually curious, emotionally generous version of *myself* that I could be.

He loved us so much and was so proud of us. Do you know this? He would so eagerly share news about what his former students had accomplished, or what his colleagues in the Classics department or in departments across the College were teaching or publishing, or what Pat was painting or printing in her studio, or what Judy and Leon were up to in folklore and mathematics in Illinois, or what Michael was doing with his English-as-a-second-language students or Ann with her horticultural work. He was so brilliant and accomplished himself—the triple major in college, the Rhodes Scholarship, the ceaseless study of languages, the teaching awards, the teaching of Sanskrit for at least fifteen years beyond retirement, the manifold musical performances, the nonstop curiosity and joy in learning—and he was also so open and humble in his genuine, steady wonder about what the people he knew were capable of. He valued us, seeing what was best and most able in us—and in other people. And he valued the people we valued. I will always be grateful to Bill for extending his care beyond me to my family and, much later, my partner, about all of whom he was still asking, right up until the end. Of all the people I've ever known, he was one of the fairest, most just, and most peaceful—in the sense of being *dedicated* to peace, with each breath and every step—and those qualities are what made him perhaps the wisest person I will ever know.

Memories have been coming back to me in flashes over the past few weeks, as I've thought about what to say this afternoon. How, when I took GREK 11-12 with him, he graded all of our work with a green Pilot Razor Point pen—those green pens with the little yellow band at the top of their caps—giving us tiny green lights over and over, day after day, to keep us going. Or the stories he would tell about chain-smoking his way through his first year of teaching at Kenyon because he was so petrified all the time. Or the way he ended up in Finland illegally during his travels in his Rhodes Scholar days and was told he had to get to Sweden within 24

hours—and succeded in doing it. The way he named his last Subaru Forester "Celadon" because of its color. The way he taught me how and when to use the adverb "hopefully": *not* as a general wish for the future (hopefully, I'll never forget him) but instead as a way to register something more specific (given the chance to evoke Bill today, I set about my labors hopefully). A visual memory of the tiny copper vase in which he'd bring the earliest spring flowers to the classroom—chionodoxa and snowdrops—so that we could learn their Greek names.

The rumor we students heard (but could never confirm) that he had once broken a cast-iron stove while dancing. All the times he and Pat drove me (both in the old Forester and in Celadon) all over Knox County's back roads to dine at Spearman's or Hunan or the short-lived Indian restaurant on the square in Mount Vernon. The time just before my graduation from Kenyon when he agreed to let me take him on a mystery trip—a tradition in my family—and I picked him up in my big gold Toyota Camry and took him down to see the pygmy goats that were, just then, being raised down by the BFEC and the Gap Trail (I thought he would like to see them because we'd just been translating *Daphnis and Chloe* in advanced ancient Greek). The time I showed him how to use the lab computers in the basement of Ascension to access this new thing called the World Wide Web, where he could read his favorite Viennese newspaper online. The time we used Google Maps's Street View function to visit tiny Windom, Kansas, where he was born. The way he always had a pen and some index cards or a little notebook in the chest pocket of his shirt, along with his glasses. The time Bill and Pat came with me when I took possession of my house in Gambier and helped me celebrate unlocking the door of my *own* house for the first time. All the Friday Luncheon Cafés we attended at the Parish House. The sound of his hello when he'd come to the phone.

I could go on. We could all go on. I hope that we *will* go on, today and in the coming days, sharing our memories, weaving a web in which to catch as much of Bill as we can.

When I took that trip to the archives to visit the William McCulloh box and came away with copies of Bill's Baccalaureate addresses and his 1985 Founders' Day address, I was startled and embarrassed to realize that I had actually *attended* the 1995 address in which he'd asked that question I'd started loving so much almost a decade later. It was the end of my sophomore year, and I was about to study abroad for a year, and I had stayed on campus both to peal at graduation and also to hear Bill's address—which I think I knew immediately I wasn't ready to assimilate into myself. Reading it again all these years later, I relish the way he blends wisdom and self-deprecation, Kenyon history and Greek literature and philosophy and even a bit of British Victorian literature. Close-reading the lyrics of Canon Watson's "Kokosing Farewell," he catches an echo of Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem "Ulysses" and calls his listeners to consider the line "I am a part of all that I have met." As a Victorianist trained in the late twentieth century, I have generally thought of that line as one about conquest or domination, about Ulysses scattering himself and inserting himself everywhere he goes. Rereading Bill's Baccalaureate, thinking about the mystery of how we become ourselves through our relationships with others, the line shimmers into a different kind of meaning. "I am a part of all that I have met" suggests that there may be hitherto unsuspected parts of me still awaiting my arrival, out there in the world with all that I have not yet met, and it also suggests that I am incomplete without all that (and all whom) I *have* already met—that I am distributed, diffused, connected. That I am known, and held, and kept by all that I have met.

And if *Bill* is a part of all that he met, then he is the furthest thing from gone, because he is living on as a part of all of us—all of us on whom he lavished time and attention as though

both were infinite; all of us who drank strong tea with him; all of us to whom he fed loukoumi or halvah or cookies (or, if he was trying to be healthy, nuts or fruit); all of us who spent time in his office or his home laughing or crying, exchanging ideas, listening and being listened to; all of us who knew him closely or distantly, for a long time or a short time.

In his 1985 Founders' Day address, Bill introduced listeners to the ancient Greek construction "men" / "de," which he called "two little words which helped [the Greeks] organize the chaos of experience": "men," on the one hand; "de," on the other.

Men: it is impossible and unthinkable that we have lost him, impossible and unthinkable that any of us, but maybe especially the best of us, is *mortal* and must go.

De: it is a miracle and a wonder to have been alive at the same time as William Ezra McCulloh, to have gotten to know him in all the various ways we knew him, all of us who carry a part of him on with us in these selves and lives he helped us make.

Bill signed his letters and cards with a Greek valediction, "eu prattois"—may you fare well. (He ended his 1995 Baccalaureate with "May you all — may we all — fare well," both, I suspect, because of the refrain of "Kokosing Farewell" and because of his habitual sign-off.) Every once in a while, especially later in his life, he would add love: "eu prattois, kai agape."

I loved that. I loved him. I still love him.

Eu prattois, o Bill, kai agape. Efkaristo. Blessings upon you, my dear.