

Memorial Minute for Richard Unsworth
Read by Thomas Derr at the March 28, 2018 Faculty Meeting

Richard Preston Unsworth, long-time chaplain to Smith College, professor of religion, secondary school headmaster, and civil rights activist, passed away a year ago last September at age 89. Dick was one of my oldest and closest friends, and I remember him with great fondness. We first met at a conference for college chaplains in 1960 and hit it off, over a shared interest in Smith College and general bonhomie. Then two years later he summoned me from Geneva, wither I had repaired doing dissertation research, to come to Smith as his assistant in the chapel – and also as part-time in the Religion department. We began our work together in 1963 with a brave resolve to keep our language sharp by speaking French to each other in the office, a resolve which didn't last two weeks, much to the amusement of Jane Wells, the administrative assistant.

I realize that few people here will remember that fateful fall of 1963, but I guess we all know what happened then. We were three months into the semester when President Kennedy's assassination rocked the campus. As the news spread a stream of students poured steadily into the chapel while Vernon Gotwals played quietly on the organ and Dick and I sat downstairs batting ideas back and forth for a sad and bracing reflection, which he then delivered with masterly eloquence: a fine example of a classic college chaplain.

Dick was a Presbyterian minister with degrees from Princeton, Yale, and Harvard – the perfect trifecta, I suppose - and he presided over a lively chapel that was broadly ecumenical in its Christian face, and attentive to providing professional leadership for Jewish and Catholic communities – a ministry which would later expand as the college's student body increasingly diversified. Reflecting Dick's own commitments, it was also the hub of the College's civil rights activism. Dick was a master organizer, quick on the telephone to find the right contacts, an able planner, deeply involved with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (Martin Luther King's organization) and essentially our general strategist for the many of us, including himself, who went to various southern locales, in some considerable personal danger, that wonderful/awful "civil rights summer" of 1964.

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There was a time shortly afterwards that he came into my office and said, in essence, I hate to desert you, but I've accepted the chaplaincy at Dartmouth – where it was called Dean of the Tucker Foundation. And there was another time a short few years afterward when he returned to Smith, to the same post he had left, then newly vacant again – though without me this time, for by then I had been kidnapped by the Religion department for full-time teaching. But Dick was always being courted by others, on lots of short lists, including his alma mater Princeton, a chaplaincy which definitely interested him; but at the same time another of his academic mothers, the Northfield-Mt. Hermon School, was looking for a new headmaster. And that is where Dick went, for 11 years, presiding over the integration of the once-separate boys and girls schools, and, among other initiatives, serving as president of the Critical Languages and Area Studies Consortium, a project of private schools to expand the study of Asian languages. When he was installed at NMH the chair of the trustees was appropriately effusive in presenting him, but a sagacious elder had already told him that on that day he would hear so many wonderful tributes that he would be wise not to believe half of them.

After retiring from NMH he found himself in demand for interim positions, including a brief stint back here in the chapel, and then to be the provisional head of the Berkshire School while they searched for a new head. But once the school had Dick at the helm, however temporarily, their search process for a new headmaster mysteriously slowed to a crawl. Eventually a timely reminder that Dick was not immortal got them back to work, and he was able to retire again, this time for good.

He and Joy eventually settled back here in the Lathrop community in Easthampton, where he found time to complete a biography of a bold and courageous French pacifist, Andre Trocme, who had been the pastor of the village church in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, where there was, and is, an international boarding school, the College Cevenol, founded by Trocme and his wife Magda, a place Dick and I both knew well. The village, under Trocme's inspired leadership, is famous for hiding Jewish children from the Nazis in World War II. Dick's book, A Portrait of Pacifists, was published in 2012.

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The many of us here who knew Dick have varied and wonderful memories of him. There was the warmth of his household presided over by his gracious wife Joy, at a time when graciousness was really prized. [Joy was the head of special education for the Greenfield public schools, and they had four children.] And there was music. Dick was an accomplished player of the acoustic double-bass, and had for a while his own student-faculty jazz combo, called “Sophia’s Moustache.” During his last interim here in the chapel he had an intern from Harvard Divinity School, a woman whose husband was Noel Paul Stookey, the “Paul” of the famous folk trio Peter, Paul, and Mary. One remarkable Sunday morning, in commemoration of a civil rights anniversary, Dick was asked to preach again a sermon he had originally written during the 60’s. It was moving and powerful, and the students applauded at the end. You don’t applaud a sermon do you? Not proper church decorum? But applaud they did. At the offering time Paul Stookey and his magic guitar played a charming whimsical piece about “the cookie jar” (you once took from it, now time to give back) and at the end of the service, for a postlude, Dick got out his bass and led a new student trio in a jazzy finale. He and Paul became friends, and it was fitting and moving that in December a year ago, at the memorial service for Dick here at the First Churches downtown, Paul sang, beautifully, hauntingly, “My life flows on in endless song... How can I keep from singing?”

We also remember Dick as the pastor to our community. There are faculty and staff couples whom he married, whose children he baptized, whose friendship and wise counsel they sought in time of trouble, and whose funerals and memorial services he conducted. (The last time, I think, was the memorial for Eliot Offner.)

He and Joy lived here for the last stage of their life, until Joy died. Dick then moved to a retirement home in Arlington to be near two of his children, until he, too, began to fail. We talked by phone about two weeks before his death, in a call arranged by his son John. It was a bit difficult due to his growing infirmity, but warm and nostalgic for both of us. And then quite suddenly, it seems, he was gone. I described him once to a friend as “a prince among men” --- a sentiment I affirm again today.