

On the Death of a Friend

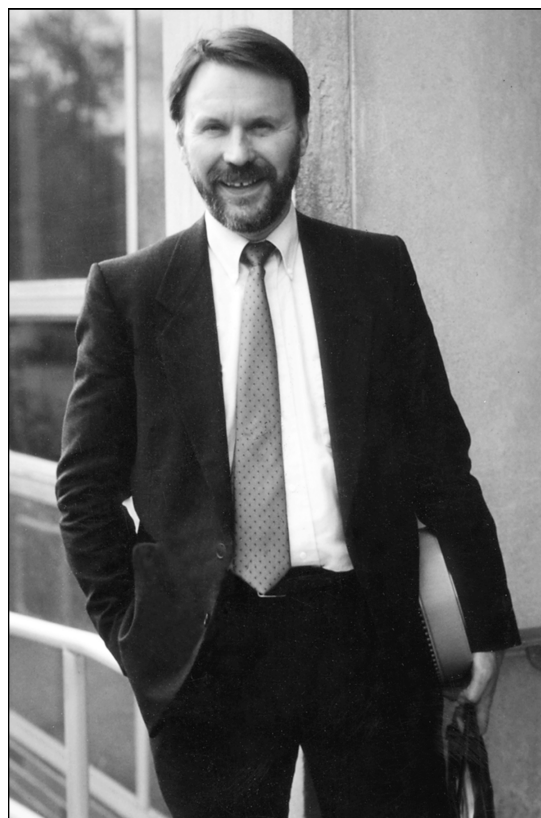
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I will write about the life and career of John Alexander elsewhere. Here I want to speak of his death and to do so in a highly personal way, though one which I hope will not violate good taste. In the Spring of 2001 John went to his doctor to seek relief from a persistent cough. Given the pervasive pollen and pollution endemic to Cincinnati, none of us thought this unusual. Consequently we were all stunned when he returned with a diagnosis of untreated colon cancer. The cancer had metastasized and spread to his lungs, and he was told that he had between two months and a year to live.

John and I shared much in common. We both had similar boyhoods in the Midwest, a similar sense of humor, and common interests in chemistry, history and architecture. But there was one area in which there was no overlap and that was religion. John was a devout Christian and one who, in recent years, had begun to take his religion very seriously. Few of his colleagues were aware of this as he was intensely private about his beliefs. I, on the other hand, was a disbeliever and there seemed little I could offer him as consolation in his time of distress.

However, shortly after his diagnosis, I made him a gift of my favorite translation of the *Meditations* of the Roman Emperor and Stoic, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus – the 1898 rendition by Gerald Rendall. The Stoics were pantheists who believed that every act of nature or man, however cruel or pointless, had an ultimate cosmic purpose, though that purpose might be beyond human comprehension. It was the duty of the wise man to acquiesce in the role that fate had assigned him. However brief or humble the part, he was to play it to the best of his ability and, above all, with dignity. Many find this a harsh and demanding philosophy and yet many others, both Pagan and Christian, have found it a great comfort in times of ultimate stress.

John had never read Marcus and he dutifully took the book along to his weekly chemotherapy sessions. Sometimes, as I drove him back and forth from the cancer treatment center, we discussed the relationship between Stoicism and early Christianity. But in time he finished the book and nothing more was said. Instead he sought further counsel with his minister, as was only appropriate, and I thought that the matter was at



John in a typical pose taken about a year before his death.

an end. Consequently, I was greatly surprised when, shortly before his death, I was informed that he had requested that I read a passage at his funeral which he had selected from the *Meditations*. His choice showed that he had in fact studied and understood old Marcus well, for he chose the very last entry – an admonition that the Emperor had written to himself shortly before his own impending death at age 59 in the year 180 AD:

Man, you have been a citizen of the great world city. Five years or fifty, what matters it? To every man his due, as the law allots. Why then protest? No tyrant gives you your dismissal, no unjust judge, but nature, who gave you your admission. It is like the praetor discharging some player whom he has engaged. "But

the five acts are not complete; I have played but three.” Good – life’s drama, look you then, is complete in three. The completeness is in his hands, who first authorized your composition, and now your dissolution. Neither was your work. Serenely take your leave; serene as he who gives you the discharge.

The Stoicism of Marcus formed in some way a fragile bridge between John’s Christianity, on the one hand, and my own Epicureanism on the other. Like Epicureanism, it denied the existence of a personal God, but, like Christianity, it affirmed some ultimate purpose in life and nature. Epicureanism, though also teaching the acceptance of death as a natural process, repudiated the existence of any such inherent purpose in the mindless concourse of atoms and void. This was surely too harsh a doctrine to discuss with John at such a time, and indeed it would never have entered my mind to do so. But though a man may refrain from the gaucherie of pushing his beliefs on another, he can almost never refrain from judging the actions of another through the lens of those beliefs. And in observing John during the last year of his life, I was struck by how much better his behavior conformed, albeit unconsciously, to my personal philosophy than did my own.

According to Epicurus, the most valuable possession a man could attain, aside from the virtue of prudence, was friendship:

Of the things that wisdom prepares for insuring life-long happiness, by far the greatest is the possession of friends ... The noble man is chiefly concerned with wisdom and friendship, of these the former is a mortal good, the latter an immortal one ... Friendship dances through the world bidding us all to awaken to the recognition of happiness.

That John unknowingly followed this injunction was apparent from the number of visitors that crowded his hospital room and home during the last weeks of his life and by the many people who prepared meals and helped with John’s physical care. I once said to him that one of our differences lay in the fact that, while I had invested my life in books, he had invested his in friends.

Since Epicureans did not believe in a life after death, they tended to emphasize the importance of maximizing the quality of the present rather than postponing happiness in the hope of attaining some imaginary future reward. It is a thought best captured in the well-known phrase of the Roman poet, Horace – *carpe diem* – “seize the day.” This John also did. When he received the news of his ultimate fate, he did not sink

into a lethargic depression, but did in fact attempt to seize what days remained to him by spending as many as possible with his family and current friends, and by traveling to New York, Michigan and Chicago to visit old friends, some dating back to his high school and college days. He even talked about making a trip to Greece in order to view first hand the ultimate sources of Western Civilization.

Always a lover of cats, John also acquired a coal-black kitten during his final year. He named it Harold and took great pleasure in observing its endless antics. The manic, almost undirected energy of this young creature, so near the beginning of its life, seemed to cheer him even as his own life and energies were approaching an end. This cat was, ironically, the last thing that John and I talked about in a conversation that took place two days before his death. I had come upon a comic limerick about a cat that reminded me of Harold and which I knew would amuse John, but it had repeatedly slipped my mind during his period in the hospital and after his return home. In the meantime, Harold had been banished to a relative’s house since his increasingly frantic frolics, coupled with the large number of visitors, made his escape out the front door an ever more likely possibility. As we sat with John after the evening meal, someone in the room inquired about Harold’s fate and I finally remembered to recite this piece of silly doggerel for him:

*There was a young scholar from Kew
Who kept a cat in his pew.
He thought it chic
To teach it Greek
But it never got beyond mu.*

Now you must remember that at this point John could barely breathe, but he could still laugh and laugh he did. Even in death John could not resist a good pun.

A final Epicurean virtue that John unconsciously personified, both during his final year and throughout his adult life, was what DeWitt has called the Epicurean doctrine of the “gentleman” – not a gentleman in the foppish, upper class sense of the word, but quite literally a man of gentleness – a gentle person:

It is almost a definition of a gentleman to say he is one who never inflicts pain ... He is mainly occupied in removing the obstacles which hinder the free and unembarrassed action of those about him; and he concurs with their movements rather than takes the initiative himself. The true gentleman in like manner avoids whatever may cause a jar or a jolt to the minds of those with whom he is cast – all clashing of opinion, or collision of feeling, all restraint, or suspicion, or

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gloom, or resentment; his great concern being to make everyone at their ease and at home. He has his eyes on all his company; he is tender toward the bashful, gentle toward the distant, and merciful towards the absurd; he can recollect to whom he is speaking; he guards against unseasonable allusions, or topics which may irritate; he is seldom prominent in conversation and never wearisome. He makes light of favors while he does them, and seems to be receiving when he is conferring. He never speaks of himself except when compelled, never defends himself by a mere retort ... He is never mean or little in his disputes, never takes unfair advantage, never mistakes personalities or sharp sayings for arguments, or insinuates evil which he dare not say out. From a long-sighted prudence, he observes the maxims of the ancient sage, that we should ever conduct ourselves toward our enemy as if he were one day to be our friend. He has too much sense to be affronted at insults, he is too well employed to remember injuries, and too indolent to bear malice. He is patient, forbearing, and resigned on philosophical principles; he submits to pain because it is inevitable, to bereavement because it is irreparable, and to death because it is his destiny ...

I am sure that those who knew John recognize him in this quotation and, in many ways, its description is doubly appropriate, for though it accurately describes the Epicurean concept, it was written, not by an Epicurean, but by Cardinal Newman – a devout Christian – and was intended to describe not an Epicurean gentleman but a Christian gentleman – the brand to which John aspired. I also think it remarkable that two such apparently irreconcilable philosophies as Epicureanism and Christianity could, in the end, at least agree on just what it means to be a good person and to live a decent life.

In characterizing John in this fashion, I do not wish to imply that he had an uncritical, Pollyanna attitude toward others. As his close friends know, he did

not suffer fools gladly and, in private, could be quite candid in his criticisms. But however much he disapproved of or disliked someone's behavior, he never used this as an excuse to mistreat them in public and invariably strove to be polite and kind in his actions toward them.

When I observed the intensity of emotion felt by many of the departmental secretaries and support staff when they first heard the news of John's diagnosis, I could not resist teasing him, "You know John, if you insist on dying on me, you are creating a severe problem for me as the departmental historian as I am going to have to explain away the scandal of so many married women crying at your funeral." This was an image that appealed to him, as I knew it would, and he gave an appropriately mischievous chuckle. In thinking it over, there is, of course, nothing to explain as I am certain that it was this gentleness of character that the women in his life intuitively recognized, whether as family, friends, or colleagues.

As a disbeliever I cannot speak to John's faith in a life after death. If, however, one means by that term his continued existence in the minds and hearts of his friends and family, then I am certain that he has attained his immortality. So in the years to come, when an old photograph, a keepsake book taken from the shelf, or a story told at lunch calls John to mind, smile and remember what a privilege it was to have participated in that dance of friendship he wove so many years ago. Whatever the mechanism – whether as the disembodied spirit in which he believed, or as a slight warming of a passing breeze due to a momentary fluctuation in the thermal distribution of his dispersed atoms, I am certain that John will, after his fashion, return the smile.

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