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Clark remembers Moyer as a 'true humanist'

(Editor's note: The following is the text of University President Robert Clark's memorial speech for Dean Burton Moyer delivered in a Thursday ceremony.)

Burton Moyer came to the University only two years and four months ago to serve as dean of the College of Liberal Arts. We have had but a small claim on the whole of his professional life. It is, therefore, a remarkable fact that in so short a time he should have made so great a claim on us for our respect, admiration, and affection. Even those who scarcely knew him have joined in the general cry of anguish and grief at his death. The whole community loved him, those of us who knew him for the manner of man that he was, those who did not know him, for the man they perceived through his acts and utterances.

He came to us a distinguished scientist and able administrator, a member and former chairman of perhaps the best department of physics in any university in today's world. The time had come, he thought, for him to change. When he arrived on our campus he said to an inquiring reporter, "I had just reached the point in my professional life where my sense of mission lay more in the direction of institutional problems than in scientific research — I want to spend my remaining years in developing a liberal arts college of high quality." He came with a vision — but not with condescension. He saw our weaknesses but he perceived and cherished our strengths.

He dreamed of the University as University — where the advancement of knowledge is not an adjunct to learning or a luxury to be purchased at the cost of good teaching, but a necessary and exciting enterprise in which the whole academic community ought to be involved, as active participants and grateful recipients of the rewards. In consequence, his expectations were high, for scholarship among the faculty, for dedication to learning among faculty and students alike.

He was a man with the vision to build and he needed only the resources to support his vision.

But the times were out of joint. It must have seemed to him that he had to build with a trowel in one hand and a wrecking bar in the other. He was faced with two overriding problems: students in rebellion against social injustice rebelled also not only against pedantry in the classroom but against learning itself; and financial support after a decade of rapid expansion suddenly in his first year in office, levelled off and declined sharply for this University, and all higher education. So it was Dean Moyer's lot to direct the restoration of learning to those classes where it was slighted and to preside over the retrenching of programs and the balancing of reduced budgets in the whole of his academic domain. Unpleasant, sometimes bitter, sometimes anguishing tasks for students, faculty, and the dean. But necessary. The College in its travail was fortunate to have his leadership. It was in the time of

trial, at the moment when circumstances and his convictions required him to say no, that students and faculty tested his character and found it good.

He favored innovation in the instructional program but he would not countenance the denigration of learning. He was not, he said, inclined to give credit for bull sessions, even glorified bull sessions. He favored the presence of students on many faculty committees and thought faculty derelict if they did not listen to students. He, himself, listened. But he believed, and said, that final decisions on curriculum and personnel should be up to the faculty, in which he included the administration. In all this he maintained an easy and continuing dialogue with the students. He might prompt their criticism but he did not evoke their enmity.

And so it was in his relationship to the faculty. He insisted upon high standards in personnel decisions. He patiently argued the necessity of budget restrictions. But he was a good listener. He understood the problems of those with whom he worked. He resisted the imposition of bureaucratic tasks and was concerned not to add unnecessarily to the burdens of departments. And yet he insisted that the job that must be done be done.

Singular it is that out of the conflicts over curriculum and budget, faculty should praise him for his integrity, speak of his unfailing personal warmth, trust him for his openness and fairness, respect him for the firmness of his convictions. The key to his composure, his compassion, his great strength, said a colleague who worked closely with him, was that "he was at peace with himself. He was not threatened by the prospect of contacts with other people, or with ideas that were not his own."

He was, a professor of literature said to me, a "true humanist." Certainly he was at peace with himself. Perhaps it was because he had the humanist's penchant to ask the questions of ultimate meaning, purpose, destiny . . . questions that must, he believed, be answered outside the categories of science. He was reared in a rich religious tradition, in a denomination founded in this country during the anti-slavery struggle of the 1840's, its platform the fatherhood of God, the worth and dignity and brotherhood of man, and the satisfactions of simple piety.

It was a faith that found expression in Burton Moyer's life not so much in the details of the creed as in the sense of values, of meaning and direction. It was a resource, he wrote, that provided one with "an inner, private independence . . . an independence from a driving anxiety about proximate concerns of reputation, prestige, and the rewards peculiar to the contemporary system . . . (it is) the ability to work hard with inner relaxation."

If that was his creed, as it was — a relationship with God and the Universe that gives one "the ability to work hard with inner relaxation" — no man whom I know ever practiced more fully than he what he had defined in principle.

Friday, April 27, 1973

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