

THE ADVOCATE

Newsletter of the NHMCCD Employee Federation

March 1996

Edited by Olin Joynton

Dr. Tom Kelly (1943-1996) In Memoriam

"Poor Tom's acold." (*Lear*. 3.4.152)

Tom Kelly was a warrior; he identified with the Anglo-Saxon code of his ancestors as he performed it time and time again before his classes while teaching *Beowulf*. For over twenty years he fought the good fight against ignorance, illiteracy, and the insolence of office. He worked tirelessly to bring enlightenment to his students and to a society that little values the qualities of mind and felicitous of word that he thought essential to the examined life.

Tom's life was wrapped up in his teaching; he did not just profess what he taught, he lived it. He thought the pursuit of knowledge more important than fame, or wealth; he thought one should strive for perfection. He hated the self-serving posture, and could readily see through the mod, the chic, the phony. He had high standards, both in class and out, and could not see the world's way of accommodating tawdriness, sloth, or iniquity. Above all Tom was a giver, not a taker. He gave of himself to his family, to his friends, to his students, to his colleagues, to his college. He worked hard and demanded that his students work hard. He cared, cajoled, and prodded. He loved intensely what he taught, but he became increasingly alienated from his students and the society they inhabit.

All of us who teach today know the coldness Tom came to feel: the classroom silence of those who have not thought, nor read, nor care; who sit in stolid indifference and sometimes outright contempt. Tom kept trying. Every semester he revised this, tried to clarify that, used a different approach. But it was always the same. At the end of the semester the successes were few, and the parking lot was empty.

Tom ranted and raved at times; we all do. Yet, like us all, he suffered the daily affronts and indignities alone, in silence: "Who alone suffers suffers most i' th' mind."

Finally the coldness became polar and the Germanic winter set in. He could battle no longer.

On February 1, 1996, at some time in the morning after his wife had left for work, Tom Kelly sat down at the foot of his bed and took his own life.

No wonder therefore, in all the world,
If a shadow darkens upon my spirit
When I reflect on the fates of men—
How one by one proud warriors vanish
From the halls that knew them, and day by day
All this earth ages and droops unto death.

"The Wanderer" (Trans. Charles W. Kennedy)

Ave atque vale Tom, old friend and warrior. Hail and farewell!

--Robert Miller

Dr. Thomas Kelly: A Personal Remembrance

ROSENCRANTZ: *What's the earliest thing you remember?*

GUILDENSTERN: *I don't know-- I can't remember.*

ROSENCRANTZ: *You don't understand what I mean--what's the first thing you remember, after all the things you've forgotten?*

*--from **Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead**, by Tom Stoppard*

The week before Dr. Thomas Kelly died we were laughing together in the office about these two characters seeking to discover their identity when their own author had deliberately refused to give them anything more than a very sketchy past. They are minor characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and yet Stoppard's play re-tells the story as these flat characters might have seen it. Some of the lines are wickedly hilarious for someone with a good knowledge of *Hamlet*, which Tom loved dearly.

He was gifted with a terrific sense of humor--it was not unusual for him to have everyone in our office suite doubled up in laughter after one of his stories or impersonations. Anyway, on this day as I quoted from Stoppard's play, he became caught himself by a paroxysm of laughter, and it turned into the racking cough that he had been struggling with lately. He had to walk out the office door, begging me to stop feeding him those lines, so that he could catch his breath. A couple of days before, he had had such a coughing spell that at least three people from the office suite had asked if he was all right. It was a bad case of congestion from allergies.

Except for the few of us who knew him well, most people are probably wondering what he was like, what problems he might have had, and so on. I would like to answer that question, as the person who worked closest with Tom. In fact, there is no scandal here, no crisis that he was struggling with--personal, financial, or physical. He was a devoted husband and father, with two wonderful children who are grown and doing very well out on their own. And yet there is a hidden story--the story of a magnificent man who lived quietly, but who exhibited and expected excellence from his students. I knew him as a friend who valued life and learning, language and art, nature and the universe.

Our office doors were four feet apart and we talked every day, often between classes, for nineteen years. He was from Tyler, not far from where I grew up, and we often shared East Texas stories and sayings (like "I don't understand all I know about that"), even attended the Texas Folklore Society meetings together for a few years. Tom reminded me of my own roots, and he became a kind of big brother figure at the office--someone to be a sounding board, to exchange ideas with. We kept up with each other's children, and many other aspects of the fabric of our lives. He helped with the re-modeling of our house, and my wife and I decided years ago to name him as executor for our wills. We couldn't think of anyone we trusted more, and we knew he would make sure our stated wishes were carried out.

Tom and I talked often about archeology, one of his favorite subjects. He was a great fan of the programs on anthropology and science broadcast by A&E, the Discovery Channel, and PBS. He and his wife Jill were supporting members of the Natural Science Museum in Houston, and he was an avid follower of scientific and archeological exhibits of all sorts. I often brought him brochures of clippings about sites or museums I had visited, the most recent of which was the ancient Caddo Indian mound near Alto, Texas, which has a little museum showing the pottery, tools, and weapons of this culture which existed between 800 and 1200 A.D.

A fervent lover of all kinds of art, he was especially fascinated by language and the intricacies of communication. One of our pastimes was to exchange new information about interesting word derivations we had discovered or share expressions we had heard in which people might get a word wrong, and yet make a kind of poetic sense (“rigamaroar” for “rigmarole” for example, or “Old-Timer’s Disease” for Alzheimer’s Disease”). And to hear him talk about the Beowulf and Old English culture was always enlightening. It must have been a real treat to sit in his ENGL 2322 class. I often watched from the hallway and wanted to visit. We also talked about movies and novels. A great fan of Sherlock Holmes, he was even taking a course with Jill at Rice on the subject of the mystery novel. I had just told him about Cormac McCarthy’s great western novel *All the Pretty Horses*, and had shown him a scene from it. He had been amazed at the writing style--the ability of McCarthy to capture the feel of the open range.

Also, no one who knew Tom could forget that for many years he contributed a true icon to the northwest corner of the faculty parking lot: that beautiful bright red Ford pick-up which, though it was at least six years old and had 60,000 miles on it, looked and behaved as if it were brand new. During a service visit once, a mechanic came all the way into the waiting room to shake the hand of a man who kept his engine that clean. Once a year Bob Miller, Olin Joynton, and I would join Tom to cut and split wood for our fireplaces, and this event became a ritual for us through the years--a time to strengthen and renew our friendships--and to admire the red truck, of course.

The night before his death on Thursday, February 1, Tom and Jill had planned their vacation to Santa Fe. On Wednesday he had inquired about a mini-grant application to design and develop some educational software. He wanted to do something new and creatively challenging in his professional life. I would not be surprised, even after two months, if he were to walk into my office at this very moment and ask me if the traffic was bad on I-45 as I drove in to work (we both live in the Conroe area). In fact, I could almost pick up where we left off in our last conversation. What I would like to tell him, now, is that I loved him, as did many others at North Harris College. We have lost a great professor, fellow AFT member, and most importantly a good friend, but his memory and personality will continue to influence who we are for many years.

--Michael McFarland

Ethics in the Workplace, Part II: Professionalism

“She’s a real pro” is one of the highest accolades one hears in the workplace. Conversely, few things produce more anxiety, hurt, and anger for an employee than being accused of unprofessional conduct. It is clear that professionalism operates at work as a central ethic because it embodies so many of the values and standards we use to evaluate our own practice and that of others. In spite of its centrality, however, it remains a rather loose notion in the minds of many--so loose, in fact, that it often seems to stand for behavior that we find appealing and its negation for what we find unappealing. I include myself in this complaint of looseness. After twenty years of supposedly being a professional, it was only recently, in connection with preparing a course on nursing ethics, that I reviewed some literature on the subject that defined it in a precise way. Here’s a challenge: before looking at the next paragraph, write out your own list of defining characteristics, and see how close it comes to what the experts say.

Authorities on the subject regard the following as marks of a profession: extensive training, autonomy, service to society, not just a job but a life-long calling, practice based on theory, control of the profession by its members, a distinctive culture, and a code of ethics.

With regard to the last mark, ethicist Albert Flores says that in recent years “every major profession has . . . undertaken the task of revising its code of ethics” in response to increasing public criticism of routine activities of professionals. Much of this revision has consisted of modifying rules that professionals are expected to follow. For example, in medicine the traditional rule has been that in order to be eligible as an organ donor, a person must be dead in the sense of having no detectable brain activity. However, there is an acute shortage of small organs that would be suitable for transfer to infants, and there are anencephalic

infants who are expected to die within a few days of birth and who do have lower brainstem activity without any possibility of higher consciousness. Why not use them as donors of small organs? About a year ago an American Medical Association ethics panel approved a trial period during which it was considered ethical for physicians to take organs from anencephalic infants. Understandably, it turned out not to be a practice with which people could get morally comfortable, and the ethics panel rescinded its approval.

This kind of fiddling around with the rules of conduct for professionals has its place, especially when emerging technologies create situation undreamt of when the traditional rules evolved. Yet the new wave in the theory of professional ethics (and in the broader subject of ethics itself), moves the focus away from what kind of rules we want professionals to follow and towards what kind of people we want professional to be. Rooted in an Aristotelian approach to ethics, this recent trend goes by the name of "virtue ethics." It assumes that people of good character, who have the necessary virtues in an appropriately developed way and in the right balance, will naturally find their way to ethical solutions to professional dilemmas. It places a higher value on developing virtues than on the dubious security that technical regulation provide. It recognizes that a clever knave can often find enough loopholes in the regulations to operate in an immoral fashion without being technically vulnerable to challenge. The new attention to the cultivation of virtues aims to raise the ethical level of practice to the point where the public will have more trust in the professions. It also fosters creative moral problem-solving in a morally pluralistic environment as opposed to mechanical rule following. As Richard Epstein says in his book *Simple Rules for a Complex World*,

Law's stock in trade is the use of collective might, and the sanctions that it imposes must be reserved for the most serious of social violations A legal system is not a complete social system, and we should not reflexively invoke legal remedies to enforce whatever conduct we think to be socially desirable. The uncritical reliance on coercion drives out informal sanctions and curtails possibilities for displaying the personal virtues we all prize. The most we can expect from a legal system is to create a domain that allows the virtuous a free sphere of action to do good deeds.

What are the prime virtues that a professional should possess? Through all the debate and conflicting emphases of different authors, I see the following mentioned repeatedly: altruism, integrity, competence, loyalty, trustworthiness, collegiality, compassion, justice, moderation, truthfulness, and confidentiality. Though I still want the rules around to snag as many knaves as possible, my more fundamental desire is to work in an environment where we count on moral decisions to be made because the professionals exemplify these virtues.

--Olin Joynton

Letter to the Editor

Seldom has a letter so clearly and forcefully summed up the potential dangers of a situation. Here at Montgomery College, the proportion of adjuncts is high, and probably does have negative effects such as those mentioned. However, there is a fall-out danger not specifically mentioned that also exists and that can be minimized.

When so many adjuncts are hired, some at the last minute, instructors inevitably find themselves before a class they've never taught before. Unless such instructors have college teaching experience (and many of our adjuncts do not), they have very little sense of the nature of the course, the expected learning outcomes, its relationship to other courses in the curriculum, etc.

If the syllabus is a mere shell identifying the text and nothing else or something full of jargon signifying nothing, the instructor must rely on the supervisor for this crucial data at the most frenzied time of the semester. A carefully prepared syllabus addendum for adjuncts would spell out material to be covered, types of assignments recommended, exit skills sought, workable time allotments, number and nature of

evaluation instruments, etc. While the instructor would by all means be left free to plan his/her own calendar, to forge his/her own teaching methods, the students would enjoy a far more coherent learning experience, especially in departments where courses are in a sequence. For example, if research skills were a specified component of one course, instructors in the next course could reasonably expect that students who had passed that course would have the those skills or at least have been exposed to them. Unfortunately in some areas this is not the case.

Such a failure is not the fault of the adjunct who was not ever told, or the student who was not ever taught. It is a danger that can be diminished by clear syllabi and careful supervision by people who have experience and a coherent vision of the curriculum. Our image depends on our ability to guarantee consistent quality in education. Adjuncts usually want this as much as the highest administrators. Help them to give Montgomery the best they have.

--Name Withheld

Editor's Note: Copies of syllabi for all courses are supposed to be available in the Learning Resources Center of North Harris College. At the Kingwood College and Tomball College LRC's, some of the syllabi are available. The suggestion has been made for a similar service at Montgomery College..

Update on "Report from the Adjunct Ranks"

The February issue of the *Advocate* featured an article written by an adjunct professor criticizing the District's unacceptably high percentage of adjunct faculty. The article reported that during the current semester 71.8% of the District faculty are adjunct, while the figure is only 57.1% for two-year colleges across the nation. The national figure was based on a 1991 study; we have since reviewed a more recent study from 1992-93 which puts adjunct figure at 56%, which shows that our district is slipping a bit farther behind the national norm. (<http://www.aacc.nche.edu/research/brief9.htm> is the Internet address for this more recent study.)

Also, in February we noted our intention of publishing the current figures for sections taught by full-time vs. adjunct faculty (as opposed to simple numbers of faculty), and here they are from the office of the North Harris College Coordinator of Research and Reporting.

Spring 1996
(linked classes counted once)

	District	North Harris	Kingwood*	Tomball	Montgomery
Total Number of Sections	2,662	1,267	484	481	430
Total Sections Taught by Full-time Faculty	1,464 55.0%	733 58.0%	233 48.1%	263 54.7%	235 54.7%
Total Sections Taught by Part-time Faculty	1,184 44.0%	523 41.3%	251 52.0%	218 45.3%	192 44.7%
Sections Taught by Faculty of Unknown Status	14 0.5%	11 0.9%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	3 0.7%

*President Steve Head of Kingwood College reports a total of 551 sections, of which 243 (44.0%) are taught by full-time faculty and 308 (56.0%) are taught by part-time faculty.