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Mark as a teacher

In her poem 'Lesson' Hilde Domin reflects on the meaning of death – and the dead – for the living.

In it, she reflects on the infinite finality of death.

'Everyone who departs

Teaches us a bit

About ourselves.

But we, whose words fail,

Forget this.

And they?

They cannot repeat the lesson.'

It is a great honour to have been asked to say a few words here.

I was a colleague of Mark's at St Peter's. I was there as a Junior Research Fellow, and I also stood in for some of Lawrence Goldman's teaching after he had taken over as editor of the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.

I have actually never seen Mark teach a tutorial, nor did we do admissions interviews together.

So, this is no more than a brief attempt to to add some particulars to the general history of Mark Whittow that Lawrence has given us.

Rather than comment on his teaching style and approach, I want to highlight Mark's role as a mentor, as a teacher of teachers.

I want to highlight four aspects that I found particularly impressive.

1)

Mark breathed and embodied teaching.

In a sense, Mark was the re-incarnation of Wilhelm von Humboldt's model for university teaching (or perhaps that of the more conservative Jacob Burkhardt at Zurich?): a model where research and reading informed teaching, and where the conviviality of a group of students.

But unlike not just the typical nineteenth-century German Protestant professor, Mark shared a more catholic sense of humour and flair; and he did not take himself too seriously. It was a brilliance that was not carried by arrogance; and it was deep learning that came in the form of cheerful and often debauched anecdotes.

He was immensely tolerant. But not in the lazy sense of laisser faire, but in the sense of really and honestly engaging with others' views. But in engaging with other opinions as seriously as his own.

We heard this morning how this characterised his research. It was also key for his teaching.

And Mark has taught me that teaching had to be about the subject and not about the predilections and (at times) arrogance of the teacher.

It helped that Mark's status as a person was the stuff of legend, too. That, of course, one cannot even hope to reproduce.

2)

> Mark's general history was always specific. Everything was connected. Teaching was research; and research – teaching. And lateral thinking was a MUST.

This was evident from the moment I entered St Peter's for my interview for the JRF. I had been asked to prepare a brief lecture geared towards undergraduate students.

There were, of course, no undergraduate students in the audience, which did not make the whole experience less daunting.

I used a map from Chris Bailey's global history of the nineteenth century to illustrate some of the general points I made. Mark got very excited about the map, and then asked me how the foundation of Canada, German unification and some convulsions in Latin America were related.

Mmmh, yes…

It is a question, whose answer would probably require a whole book – and it is a book that has not yet been written. And this was only Mark's first question.

As we have heard this morning, Mark's unique ability to find the general in the particular – and to enjoy the small

details that revolted against general trends and developments – made him such a great scholar, and therefore such an impressive teacher.

3) Mark trusted his students and colleagues; and he had faith in them doing well.

And Mark took the risk of entrusting someone who had worked on the campaign for nuclear disarmament, who had then decided that the history of taxation in nineteenth century Prussia, Württemberg and Saxony was the thing to do.

Others had found this shift crazy (as I came to myself), whereas Mark never lost faith in my ability to carry this off and in the importance of this project.

We had the opportunity to discuss these issues many times over coffee (with warm milk) in the St Peter's History library and elsewhere.

He challenged me to develop theories of statehood, political representation and taxation, with examples from Byzantine, Ottoman as well as English history. And he recommended various multi-volume histories of the reign of the Austrian empress Maria Theresia and argued strongly to include Austria-Hungary into the whole shebang.

I was reminded how just much I missed this when preparing for the Life in the UK Test on my path towards UK citizenship and how much I would have loved to discuss King Alfred, the Magna Carta, the Black Death and all the other exciting things with him and to look beyond the facts towards the big themes and interpretation and the fun details.

And Mark entrusted me with being the St Peter's representative for the Art History interviews – a degree that he was quite keen for St Peter's to be involved in. This was a bit like asking me to be the goalkeeper in a football match – an activity that was quite familiar to me at school, and also to my classmates, to whom my legendary skill not to keep balls away from the goal is still the stuff of legend.

When I raised my concerns with him, he said: it's a lot of fund, and you will enjoy it.

And I did.

My own approach to students – and now also vis a vis colleagues – is to be similarly enthusiastic and trusting in their ability to do well. This includes tolerates phases when their priorities lie elsewhere, for whatever reason.

4) The primacy of teaching.

Mark believed in the importance of tutorial teaching; of creating a community of both learning and conviviality and learning. This was most evident in the legendary

After I had moved up north to Sheffield, Mark asked me whether we taught enough there. He had heard from friends of Mary's and George's at Newcastle how little contact there was between students and teachers.

Good question, difficult to answer. The answer was 'no', of course, we did not teach enough there; and the standard of writing and general knowledge has been, if I may say so, shocking.

When I hear my Oxford friends and colleagues complain about the falling standards of their own students, I have to hold back.

I have taught students who have thought that Bismarck was a currency, or that an apostrophe was an STD.

And I have taught at institutions where box-ticking administrators who have never seen a student tell us how we are supposed to teach, using words that we have never heard of.

There is no college conviviality to go back to.

But what does this mean for Mark's model of teaching? Can it be reproduced with ever rising student numbers, whereas investment in staffing remains stagnant if not in decline?

Enthusiasm, I have learnt from Mark, goes a long way towards reaching even the most detached students.

And yet, I fear that the answer to these questions may no longer be 'yes', not even at Oxford, where there has been a move away from conviviality towards professional regulation.

Ultimately, this is a political issue: how to balance the perceived social need to send more students to University with the resources required to teach them appropriately.

But is it possible to teach 300 students in a year – and a 100 I am in direct contact with every semester – in the same way that I could teach and engage with 45, or only 15?

Mark's response would have been to have thrown a larger party and ordered more champagne.

'They die for us only once

Never again.

What would we ever know

without them?'

What would we ever know without Mark?

Mark was his deep learning and knowledge so lightly that it was difficult to overlook how hard he worked to obtain and to maintain them.

But there was one thing that singled him out. The exhortative from Max Ehrmann's *Desiderata* cited in the booklet for his funeral service:

'Be cheerful. Strive to be happy'.

If nothing else, Mark has taught us to seek fulfilment and happiness.

Fulfilment and Happiness – to have brought these to teaching, and to friendship – that is not a bad lesson, not a bad lesson at all.