

Mark Taylor

Four tributes from his Memorial Service, 9th May 2009

Elizabeth Gitter

I would like to tell you the story—or at least one brief version of the story of Mark Taylor's life. Most of you know parts of that story, but perhaps there are gaps or you're not sure how the parts fit together.

Because Mark and Anya have been the essential guests at my family's Passover seder every year (we need them to have any fun!), I've decided to tell Mark's story in the traditional Passover way—that is, as a response to Four Questions: 1: How did Mark Taylor become the most fun-loving person we



know? What was the source of his unambivalent ability to seek, find, create, and spread fun? 2: What accounts for Mark's patrician aura? I don't mean just the way he spoke or his beautiful manners, but his fundamental self-confidence, his freedom from any need to impress or show off or grab center stage? 3: How did his language become so brilliant? What explains the sparkling flow of his conversation, his quick wit, his ability to coin amusing works and enliven tired phrases? 4: How was it possible for Mark to be a man's man—with scores of buddies, pals, and cronies—and, at the same time, a practicing male feminist—that is, a man who delighted in his wife's professional successes, participated fully and joyfully in raising his children, and cheered on

his female colleagues? How did he manage to be both a feminist and one of the guys?

Those are my questions; here is the story. I expect it will only be a beginning; other speakers will help complete the answers. Mark Taylor was born on March 13, 1939, the long awaited only son of relatively elderly parents (his father was 48 or 49) and the baby brother of a 7-year-old sister, Ann. Mark's father was an engineer, a mid-westerner, and the scion of a venerable American family: on one side he was a Breckenridge and he was also descended from Aaron Burr, who was, of course, the grand-son of Jonathan Edwards (no genes for fun-loving on that side). Before taking a job at a chemical company in NY and settling in North Tarrytown with his family, Mark's father had served in World War I (perhaps the reason for Mark's interest in that war?) and then traveled to faraway places designing and building bridges. Mark's mother was from Chatanooga and her origins were less aristocratic, but she was a woman who knew and cared about what was proper and right.

The family's life in Tarrytown was stable and even idyllic in a postwar way: the mother kept house; the father took the train to and from the city every day and in the evenings he played ball with his much-loved little son. In an era when children were spanked, Mark was only spanked once.

Mark was, in Anya's words, his family's "little spark plug." From his earliest years he was full of energy, plans, and mischief, a voracious reader who was unmistakably brilliant—though he would later complain that in the 7th grade, when he had his appendix out, the doctors also removed a bit of his brain. Despite this mythical surgical mishap, he excelled, always, in school, without bothering much about his grades; he studied what interested him and learning came easily.

Mark graduated at the top of his class from Tarrytown H.S. and went on to Yale. His father had wanted him to study there to become an engineer, but Mark had the good sense to fail calculus. By that time, under the tutelage of great teachers such as Bernard Knox, Cleanth Brooks, and George Fayen, his mind turned in literary directions. After a tough first semester, Mark had a wonderful time at Yale—but of course he had a wonderful time wherever he was. He founded a theatrical group, the Davenport Players; played lots of bridge; made a tight and lasting circle of friends; read and thought deeply; drank some beer; and—most significantly, had his first date with Anya Bozeman.

Here is the story of their courtship. June, 1958: Mark had just finished his freshman year and Anya was a junior at the Master's School. Finding himself without a girlfriend, he confided in a neighbor that he was ready to meet someone new. The neighbor recommended her friend, Bubbles Post. As you can imagine, Mark was intrigued; "Bubbles" sounded promising. But Bubbles was out of town, so Anya became the replacement blind date. Mark and Anya spent that entire evening passionately discussing "The Wasteland"; Anya, still

in high school, had already devoured all of Eliot, including “The Four Quartets.” But they were both still very young and so over the next few years they saw each other only occasionally. Then, on Valentine’s Day, 1961, when Mark was in his last semester at Yale and Anya was a freshman at Swarthmore, he sent her an extraordinary letter in which he made clear his feelings and intentions. Anya’s mother—a notoriously tough grader in all things—read the letter and said, “That’s a real gentleman.” A few months later Anya and Mark were engaged. Thus began an intellectual conversation, a deep friendship, and a love affair that lasted for the rest of Mark’s life.

I hope you will ask Anya to tell you about all the fun they had in those early years, falling in love when they were still so young and then growing up together in the 1960s. There are lots of good stories about Paris and New York—foreign films at the Thalia, endless parties, sangria and Norwegian beer, \$1 a case—but I like the ones about the army. Imagine Mark Taylor in basic training at Ft. Leonard Wood in Missouri, 1962: the temperature was over 120 degrees all that summer—or so he said. From there he served—as a cook—in Ft. Sheridan, Illinois, reputedly the coldest place on earth.

Mark and Anya were married in June, 1963, at the chapel at Sarah Lawrence, right after Anya’s graduation. They moved to NY: Anya started Graduate School at Columbia; Mark worked in a bank to pay the rent, but he was continually drawn to literature. At first he only took a few graduate classes at City College after work; then he began teaching some classes at Baruch at night. In 1964 he decided to become a full-time student at the Graduate Ctr, where Anya would eventually join him. He wrote and published a brilliant dissertation on George Herbert, extensively cited only recently in the new Oxford edition of Herbert’s poems. In 1969, Mark was hired to teach at Manhattan College. His colleagues will tell you in more detail how much he was loved and admired there as a scholar, writer, teacher, and mentor.

While Mark was embarking on his academic career, he was also becoming a parent. In 1966, he was one of the first fathers to go into a delivery room; overcoming his notorious squeamishness, he watched Andy’s birth with tears streaming; he would weep again seeing Nicky born five years later. Mark was an equal partner in raising his children: for Anya and Mark the question was not who had to take care of the boys, but who got to have the fun of taking them to the park, or playing a board game, or reading to them, as they did every night. After they moved to Nyack in 1977, Mark remained an involved, tender, and fun-loving father, infamous for causing cold and rainy weather whenever he led Boy Scout trips.

Mark could spot a phony idea—or person—a mile away, but his clear head never spoiled the whole-hearted pleasure he took in his life. He loved the beauty of Nyack; having neighbors who were also good friends; cocktails in his back yard on a warm evening; playing golf, especially with the Pocono Peckerheads; his Manhattan College students and colleagues; parties of all kinds; the classroom; lively conversation; jokes; and Shakespeare, of course.

Above all, he loved his family, who were for him an unending source of pride, delight, interest—and, always, of course, fun.

If Mark, as Professor Taylor, were grading this story, he would no doubt write in the margin: “You have described, not analyzed, and thus have not satisfactorily answered your own Four Questions.” He would be right: the wellsprings of Mark’s exuberance, insight, and wit are in many ways mysterious. But telling stories gives solace, and I am grateful for the opportunity of recounting something of the eventful, productive, imaginative, and affectionate years that Mark Taylor shared with us all. The story of Mark’s life ends abruptly, and much too soon. We all mourn the absence of a final chapter—it would have been so entertaining, so lively, and so joyful.

Ashley Cross

I was fortunate enough to know Mark Taylor for thirteen years, and I am honored to speak here, as I know many of you knew Mark much longer than I did. I must confess, however, at the start that, though I have spent days thinking and working on what I will say here, these words feel like inadequate representations, poor substitutes, for my feelings about Mark. At first I thought I would talk more anecdotally about how Mark was one of the first friends to hold my daughter after she was born, or our many dome-of-silence car rides to Tarrytown, or one of his and Anya’s many other gestures of friendship. But these all feel very private, more perhaps about me, and, at the risk of seeming formal, I want to talk more publicly about Mark, about the major part he has played at this college and about the seriousness with which he took his work, his students, and his colleagues.

Let me begin, then, with words Percy Shelley wrote on John Keats’ death: “He is made one with nature: there is heard / His voice in all her music, from the moan / Of thunder, to the song of night’s sweet bird. / He is a presence to be felt and known, / In darkness and light, from herb and stone... / He is a portion of the loveliness / Which once he made more lovely.” Mark’s presence on this campus far exceeds his person. He was the consummate teacher-scholar, the embodiment of Manhattan College at its very best. His commitment, both to the faculty and to the students, should be a touchstone for this College. Mark was for me the model academic, not because he fits the traditional image of a professor, which of course, he did; not because of his encyclopedic knowledge, which of course he had; and not because of his passion for his subject matter, which we have been lucky to imbibe; but because he instilled that knowledge and passion in everyone who crossed his path. He lived the literary life, the life of the mind, the life he loved, and he invited everyone to join him in that world. From the classroom to the lunch room to the conference room, Mark generously gave of himself, wooing his audiences with wit and wisdom. To be in one of his Shakespeare classes, which I had the privilege of being a couple of times, was to feel yourself expand with knowledge as you drank in the rich web of allusions, the intricate

nuances of a single word, the interpretive thread he would weave through a play. Himself a master of the word, he made Shakespeare's words live in his own language.

You were struck by the remarkable depth of his understanding of those plays, as he recited from memory line after line, or as he created the Renaissance world in which they were performed, or called up the classical contexts. But Mark's knowledge far exceeded this; he could talk about everything literary and beyond—from kisses to colonialism, from *The Decameron* to *Atonement*, from prosody to politics. He'd show up in my office and say, 'Do you know this poem?' Or he'd sit down and have a discussion with you about the war poets or poetic form (something I learned to care much more about because of Mark), or which edition of Sappho or Ovid to use in your research; or he might pull a cartoon out of his pocket. The breadth and depth of his knowledge showed in every aspect of his being. On top of this, he was a beautiful writer, as his three books and many articles attest: a sculptor of the well-wrought sentence, an artist of the crisp turn-of-phrase, a wit attuned to the pleasure of a pun.

Meeting me in the hall on the fourth floor of Miguel, Mark would say, "Hello, Dr. Cross." And I would say, "Hello, Dr. Taylor," and we would chuckle. It always made me feel special, like we were part of something larger. Mark was my faculty mentor when I first came to Manhattan as a junior faculty member. I was lucky—I got someone who knew all the ins and outs of scholarship and teaching and service at Manhattan College and beyond, who could listen and advise, who could kindly and gently steer a newbie in the right direction when she went astray and tried to do too much, and who would still take you out for a beer, even if you had had an ideological disagreement or said something at a meeting or in class that you wished you hadn't. And perhaps this last was one of Mark's most remarkable traits—one that I hope to emulate: whatever the conflict within the department meeting, whatever the differences of opinion, that did not mean you could not still enjoy one another's company; collegiality was one of his gifts. He, and Anya, too, have gone out of their way to nurture my professional career by helping me with my writing, introducing me to people at conferences, and valuing my work.

I am not alone in this experience. Mark's mentoring extended well beyond me and his required duties of advising—to many of you in this room. He has made student after student feel valuable and capable of achieving literary greatness. He loved his students, every one of them, and I have always admired his ability to stay in touch with students after college, to form lasting friendships, and to bring them into his fold. One image I have had in my head these last weeks is Mark sitting at English Night surrounded by students eagerly eating up his stories or absorbing his advice—Mark in his element. Mark's openness to new ideas and to new people showed in his welcoming of new faculty and his desire to make them part of the college community; he made sure that any generational gap was a source of strength and not conflict.

He nurtured all his colleagues' scholarship through the Dante seminar and his interest in and respect for their work. Mark made you feel like this was the place to be, and you wanted to be here because of him; he was a center of this community. Though we have gone on several weeks now, I honestly can't—I don't want to—imagine it without him.

In closing, I want to borrow a concept from Mark's most recently published book, *Shakespeare's Imitations*, a tour de force of close reading and intertextuality. The central idea of this book is the concept of imitation, not as it has come down to us in its corrupted, pejorative form, but in its more complex classical and Renaissance forms and as it manifests itself within Shakespeare's plays. On a basic level, repetition, or mimesis, is a fundamental structure of our development; we learn by imitating, by responding to someone or something else, an original. The "second [Mark writes] may derive from, and owe its existence, sense and coherence to the first," but it is repetition with a difference. True imitation occurs when (Mark's words, again) "one thing seeks to resemble another thing and yet retain its own identity." Imitation thus builds on the original and reinvests it with meaning. Let us hope that we continue here at Manhattan College in Mark's spirit, that we can imitate his example to teach and delight, as the copy echoes, revives, and continues to make meaningful the original, Mark Taylor, who is its source.

Daniel Breslaw

Mostly, I'm not going to talk about the qualities we all knew so well in Mark—his gentleness, his exquisite sense of humor, his thoughtfulness, his intelligence, his modesty, his compassion, his unfailing kindness—things we are all holding in our vision of him; instead I thought I'd talk about some of the more eccentric aspects of his character.

One odd thing that always struck me was Mark's truly miraculous ability to tell a politically incorrect joke without offending anybody. What was the source of this mysterious gift? I'm convinced it had to do with the fact that Mark could tell such a joke without the slightest taint of meanness or condescension in his soul. It was his purity that carried it off. Despite the air of naughtiness, the point of the joke was never to put anyone down. Rather the joke was a kind of self-parody, a mock impropriety built around a core of deep acceptance, an embrace of the whole human enterprise—characteristic too of the author Mark admired most—Shakespeare. In Mark's case, one had such trust in the joke-teller's kind intentions that one knew beyond a doubt that the levity offered was utterly free of cruelty.

However, here's another mystery: why did Mark blink when he looked at you? I don't really know—but it was such an expression of his charm that I can't help connecting it with a certain kindly attention that he bestowed without fail on anyone speaking to him. He may have found the other person unpersuasive, errant in their thinking, or comic (he did have a keen eye for the risible aspects of human behavior), but he never found them undeserving of

attention and compassion, and he always treated them with a scrupulous respect. Blinking seemed a way of constantly freshening his image, of bringing the other into focus. I think some of you will know what I'm talking about, even if my theory borders on the nutty. The bottom line is that Mark simply never closed his heart to anyone, no matter what he thought of them. An exemplary quality.

On the other hand, Mark's passing brought out a few rather self-centered feelings in me that I'm not especially proud of—and I bet I'm not alone. For one thing, I feel cheated. There was so much more time I wanted to spend with him. So many more conversations I wanted to have. Mark and Anya were coming up this summer to visit us. Now I feel deprived. (It's amazing how childish one's inner voices can be.) Then there's the nakedly competitive urge to prove I was fonder of Mark than anybody else. The reality, of course, is that we all took much the same delight in Mark. When I look around this room and see all of you, who obviously loved him as deeply as I did, and for the same things—I feel better somehow. I can forgive myself, as I know Mark would have forgiven me.

Before I wind this up, a little history: I first knew Mark in college, he at Yale, I at...well, a rival institution. Later we were graduate students in New York at the same time, and he and Anya and my first wife and I became a rather jolly foursome. Later, when we got divorced, and they of course didn't, Mark and Anya became an extended and very loving family to me and my kids. But Mark and I were actually brought together to begin with by something called the Swine Bowl—a touch football game that's been played annually in Central Park for 55 years by essentially the same core of people, though these days expanded to include wives, children, grandchildren, and friends. We never could get Anya to play, though she would always come. But of course, it's not serious, it's mostly clowning around and shmoosing, especially at the age some of us are getting to be. Anyway, the point here is that Mark Taylor was pretty much, year in year out, the funniest person on the field. He liked to rush the passer by cheating on the count of 3 Mississippi, but you couldn't block him because he would crack you up with phony grunts and grimaces. He would announce in the huddle that he was unstoppable, gleefully take the snap and fling the ball downfield toward anyone he could see, preferably a child. He would stroll about the defensive backfield having amiable conversations about Milton or the latest sex scandal. And when we gathered at the annual post-game party, he was—by a wide margin—the life of it. Everyone there loved him. I can hardly imagine the next Swine Bowl without him.

One last thing about Mark (out of thousands) that endeared him to me, and that I must honor, is his love of funny names. He would either make them up or pounce with relish on ones he heard others using. "Grobus" (that was Anya). "Mr. Laird" (a car he once had, a nondescript Dodge, I believe). "Dogberry," a Shakespearean sobriquet bestowed on a college friend. "Barnule" (that's me). There were lots of others. They never failed to make

me laugh, and though they never made it into print, I always thought of them as part of his creative output.

But you know, despite the astonishing originality of Mark's personality, in the end one holds deepest in the memory those essential qualities we have all witnessed and treasured, and which I will, with your permission, once more recite: his gentleness... his exquisite sense of humor... his thoughtfulness... his intelligence... his modesty... his compassion... his unfailing kindness. I have never known a sweeter, more lovable man. His passing breaks my heart.

Anya Taylor

Mark and I were truly as compatible as we usually seemed but not to the extent that we finished each other's sentences. This is because I never knew what Mark would say next. He didn't repeat himself. Three or four books came from Amazon each week on war, Shakespeare, Renaissance manners, Kipling and Yeats; the library supplied piles; journals flooded in: *TLS*, *The Upstart Crow*, even *Field and Stream*. He remembered what he read and brought tidbits in to his classes and conversations. He awaited the *New York Times* each morning and kept up with numerous political blogs; he found lively tales in grading students' papers, which he spent most weekends doing, to my chagrin; he found new words, poems, approaches; he listened eagerly to others, rare in a garrulous field such as ours, and conversed without dogmatism; he paid attention to people's personal stories and checked up on people in trouble. Even his memories were not one's usual retreads of narrated personal history. Mark would remember a completely fresh event from his boyhood or college years, or from our 14 years on the Upper West Side; his dreams were in Technicolor with casts of thousands, often in WWI uniforms. A walk or a meal or a game with him was infinitely entertaining. I was the lucky one who got his attention most evenings but he was the life of the party in the army—"You kills me, Taylor," one old sergeant at Fort Leonard Wood used to say—at my family homes, at my conferences and at his.



Mark was not a person who talked in place of writing because he wrote a lot, partly thanks to Daily Themes at Yale, partly to Miss Woods in the 5th grade, partly because he was a smart little boy talking to his mom, dad, and older sister at the dining table over a hamburger made especially for him

each evening. He was one of those boys who knew how to talk to girls early and easy. His written sentences were glamorized by his discovery of Roman rhetorical figures, which he enjoyed playing with; he was a sharp stylist who shrank the manuscripts of scholars around the world, many of whom have acknowledged his help.

Mark was not just a man of words, he was a man of action, with a fast long tread up mountains in the Lake District, the Mendip Hills of Somerset, the Scottish Highlands, the Italian Hill towns, the scary canyon country of Utah, the Absaroka range, where he sang show tunes to ward off grisly bears. He travelled to odd places like Bergen, Norway; the isle of Skye, St. Ives, Bristol, Galway City, Sligo, Tours, Avignon, the Maginot Line, the Normandy beaches, Barcelona, Assisi, the Funda Gorge, Certaldo (for Boccaccio), Vicenza, Agrigento, Cefalu, Cody, Wyoming; Bozeman, Montana, Whidby Island, all over New England, most recently to Flagstaff. He dragged me to Dachau our first morning in Germany.

All his experiences, vast and mundane, were distilled into a fizzy elixir of Markness, utterly unique and irreproducible.

He was full of love: he thought about his sons constantly, and adored his grandchildren. I never saw him shy, brash, or uncomfortable; he was always full center Mark Taylor, delicately groomed, outfitted in Brooks and Lands End, eager to meet and engage you. He was a big man, with a wide back and a strong hug. Mark lived a happy, virtuous, and intense life, completely present to the moment informed by the past, lifting mugs or snifters with brio, laughing and making meaning for others.

I am proud of the original and brilliant work he did, of his devotion to his students and to the college, of his serious and joyful attentiveness as a father and grandfather. I am proud of our long and fulfilling marriage of 46 years. I am proud that this handsome, charming, warm, and joyful man chose me to live with him.

