

CHAPTER 1

What Bill Urban Taught Me

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Imagine a hyperactive puppy suddenly saved from the pound. That was me upon learning I had been chosen for the tenure-track assistant professor position in history at Monmouth College in 1994. The early 1990s were grim times for newly minted PhDs and for Monmouth College, too. But things were looking up, for me and for the college. When my husband, Simon, and I arrived in Monmouth, we brought with us profound gratitude for the opportunity, boundless enthusiasm, the desire to do the best job possible, and a deep willingness to learn how. Luckily, we had a patient instructor in the person of Bill Urban. He taught me many invaluable lessons which helped to form me into a productive member of a small, liberal arts college and which remain foundational to my now three-decades-long career as a teacher-scholar.

Whether or not he knew it, Bill was a powerful model of the virtue of patience. I moved then, as I do now, at a rapid pace. Bill does not. His background as a Quaker (I assume) inclines him to an ease with thoughtful silence which I did not share. His habit is to listen to others without interrupting. What follows is silence, as he considers what he has heard. Then further silence as he contemplates his response. As his new colleague, I rushed in—time and time again—to fill the space, offer suggestions, or prompt him to reply. It took years before I realized that my helpfulness was instead rudeness dressed up in selfish rationalization. Once that painful thought occurred to me, I schooled myself to wait. Our conversations stretched out as I listened to the silences. It took longer, but I finally began to understand that Bill's full consideration of what was being said to him honored the speaker. And the wisdom of pausing to reply until I had marshalled my thoughts proved better for everyone. Do I apply this lesson perfectly? No, I do not. But I regret every time I fail to concentrate fully and every instance when I discover that I am assembling a reply in my mind before the person in front of me has ceased speaking. Patience is a virtue indeed, and silence burnishes every colloquy with respect.

Bill also taught me, over and over, that kindness was the best glue to hold together a community. You will never agree with everyone, including, he emphasized, your friends. Academic life is long, and Monmouth is small, he cautioned. Bridges burned in an instant can take years to rebuild. Bill firmly believed that airing differences—in private, at faculty meetings, in writing—was essential to the right functioning of the campus, in part because good ideas often arose from civil disagreements that could strengthen the whole. This is one reason he always encouraged me, even as an assistant professor, to speak up. Further, Bill felt that if done with a maximum of tolerance, a minimum of drama, and a regard for the facts, disputes were usually more productive than not. Thus, I should wade in bravely, but not wantonly, and always speak less than I listened. Chiefly, I should employ kindness in battle so that afterwards, all combatants could lay down their arms and enjoy a drink together.

Closely related to Bill's commitment to kindness was the fact that I never saw him hold a grudge against a colleague. He could remember what he considered a poor decision, and like most historians he used the past as a touchstone, but Bill never had noticeably frosty relations

with anyone. The worst I ever saw—and this was a lesson in and of itself—was a sort of grave distance, but one that never lacked a fundamental recognition of the other's humanity. The Bill Urban who taught me was never cruel and took no pleasure in mean-spiritedness. Bill sometimes mulled over the decisions of others which he considered ill-advised, but he never indulged in ad hominem attacks, at least never in front of me as his junior colleague. This admirable forbearance was another valuable standard he set in his understated way, laying out for me a helpful behavioral boundary for living in community.

To foster that community, Bill and Jackie opened their home to countless gatherings. Students, staff, faculty, neighbors—the Urbans welcomed us all. I admired this extravagantly. Bill and Jackie were surely as introverted as Simon and I, and yet they hosted parties, Phi Alpha Theta gatherings, end-of-day drinks for job candidates, end-of-term picnics for the History Department, and festivities of all kinds. We could never put aside the manifold fears that kept our front door mostly shut. What to serve? How much? What if no one came? What if the house wasn't clean enough? What if, what if, what if? Like the Sienkewiczes, the Urbans were beacons of welcome and their homes a respite from daily worries—at least for us, their guests. I know from my own academic specialty the critical importance of the community building that happens away from the workplace, but I could not bring myself to be a third site of good fellowship there on South Tenth Street. I treasured it at their houses, though, and Simon and I miss the camaraderie that grew and deepened over croquet and brownies. Such amazing kindness!

Another lesson Bill drove home to me (taught, as usual, mostly by being himself) was that helpfulness also goes far to knit people together. Semester after semester, Bill selflessly sacrificed his favorite teaching period—8:00 a.m.—and awarded it to me. Picture our shared joy when we discovered that that early morning slot was *not* my favorite! Simon and I went to England for several weeks of research the summer after we bought our first house. When we returned, the yard looked better than it had when we left. Bill had taken it upon himself to mow our yard. He never said a word. More to his credit, he never made fun of us for failing to consider that grass keeps growing even when we aren't there to observe it. At least we never made that mistake again!

I announced, with significant trepidation, that I was pregnant, but Bill's response was instantly celebratory and immediately helpful. Once Gareth was born, Bill arranged a teaching schedule for Simon and for me that meant that our son would not have to go to day care. And Bill fiercely guarded that schedule for all the years of Gareth's childhood. It was priceless beyond measure to us. Bill fought to find research and writing time for us, too, and he oversaw the creation of the 1.5 position that increased our loyalty to Monmouth College, our gratitude to him, and our publication output.

It was not just the three of us Bill helped. I knew that he assisted students and had done so for years. Most of his generosity was *sub rosa* and took many forms. I learned from him to listen closely for the exigencies that could arise in a student's life, and to lend a hand when needed, even when to do so would not necessarily fit the traditional professorial role. His selflessness made me want to emulate him, and it gave me the courage to do so.

Bill helped the institution, too. Monmouth College operated on a shoestring. This was never more apparent than after we moved to Iowa State University. But that shoestring, for better or worse—and I do think it was for better—was composed in large measure of community members just doing what needed to be done. When I was a new hire, Bill was my earliest example

of how Monmouth folks just said “yes.” We volunteered for task forces, for election to Faculty Senate, for recruitment trips. We climbed on roofs to assess their soundness and we launched a research journal. We attended or took part in plays, concerts, sporting events, fraternity philanthropies, homecoming, alumni events, and funerals. We pitched in at the holiday party in the Stockdale Center, staged poetry readings, led study-abroad programs, brought in guest speakers, and sat on hiring committees, grievance committees, and inaugural committees. We rewrote the Monmouth College Hymn and led worship services. So much of the daily work at Monmouth College got done because faculty like Bill believed in the place and believed in the mission. When everyone has skin in the game, then everyone takes pride in the resultant success. Were there hard times? Of course there were. But by watching Bill, it was clear to me that the response was not to give up, pout, demand payment, or disparage. Am I writing through rose-colored glasses? Only a very little.

Despite the teaching load, the committee work, and the volunteer labor, Bill taught me another important lesson: research and writing are still possible. His own publication list is long, and he wrote books by dint of concentration and sustained labor. Simon and I utilized his method, but we had the added benefit of that 1.5 position, so one of us had every other spring semester off (without pay) which gave us more time than Bill ever had. Plus, Bill took joy in the writing—witness the fact that he wrote novels for fun as well as important scholarship to contribute to his field.

As a chair and a coworker, Bill was a lot to live up to. Happily, his lessons were delivered by action more than by word. He was a consistent role model of quiet, kind, thoughtful, helpful efficiency. Despite our own disagreements, which in some cases are wide, Bill was the very best kind of introduction to the collegiality of academic life. I remain profoundly grateful.