

From

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## In Memoriam: J. Robert Barth, SJ (1931-2005)

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REFLECTING on the meaning of Coleridge's idea of the unity which binds all things, expressed in the famous phrase from *The Eolian Harp*: "O! the one Life within us and abroad," Father Robert Barth wrote "that Coleridge always affirmed the essential oneness of love." The life of Robert Barth, who died on September 21, 2005 at the age of 74, was an active and vital expression of this unity of love. For the various communities that have mourned his death—his family, including his father and siblings, nieces and nephews; the Jesuit communities, especially those of the New York and New England Provinces; the Boston College community; and the larger academic community, including the Wordsworth circle of friends and colleagues, the large variety of Coleridgeans, and the broader field of Romantic scholars—it was Bob Barth's deep warmth, humanity, affection, and love, that marked his presence among them. And it was as Bob Barth that he was known to all whom he knew. Borrowing another of Coleridge's images, which he used to illustrate the way affection expands into love of all humanity—that of the concentric rings on a lake made by a stone which is dropped onto its clear surface—Bob Barth's personality was directed outward from a central point that sustained his energies and his attention in the direction of others. But like the stone that disappears, while the ever-larger circles grow outward on the surface of the water, his life even after his death remains clearly visible, as the evidence of his presence in those who knew him.

Bob Barth was born in Buffalo, New York in 1931, where he entered the New York Province of the Society of Jesus. He was one of seven children, among whom he remained, according to fellow Jesuit and Coleridge scholar Joseph Appleyard, SJ, at the center of the life of the Barth family. His Funeral Mass was a moving expression of these two core anchors in his life, as his Jesuit brothers led the celebration of the Christian rite of burial, while his adult nieces and nephews, numbering over forty, sang various hymns throughout the Mass. Both expressed a deep love and affection for a man who was both son and brother, uncle and spiritual father. Their reflections, encomiums, and songs expressed a simultaneous overflowing of joy and thanksgiving for his life, and tears over his loss, in a paradoxical display of emotion that lies at the heart of experiencing the death of one so beloved.

While clearly he remained dear to the Barth family, in the last two decades of his life, Bob Barth's home was Boston College. His deep generosity of heart appears to be an overriding family trait; it is this generosity that is symbolized by the gift of a bench, given by the Barth family, situated on the tree-lined entrance to the campus amidst the neo-Gothic architecture that is the hallmark of Boston College, and just outside the office Bob Barth held as Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. The plaque on the bench reads: "In honor of J. Robert Barth, SJ, who has found a home at Boston College." The gift of the bench marks a greater gift: the gift of his passion and talents in the service of the Boston College

community. The present strength of the College of Arts and Sciences can be directly traced to his efforts as dean to improve the curricula both of the humanities and the natural sciences. His vision was one in which the humanities can help to further the achievements of the sciences by reflecting on the meaning and purpose of scientific inquiry in the context of human endeavor. In this, he saw the unity of the arts and sciences as a key to furthering the interests of both, finding their source in the higher intellectual and spiritual aspirations of the human person. To this end, he was the driving force in establishing the McMullen Museum of Art and an annual Arts Festival on campus. Bob's presence was not merely one of administrative orchestration. A man with a strong, deep, melodious voice and a fine sense of timing, he appeared on stage in theatrical and musical productions on campus. Many students testify to his passion and love for poetry, theatre, and music as helping to move their careers in the direction of the performing arts. Boston College for the last twenty years has, because of his efforts, become a home in which the arts have flourished.

The concentric circles of his interests and loves expanded into the larger academic community, and most fully in the field of the Romantic poets, whom he loved most. As John Mahoney, who holds the Rattigan Chair of English at Boston College, and was a close friend and colleague of Bob's for over forty years tells the story, it was under the tutelage of W. Jackson Bate at Harvard that Bob first discovered a love for the Romantics, and for Coleridge and Wordsworth in particular. In fact, John Mahoney, J A Appleyard, SJ, and Bob all studied together as graduate students under Bate, whose teaching, writing, and lecturing produced a generation of sympathetic and impassioned readers of the Romantic poets. In carrying on this tradition of scholarship and teaching, Boston College has been a place in which the voices of the Romantics have been widely and resoundingly heard. Bob Barth's scholarship has been seminal in advancing the centrality of religious experience as the basis for understanding the lives and writings of Coleridge and Wordsworth. His scholarly life, beginning with the publication of *Coleridge and Christian Doctrine* in 1969 and ending with *Romanticism and Transcendence: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Religious Imagination* in 2003, has been a sustained and courageous attempt to advance the study of the relation between literature and religion. In many ways, his work is daring and bold; but it has been his way of advancing this approach, with a truly genial, collegiate spirit and a subtle and penetrating intelligence, that has allowed the aspect of Coleridge's commitment to Christianity to be considered on its full merits. All who now labor in the attempt to articulate the fullness of Coleridge's Christian beliefs owe Bob a tremendous debt. His influence, though scholarly, was personal as well. Attentive, graceful, and warm to colleagues, he was an example of true collegiality, with a willingness both to instruct and to be instructed. He was especially generous to younger scholars, and a genuine inspiration to students, both undergraduate and graduate alike. At a time in academia when research frequently comes before teaching, Bob Barth showed to us all what it means to be a scholar and teacher, because he never considered the

two to be separate activities. And up to the end, he never lost the desire to learn more.

His life in academia brings us back to the point from which the circles of his influence originate: at the center of his spiritual life. For his scholarly writings were informed by a deep personal desire for spiritual communion with Jesus Christ, contemplated through the teachings of St. Ignatius of Loyola. A hint of this can be heard in his recent recording of poems by Shakespeare, Keats, Coleridge, and others, marking the four seasons. While the technical merits of his recitations are clearly in evidence in his skilful mastery of inflection, rhythm, and diction, it is the seriousness of expression, the reverence for the spoken word, that can be heard most emphatically. It is not a stretch to suggest that Bob found in the reading of poetry a form of religious experience. In this, he follows in the tradition of St. Augustine, who saw in all things an opportunity to praise God. But perhaps the great Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, forms the closer poetic and spiritual inspiration for this idea, for it was Hopkins whom he saw as the great culmination of the Romantic lyric established by Wordsworth and Coleridge. Hopkins, for Bob, can be seen as an example by which the poetry of Romanticism and the spiritual teaching of the founder of the Jesuit order, St. Ignatius, might be combined. But above all, it was Coleridge to whom he looked for a synthesis of poetry and prayer.

In his last book, *Romanticism and Transcendence: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Religious Imagination*, Bob suggests that it is precisely this combination that has guided his writing: "In the present context, I would like to approach the role of imagination in [Ignatius's] *Spiritual Exercises* through the lens of Coleridge. Admittedly, the relationships between Ignatius and Coleridge are personal for me, since they are the strongest influences on my own life, but there is a strong connaturality between them: both were deeply grounded in the Incarnation of the Word of God in Christ; both travelled their journeys of faith through suffering; both saw the working of the human imagination as central to their experience." The use of the Coleridgean term "connaturality" marks the character of Bob's approach to Ignatius, as seen through Coleridge, not the other way around. This is a remarkable strategy for a Jesuit to take, since it is his own spiritual master who is being interpreted in light of an English poet. But the claim is one that is Ignatian in spirit, for his *Spiritual Exercises* seek a reflection on Christ's life that becomes experiential, concrete, informing imagination so that it might desire the imagined object before it. This is the dynamic of the Coleridgean imagination, and it is here that Bob saw the confluence of prayer and poetry, religious faith and "the willing suspension of disbelief," that leads the human soul toward God. It is this directional movement that served as the center of his many loves, uniting them all in a circle of unity. Coleridge again serves as a personal indication of Bob's own desires: "Coleridge was a loving and much-loved man, even to the end, when his dear friends Green and Gillman sat by his deathbed. But it was in God that Coleridge found at last the only perfect response to the 'yearnings of the spirit.'" But while Coleridge's ideas of love

remained ideals that in his life were largely unrealized, Bob's life was one unified by a love fully realized, when seen in the effect that it had on the many loves to which he gave himself, and in the manner he himself was so beloved. In commenting on Coleridge's "Epitaph," in which the poet seeks mercy and forgiveness from God, he asks: "Not love?" His answer to this question can be read as a comment on his own deepest desires:

But surely yes. Only a year before he had written: "The Love of an almighty I AM to a fallen & suffering Spirit becomes Mercy. To Spirits Conformed to the Holy Will the I AM is the God of *Love*—to a fallen Spirit the God of *Mercy*. Love and Mercy are the same attribute differenced only by the difference in the objects.' So this loving man, strong in his weakness, died trusting in the power of a Love greater than his own. It was, finally, in God that Coleridge found the fulfillment of his lifelong yearning for love.

For a spirit as generous as Bob Barth's, it is for the fulfillment of this hope, for the yearning to experience the source of all love, to which one cannot help but give assent.

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