

MEMORIAL MINUTE FOR PAUL EUGENE PFUETZE

When Paul Eugene Pfuetze died, last November, he had lived for over eighty years. He was born November 27, 1904 in Manhattan, Kansas, the son of Emil C. and Rogene Scott Pfuetze. Three generations before him, his forebears had come from Saxony. He retained an "abiding love for the Kansas farm life he had lived as a boy, [for] ...memories of Grossvater and Grossmutter, ...the pace of farmwork done with horses, the pride of task and tool." (Those words are taken from the memorial minute for him at the Poughkeepsie Friends' Meeting.) He also embodied a family commitment to learning, as did his brothers, three of whom became medical specialists and the fourth a judge.

In 1928 Paul received the B.S. degree from Kansas State University, where he had been a varsity wrestler. He was named a Rhodes Scholar and, at Oxford, planned to study physiology with Sir Charles Sherrington.

But that plan shattered upon the discovery that he had tuberculosis. Instead of sailing for Oxford, he relinquished his Rhodes and went to an Arizona desert, where he began years of struggle to recover. Long stretches of waiting were punctuated by one experimental treatment after another. One of his lungs was collapsed. With the outlook for his recovery still in doubt, Louise Gibson and he ventured to marry in 1932. Her supporting them by teaching mathematics at Whittier College was only the beginning of their two-career marriage.

By the time Paul was able to resume his studies--at first intermittently, then full-time--his direction had shifted from physiology to religion and philosophy. He earned an M.A. from the Pacific School of Religion in 1940 and, the following year, a B.D. from Yale Divinity School. Then came doctoral studies at Yale, which led to his Ph.D. in 1951. While at Yale he was a Kent Fellow of the National Council on Religion in Higher Education.

He taught at the University of Connecticut from 1942 to 1947 and, in 1948, moved to the University of Georgia, where he was Professor of Philosophy and Chairman of that department. It was there that the Pfuetzes adopted their three children--Scott, Karen, and Walter. They also became active in the struggle for integration in a racially segregated university and community, well before that cause gained the broad support it later elicited. In time, backlash against their activities mounted, even within the university.

This helped Vassar recruit him, in 1959, to succeed J. Howard Howson. Until he retired, in 1970, he was Professor of Religion and, during most of those years, held the Frederick Weyerhaeuser Chair and chaired his department. His teaching responsibilities lay in the history of religions, especially those of Asia. Since that material had not been central to his previous studies, he embarked on a major project of "re-tooling" by giving his first

summers to courses at Columbia and the University of Wisconsin and, in 1965-66, devoting his leave to studies in history and religion at Madras University.

Several months after returning to Vassar, he was struck by an automobile in front of Main Gate. That blow broke a hip and nearly all his ribs. In intensive care, at age 62, with but one lung functioning, each breath that he drew inflicted excruciating pain. But he survived, and he recovered--dogged wrestler that he remained.

That same tenacity enabled him to make an enduring difference in Vassar's curriculum, at the point of Jewish studies. Although generations of students had found the Judaic heritage to be a major part of Religion 105, it was Paul who inaugurated a course devoted entirely to it. Characteristically, he did this by adding the course to his full teaching load. Then he secured outside funds to bring visiting lecturers to address further aspects of the subject. He lived to see his initiative expand to a variety of Jewish studies at Vassar, a number of them taught by a scholar in the field who has tenure.

Then there was the personal side of his teaching, which students noted and prized. An alumna has recalled how students interested in continuing a course of his, beyond the semester's end, gathered in his home for discussions that were a high point of her Vassar experience.

As a scholar, Paul published articles and reviews in a dozen journals in philosophy and religion and belonged to as many professional societies. His monograph on "Martin Buber and American Pragmatism" appeared in the volume, The Philosophy of Martin Buber, published in Chicago in 1967, after having appeared earlier in German. For the heart of his research and his own reflections, though, one must go to his book, The Social Self, published in 1954 and reissued in 1961 under the title, Self, Society, Existence. Convinced that the tragic and catastrophic use that modern men and women have made of their powers and technics shows that we have for several centuries misinterpreted our own nature, he examines an alternative view--the notion that our selfhood is essentially social. In his words, "it is in meeting, in interaction between persons, in communication with others, variously conceived, that the free, responsible, independent human person is achieved." Central to this origin and development of our selfhood is speech, the active give and take of dialogue. He elucidates this insight by examining the striking concurrence in it by two thinkers from diverse traditions--George Herbert Mead, the American pragmatist, and Martin Buber, the Continental Jewish existentialist. He concludes by illustrating the fertility of the idea of the social self in a dozen disciplines, ranging from biology to theology.

To those who knew him, the fit between this colleague's scholarship and the rest of his life was impressive.

Consider his service to the community beyond campus. As a member of the Society of Friends, he was active in the Poughkeepsie meeting and, beyond that, in regional meetings, the Board of Managers of the Oakwood School, the Friends' Committee for National Legislation, and the American Friends Service Committee. His Quaker way--both its principles and their religious root--found expression in his advocacy of prison reform, his participation in Quaker worship at nearby prisons, and his service to Project Gateway. During the Vietnam War, he served as a draft counsellor. Eventually, he reduced his income through additional charitable giving and through acceptance of in-kind services in lieu of rent, in order that no federal taxes of his would support a war that he judged to be both illegal and immoral. After retiring, he taught at Dutchess Community College. He ran for Supervisor of the Town of Poughkeepsie, against an incumbent who was subsequently indicted and who pleaded guilty. On election morning, his wife Louise died of a heart attack, brought on in part by the rigors of the campaign. That night, Paul also lost the election. In his grief, he took up leadership of Tell Care, a hot line for senior citizens that Louise had founded. He won a term as a county legislator. He served on the boards of Family Services and of the Mid-Hudson Memorial Society, among other agencies.

But it was through his letters to the Poughkeepsie Journal, and sometimes to The Miscellany News, that many came to know Paul Pfuetze best. (For the curious, Vassar Library's Special Collections has saved over a hundred and thirty of these.) In them, he spoke for gun control, Native American rights, conservation of natural resources, and affordable housing; for conscientious objectors, student demonstrators, amnesty for those who refused service in Vietnam and, especially, for the dismantling of our nuclear arsenal and for peace. He delighted in pointing out absurdities in our political life: praying for peace while paying for war; prosecuting so-called welfare cheats, when "the real freeloading chiselers and parasites," as he called them, were respectable and successful business and professional people; naming a Trident missile 'Corpus Christi'.

In these letters, in his classroom, and in the communities of both town and gown, Paul Pfuetze lived for the values of which he spoke in a meditation that he wrote on New Year's Eve, 1974:

As human beings, children of God, we can reassert our 'humanity'.... We must understand that the naked human person is the one real thing in the face of the technics and mechanized institutions which we ourselves have created. For he (she), by the grace of God, is the seed of whatever human life there will be on earth.

Respectfully submitted,

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