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DYING WITH STYLE AND GRACE

*Garth Meintjes**

"I want to die with style and grace." These were the first words Father Bill Lewers said to me after learning that his cancer had become terminal, which is exactly what he did on April 19, 1997, just six weeks short of his seventieth birthday. In the interim, he embraced every moment as an opportunity to bring closure to his life and to the work about which he cared most deeply.

I was blessed to have met Bill in August of 1990, when I arrived from South Africa to undertake graduate work in international human rights law. He was the first teacher I encountered at Notre Dame, and I was quickly inspired by the engaging manner in which he elicited our participation in the learning process. Each class revolved around a complex legal problem that he encouraged us to examine from every perspective, so as to make the best case for each side. As a teaching method, I found this approach to be not only highly effective and thoroughly engrossing, but also vital to the success of human rights teaching.

Aside from Bill's classes, the LL.M. program in international human rights law at that time had relatively little more to offer. Troubled by this, I approached the Director of the Center for Civil and Human Rights for advice. Bill's response was surprisingly simple and disarming: "Are you willing to help me do something about this?" With this question began six and a half years of collaboration through which we became both colleagues and the best of friends.

Together we set out to revitalize the Center and to expand its programs in the areas of teaching, research, and service. Bill's basic guidelines for this effort were simple. First, the Center must always remain an integral part of the Law School, so that it may serve as a model for all law students in its commitment to human dignity and as a vehicle for those faculty who wish to be involved with its programs. Second, its limited resources are to be invested in a small but select

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group of committed students at a point in their lives when it is most likely to have an impact. And third, by adopting an interdisciplinary approach to resolving real problems, it must strive to bridge the gaps between different spheres of knowledge on the one hand, and between theory and practice on the other.

Thanks to Bill's direction, the Center has flourished and succeeded in a long list of accomplishments. Annually, its human rights programs attract applications from a host of promising young lawyers around the world, resulting in an ever-expanding network of lawyers who consider themselves Notre Dame advocates for human rights. It has hosted a variety of key conferences, and in 1994 it published a two-volume English translation of the historic *Report of the Chilean National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation*. More recently, it has established a series of practical training programs, including a highly successful law clerkship program at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

In what I can describe only as Bill's "if-you-build-it-they-will-come" philosophy, all of these initiatives were established through a series of grants—three from the Ford Foundation and two from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation—that enabled the Center to first demonstrate the value of its programs before securing a commitment from the University to fund the cost of its future operations. In the end, this was the only goal of Bill's professional life that he still desperately wished to achieve before he died, particularly since he viewed his work over his last seven years as his best. Fortunately, just two months before his death, the University's Board of Trustees informed him of its decision to support the Center until an endowment could be established. That decision not only provided a closure for which Bill had worked very hard, but also presented us with a new beginning that he anticipated with great enthusiasm.

These years with Bill taught me many things, but especially about how to live in the eye of the storm, the importance of friendship, and the sustenance of faith. Lesson number one was that things are never "normal," but rather that what we think of as normalcy is the ability to find balance between our gains and our losses. Bill's health was a constant reminder of this principle. Time after time, he and I would walk out of a doctor's consulting room and shrug in unison while repeating his usual refrain, "What you lose on the swings, you make on the roundabout." Actually, that was my preferred phrase, which he used to humor me; otherwise, his favorite was, "There is always a joker in the deck." But on those occasions when the ups seemed to outweigh the downs, he would delight in saying, "And then God throws you a bonus," a phrase he borrowed from Father Ted Hesburgh.

As a friend, Bill was a pillar of unwavering support and loyalty. He placed unlimited trust and confidence in others, which naturally made it so much more difficult to ever disappoint him. However, even on those occasions when one did disappoint, he was always willing to forgive. Besides, it was difficult to make mistakes around such an exceptional friend and mentor, for he always made time to provide advice or counsel. Of course, he was also quick to remind you if you failed to heed his advice. In fact, one time he exclaimed with frustration, "Sometimes I can be almost as stubborn as you." (Actually, I took this as a compliment, in a backhanded sort of way.)

But my friendship with Bill was more than this; it really was a kind of journey in which we shared times of great happiness and times of deep sorrow. This experience of sharing with him the loss of loved ones, the roller-coaster ride of his health, and the joy of my marriage, taught me about both the need for having friends and the rewards of being a friend.

Most importantly, Bill taught me about faith. Believing in justice is not wholly the same as believing in God. Being committed to social justice requires you to examine the relationship between individuals and society or government, but not necessarily between yourself and God. On the other hand, to believe in God certainly compels us to reflect upon our commitment to social justice as well. Bill's life until his death exemplifies this understanding—one that he referred to as the illumination of the heart and mind, but that I now call grace.

The final three months of Bill's life were not easy. Nevertheless, he seized every day with a determination to make the most of it, to say farewell to as many friends as his strength would permit, and to put all his personal affairs in order, including every last detail of how he was to be buried. As his body began to fail he fought mightily to keep a clear distinction between letting go and losing faith. He did not want to prolong his life by taking any extraordinary measures, but what precious time remained he chose to spend with a few friends constantly by his side. When death finally came, he was ready and at peace. And as we silently watched, Bill died just the way he had lived—with style and grace.

