A CELEBRATION OF LIFE

JONATHAN WALTON, JR.

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Remarks: Faculty, University of Iowa: Malcolm J. Rohrbough

Ten years ago one of my colleagues in the Department of History at the University of Iowa resigned in order to accept a position at another university. On the occasion of our last lunch together, I asked him to reflect on his long career at the University of Iowa. "What," I asked, "was his greatest contribution to the department?" "That is easy," he replied, "I was the chairman of the committee that hired Jonathan Walton. That was my greatest contribution to the Department of History." Shortly thereafter Jonathan moved into my colleague's vacated office, which was next to mine on the third floor of Schaeffer Hall. It was there that Jonathan and I came to know each other well. In the hallways, around the coffee pot in the department office, and in one another's offices, our lives intersected in a multitude of places and ways around the University of Iowa and the town that we call Iowa City. And so I came to understand fully the meaning of my colleague's words and Jonathan's importance for the Department of History, the College of Liberal Arts, and the University of Iowa.

More than any university teacher-scholar I have ever known, Jonathan Walton had a coherent and well developed sense of what a university was for and what it was about. In his view, it was a COMMUNITY. Jonathan thought of the university as a community of people—whether faculty, staff, undergraduates, or graduate students made only marginal difference
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to him—it was a community brought together to interact with one another for the mutual benefit of all, enriching one another's lives through the mutual sharing of information and insights. He carried this sense of community into everything he did. And he did a lot.

Jonathan thought of the department as a community. He viewed his colleagues not as a collection of diverse personalities divided by different fields that rarely intersected; but rather as a collection of twenty-eight like-minded individuals committed to the same ends through only slightly different means. In departmental meetings, he enjoyed free ranging discussions of the big issues. What sorts of requirements should we have for history majors? Why? How could we give more attention to the mass of undergraduates who seemed to find themselves lost in the cracks of large classes? He was also one of the department's most active hosts. His apartment and his meals were synonymous with pleasant and stimulating evenings. The pleasant qualities came from his excellent meals; the stimulation from the mix of the guests--for Jonathan, more than anyone I know, was adept in bringing together people from diverse parts of the university, all in pursuit of his vision of the university community of the whole.

It was within about a year of his moving to third floor that Jonathan and I began an exchange of food. His cooking was superior, and he would offer finished dishes--sweet potatoe pie was my favorite. In return I would offer tomatoes and peppers from my garden in the summer, oatmeal-raisin cookies in winter. He was generous in his praise of my gifts, which seemed to me very much inferior to his. In the dead of winter, when the wind blew from the North Pole across the Pentacrest of the university,
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we would leave packages of M & M's in one another's mailboxes along with notes to the effect that spring must be close and not to lose heart. I once asked him whether he had this exchange with all his colleagues. He considered for a moment: "No, but I would like to."

Jonathan's research interests displayed this same interest in community. His forthcoming book compares black communities in the United States and Canada. The Canadian black settlement especially fascinated him. Where they came from? How they came to Ontario? How they organized themselves internally, and how they interacted with the external communities around them. In his work Jonathan posed a central question: Why was it that two nations with democratic governments and written constitutions had such different experiences with black communities—in this case the black communities in Canada and those in the United States? With the publication of Jonathan Walton's book, this question and his view of it will directly influence how historians of America view this part of our past.

Jonathan's sense of community was central to his teaching. More than any teacher-scholar I have ever known, he thought that the coming together of teacher and students in a classroom situation was simply another convening of a community—albeit on a regular basis. He would begin the class of reminding everyone of the opportunities available for interaction. It was a review of community events in Iowa City—the larger community. A performance of the Black Action Theater was scheduled for the weekend. He had heard a terrific jazz pianist on Saturday night. A visiting lecturer would speak on the history of slave communities. What other items of note should be shared? Two or three students would contribute to the discussion. Then Jonathan would turn to the subject at
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hand. "What," he would ask, "is the relationship between post Civil War Reconstruction and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s?" Within fifteen minutes he transformed an inert and passive class into an impassioned discussion of historical issues. For Jonathan the present was never far from the past, and he used one to illuminate the other. His students, taking their cues from him, would launch themselves on voyages of intellectual discovery about historical questions. It seemed to me that Jonathan always saw himself as the conductor of a chorus. He might pick the music and the time and the place, but it was the chorus that made the music. Just as the conductor was nothing without the chorus, so the teacher was nothing without the students. In this fashion Jonathan Walton redefined teaching for me.

Jonathan always began his classes by greeting his students. "Hi. Good Morning." I can see him clearly, leaning against the lectern, a cup of coffee in his left hand, his right hand moving in persuasive gestures to bring the class with him on the day's journey through an assigned portion of the American past. He was the conductor, about to bring forth music from his chorus. He was the master of his trade. He has left us. And department, the College of Liberal Arts, and the University of Iowa are the poorer for it--and most of all the next generation of students who will never know the genius of his craft and the warmth of his persuasive smile.