

Paul Grave's Eulogy of Richard Burke

I've been asked to say a few words about Dick Burke's career at Oakland University. As most of you know, Dick was the first faculty member hired by Oakland University. Dick deeply believed that the central role of a professor was to teach, and over the years he taught thousands of students. He had a significant impact on the curriculum in Oakland University's early days, when he helped to develop and taught a general education class in Western Civilization that all students were required to take. This was really a history of ideas course incorporating philosophy, history, literature and science. He co-edited an anthology for this class that was used not only at Oakland University, but at several other universities across the country. He also developed courses on his special interests in Philosophy of Rhetoric, Philosophy of War and Peace and Philosophy of Sex. Dick was very active in the AAUP. Dick also served as chairperson of the Department of Philosophy for more than 20 years, and sponsored scholarships, writing contests and ultimately endowed the Burke Lecture series. For many years he hosted an annual party at his home with an open invitation to all students interested in philosophy.

Dick's philosophy was very much in the Greek tradition. For Dick, as for the ancient Greeks, perhaps the most important question was, how do we live well?

As individuals, what traits of character lead to a flourishing life? This was also the focus of his teaching. He wanted students to examine their own lives and try to free themselves from dogmas, prejudices and superstitions that hindered their flourishing.

Dick was also very interested in economics in the broad sense of examining which forms of government, production and distribution were most conducive to human flourishing. He was deeply suspicious of American exceptionalism, capitalism, and militarism. Dick was a pacifist, active in the Concerned Philosophers for Peace and locally at the Oakland County Dispute Resolution Center. War, Dick thought, rarely contributes to human flourishing.

Dick was also an iconoclast and a contrarian. He delighted in skewering the conventional wisdom on almost any topic. Philosophy for Dick was a joyous, playful activity. “Serious, but not solemn,” as he used to say. Smiles were encouraged, though showing teeth was suspect and laughter was definitely going too far. Dick always had time for philosophical conversations with colleagues and students.

I spent many hours with Dick in the last weeks of his life. I greatly admire the way Dick faced his impending death. Dick embraced his death with great poise, grace and dignity—humor even. He would have preferred to end his life himself, on his own terms. Prolonged terminal illness adds nothing to our flourishing. But he very greatly enjoyed, and was grateful for, the frequent visits from friends in the last days of his life.

As he lay dying, Dick asked several of us what would be lost from the world when he had died. For one of the few times in my life, I was at a loss for words. But a month later the question is much easier to answer. Almost every day, I read a newspaper story that we might have discussed on one of our favorite topics. Something involving: ethics, politics, science, religion, economics—usually the intersection of at least two of these—and no Dick to discuss them with. There is very definitely something wonderful lost from the world. Where before I had a thoughtful, generous, good-natured, dear friend, now I have a short, stout Dick-Burke-shaped hole in my life.