

Reflections on the life of Albert John Coleman (1918 – 2010)
by Peter Taylor

Service of Celebration and Thanksgiving
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I'm humbled and honoured to be able to talk about this man, in this space at this quiet time of reflection and thanksgiving.

I first encountered John Coleman as a student in his freshman calculus course in 1961. His lectures roamed chaotically over life, over art, over the nature of the universe and periodically touched down upon the technical aspects of the subject. If his lectures contradicted all standard treatises on good teaching, they were true to the *Aims of Education*, an extraordinary collection of essays written in the 1920's by his great mentor Alfred North Whitehead. For Whitehead the lecture is process, not product. Of critical importance are the false starts and the tentative guesses as the professor thinks aloud and uses his small share of knowledge to grapple with ideas. That was John exactly.

Can we teach like that today? I hope so. It worked for me, but did it work for the others in that classroom in the New Arts Building? One thing I know is that in venturing out to raise money in his name in order to support our Coleman Post-doctoral Fellows, those we talked to, in many financially sound walks of life, recalled his classroom with great reverence.

Perhaps John's real greatness as a teacher lay in the way he opened himself up to his students, still always keeping that essential measure of distance.

For many years he ran a seminar for 12 students in their second year. The summer before, we had the task of reading a number of books: Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, J B Phillips *Letters to young churches*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, and others, and during the year we met every second week at his home to take turns presenting papers on the books. The highlight of the evening was around 9 o'clock when Marie-Jeanne would excuse herself and return bearing trays of steaming cocoa and cookies.

I have been trying to grasp what made those evenings so magical. Most of all it was that extraordinary couple, John and Marie-Jeanne. And the idea that they had invited us to come together to be with them. Beyond that, there was the theology and I remember being struck for the first time by what an amazing story it was, that whole Christian thing. There was more than theology of course, science and history and literature, and perhaps religion too, I'm not sure. Except that simply being there in that room was such a religious experience. John was a deeply religious man whether in his basement study, writing his papers and reports, crafting his letters, and polemics, or worshiping in this great cathedral of St. George which he loved so much. Of course the real theologian of the family was Marie Jeanne and from time to time he would look at her sitting quietly in the corner, *Cheri, you might like to comment on that.*

He married her in 1953, having met her in Geneva during his four-year tenure as University Secretary of the World Student Christian Federation. He was cautious about this formidable undertaking and wrote her a letter asking that she not expect too much, that he didn't even know if he could provide a normal marriage but he felt it was right that they be together. In fact it was by any measure an extraordinary marriage. Marie-Jeanne wrote in 1980 of the confusion in their lives as John prepared to do battle with Flora MacDonald for the local federal seat. She spoke of "her own deep need not to become politically involved but to function independently in an altogether different sphere." "What would be our lot if he succeeded? Where would we live? And what if he didn't? What would he do, a human dynamo such as him so eager to serve. So confusion reigned," she continued, "except for the straightforward constant in our minds that we belonged together and would stay together come what may." And then, in parentheses, "Looking around us, we realized what a huge privilege it is to feel so strongly that way."

John's political gambit was in fact quite exciting. The newspapers found his style perplexing but agreed that while he was definitely no politician there might be *something* to be said for having a scientist in parliament. In an interview with Michael Cobden, published in the Whig, he volunteered that he didn't really understand economics and he wasn't sure about statistics either. And then he added that yesterday he had had to talk about inflation and all the horrific issues you get into at coffee parties with the ladies. One of the beautiful things about John was that he was child-like in so many ways. In fact, at 9 pm on voting day, with half the votes counted, he was 600 ahead of Flora and one of the national networks announced that their computer had predicted a Coleman win. It was not to be but it was close and she edged him by only 1000 votes. He wore it well, and in fact he had enormous respect for Flora.

I should say something about John's many diverse and often surprising accomplishments. His father was a worker on the Canadian Pacific Railway and with the help of a scholarship John gained admission to the University of Toronto. In 1938 he was a member of the 3-man team that won for Toronto the very first Putnam exam, now the premier North American undergraduate mathematics competition. After a time at Princeton and a Toronto PhD in Relativistic Quantum Mechanics, he worked with the WSCF visiting 100 universities in 20 countries and writing a book on *The Task of the Christian in the University*. He spent 10 years as a prof at Toronto, and in 1960 began his 20-year tenure as Head of the Department of Mathematics and Statistics at Queen's. It was a simpler university in those days. There were almost no committees and decisions were made by Heads and Deans and otherwise by the Principal, or Jean Royce or the Padre. John made a number of strategic decisions and over the years built the department up from 10 faculty to a high of 48. In the early 60's he chaired the Ontario Mathematics Commission which effectively brought the "new maths" to Canada, and John co-authored a set of high school text-books. In the 70's, he served as Chair of the Citizen's advisory committee to Millhaven Penitentiary and in that role, developed much sympathy for the prisoners but also espoused the cause of the prison staff who he felt were under-appreciated.

In 1978 he was the only Canadian layman to participate in the Lambeth conference in Canterbury. He found that a fascinating experience. The big issue that year was the admission of women to the clergy, the previous conference, ten years earlier, having been unable to reach a conclusion, and in the meantime a few jurisdictions, including the Anglican Church of Canada (only two years earlier in '76) had gone ahead and ordained a few women. At the '78 Conference, Churches were at last given the right to decide for themselves. In 1980, after he resigned as Head, John went to work for a year in Ottawa with Marc Lalonde, Minister of Energy Mines and Resources, acting as liaison with the Parliamentary Committee on Alternative Energy and here the focus was on oil. Interesting how some issues go 'round. He loved the piano—he was good! though I can't resist Oscar Wilde: *I don't play accurately, anyone can play accurately.* he sailed, he skied, he played squash.

I now skip to the present. Some two years ago John made the move from his spacious apartment overlooking the lake to a room in St. Lawrence Place. His macular degeneration had progressed to the point at which in order to work he needed a wall size computer screen that could display letters four inches high. And it was there that he spent most of his waking hours, as he had a huge project on the go. When he managed to pilot his walker next door to the Ramada Inn to have a beer, that was all he would talk about, why Einstein was wrong and Whitehead was right. If this sounds a bit like the delusions of an old man, it was far from that. Last Fall at the age of 91, unsteady on his feet, he delivered the departmental colloquium talk on this subject. In fact two days before, his colon cancer now apparent, his doctor admitted him to KGH. "You'll have to wait till Saturday," John said, "I have to give the colloquium." John had a number of papers or rather a number of versions of the same paper, which he revised, sent out for comment and submitted to Physics journals. One compelling aspect of Whitehead's theory is that it resolved the problem of dark matter, that mysterious substance that must according to current theory, be all around us, indeed here in this very space four times as much of it as the matter we can detect, ourselves, our pews, the walls of this cathedral, but it does not interact with electromagnetic radiation or with light (hence the name dark), so we can only detect it through its gravitational effects on the speed of rotation of distant galaxies. But Whitehead had proposed a new geometry of space-time, different from Einstein's, which actually accounted for these galactic effects without the need of dark matter. Well that seems pretty good to me, so what's the problem? *No one has the courage to question Einstein*, John would say darkly. I asked Dick Henriksen about this and he pointed out that there has indeed been discussion of this but that were technical problems with other aspects of Whitehead's theory. John knew that of course and felt that those could be resolved by someone who was young and bright. Three weeks ago at his bedside in KGH, I was talking about a clever undergraduate I was working with and John said, have him come and visit me, please, I need to talk to him. And I cautioned: I'm not sure he knows much physics, and John replied: I can teach him what he needs to know, there are only a few calculations he needs to do.

I think he knew his time was short. But I never once heard him complain, ever. There was always a great world to explore and wonderful friends and colleagues, even when he could hardly see them. During his last days I read from Stephen Hawking's new book in which he argues that the laws of physics are powerful enough to deliver the Big Bang and that God is not needed. John was fascinated to see how Hawking would argue the matter, but of course it was of only academic interest. Neither of us had much interest in a God that was only needed to start things off.

One day upon leaving his class in 1961, he handed me a piece of paper. "Do you know this poem?" he asked. I didn't. Write an essay about it, he said, by Friday if possible. Goodness! I read the poem again last week and was struck by how much it was about John himself. It was not T.S. Eliot, arguably his favorite poet, but William Henley. Curiously enough, the poem sits at the centre of a current film about the South African rugby team that I watched two weeks ago on the plane on my way back to Kingston.

Invictus.

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeoning of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find me, unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

John Coleman