

In Memoriam: Bob Whiteman

Introduction

On February 20, 2014, the Columbia University Bioethics Program lost a dear member of its community when Bob Whiteman passed away due to complications of a brief illness.

Thank you for you joining us this evening. It is my honor to welcome you – especially Robert Whiteman’s family and friends.

We are here for two related reasons: to remember one of our alumni, Bob, who very sadly died in February; and to celebrate his memory, passion and spirit. We are here, too, to hear from one of our distinguished colleagues about the area that Bob was particularly interested in – clinical ethics.

Bob was a great man, and his sudden death left all of us here at Columbia shocked, and in disbelief. He was a member of our first cohort of students, and was very instrumental in helping to shape our program. He came our Masters of Bioethics program already having degrees in Divinity and Law, and a wide range of life experiences, having served in the military, and practiced as a malpractice attorney for several years.

Most importantly, though, he brought passion to all that he did. From the outset, he brought fresh suggestions for how our Masters of Bioethics program could grow and develop, which we incorporated – in part with his help. In part, due to his output, we added new courses in topics such as Neuroethics, Clinical Ethics, Science for Bioethicists, Ethics and the Pharmaceutical Industry, and a Clinical Ethics Practicum.

Bob embodied the best of bioethics, and the program embodies much of the spirit, and breadth of his interests in bringing together the law, theology and real dilemmas, small details and the “big picture”, the practical and the ideal, the earthy and the divine, He saw bioethics issues not just at the one-on-one level, but more broadly at the level of systems and organizations as well – though professional training and practice, and education of the public at-large.

After he graduated, he remained an incredibly loyal friend and supporter of our program, not only staying close friends with members of his class, but volunteering to be a mentor to many students in subsequent years.

When I wanted to start a new initiative to have our students to read each others' papers to give each other feedback to submit them to scientific journals for publication, I asked him to head the group. And he readily agreed. When we had meetings for prospective students to tell them about our programs, I regularly asked him to speak and represent our alumni, and he invariably agreed.

He continued to come to our events – and I know he would have been here this evening to hear our guest speaker.

I was not alone in my admiration for him.

Bob will always have an important role in our program. We and future students in our program will be grateful forever to him. I hope that the comments that appear as part of a permanent website tribute to Bob on our *Voices in Bioethics* on-line journal, will continue to keep his vision and spirit alive and inspire others in the future.

- Robert Klitzman

Reflections from Colleagues and Friends

Although unable to attend Bob's memorial service, my thoughts continue to be with his family. As shared with his sister during the earliest stage of their grief and disbelief, the memories I have of Bob as a vital first-cohort Columbia Bioethics colleague are indelibly integrated into my experience with the program.

Whether our positions were in agreement or we respectfully agreed to disagree in Ron Bayer's early morning PH Ethics lecture or during evening discussions surrounding philosophy and law with Arthur and Josie, Bob could always be counted on to foster new insights.

My most vivid recollection of Bob however was not in the classroom per se; rather it was when Bob was "on stage" and displayed his thespian talents in one of my vignette-plays. Although many bioethicists and geneticists have ably portrayed the snarky nineteen-year character coincidentally called "Bobby," Bob truly captured the audience and ethical tension with the greatest panache thanks to his bellowing voice and dramatic flair!

For me, Bob will always remain larger than life.

- Lynn Bush

I'll never forget the first evening class of the first semester for the first cohort of bioethics students... I had moved to NYC only a week ago, I didn't know anyone, and I was a little terrified of the walk I had ahead of me from Morningside campus to my apartment on Riverside and 153rd. I made my way down College Walk, and there was Bob, standing right by his car. He spotted me and waved me over, asked me where I was headed, and immediately offered me a ride. We had a wonderful conversation as he drove me home, and NYC didn't feel as terrifying to me anymore.

Since that day, I considered Bob to be a friend, a role model, and just simply a good person. I was thrilled to learn that we would be working together as teaching assistants during our second semester, and grateful to have him by my side. Bob was one of those rare people who is fiercely intelligent and commanding, yet so incredibly thoughtful and gentle. He made the world a better place everywhere he went, and he will be greatly missed.

- Bela Fishbeyn

Bob was a student in my Law and Bioethics course in 2012. That was the first year I taught the course, so I was nervous. And it was more than a little intimidating to find that one of my students was himself a lawyer, with decades of experience in medical malpractice. But of course Bob was generous with his expertise. He would hold back for a while so that other students could offer their thoughts and comments, and then he'd share his real-world experience with grace and humor.

I was also lucky enough to get to know Bob a little better because I ended up riding home with him almost every week after class. Once Bob realized we both lived in Westchester, he told me that it made no sense for me to be schlepping back on the subway and train in the dark and the cold. So each week after class, he drove me to my door.

I recall some great conversations on those smooth car rides up the Hudson Valley. We would discuss ideas and arguments from the class and from the intersection of law and bioethics generally. Or Bob would tell me about cases he had been involved with—difficult end of life decisions he had dealt with first hand. Or we'd talk about a paper he was working on. He had a youthful interest in bioethics and in the problems that animate

our field. I was so shocked and greatly saddened to learn of his death. He was full of energy and wit—as sharp as a tack—and was an absolute pleasure to work with. My heart goes out to his family at this sad time.

- Josephine Johnston

Bob's intelligence, compassion, and good humor added immeasurably to our bioethics classes. He had a unique gift for stimulating discussions and opening up spaces for reflection. He enriched our program not just by what he brought to it himself, but also by what he brought out in others.

- James Colgrove

Bob was in the very first group of people entering our Bioethics program here and he immediately helped to make my experience, and that of the others in the Philosophy of Bioethics class I was teaching that first semester, so much more rewarding. Bob brought life and wit, experience and understanding to each Monday evening's discussions.

As faculty, we had wondered how difficult it might be for our students to have good rapport with one another when they were at so many different places in their respective lives and careers. But Bob was a key part of the answer to that question—he was a wonderful catalyst, greatly appreciated by everyone, so willing to engage people on the issues, always very knowledgably, always in a personable and affable way.

When Bob was almost finished with his own thesis, he generously continued to attend further sessions of the thesis workshop so he could offer his support to other students who were not as far along. Indeed, well after he received his own degree, Bob was a very valued and articulate presence at almost all of our information sessions for prospective new students. Bob believed in the importance of bioethics and in the significance of our program here at Columbia-- and so he was willing to explain the program so clearly and to advocate for it so cogently.

To me, Bob was and is the spirit of what this program is, and ought to be, all about. I will always remember him in this way.

- Arthur Kuflik

Bob's positive influence cannot be overstated. He had a profound effect on my life, even though I only knew him for a short period of time. Bob was one of the first people I met when I moved to New York from South Carolina and he helped ease my worries about such a drastic lifestyle change. I met him at Admitted Students' Night, which he was attending as an alumni. I was a nervous wreck at the event because I was still questioning

whether or not I would be able to handle living in New York. Bob welcomed me with open arms, literally and figuratively. He helped me realize that I was making the right decision.

Since that time, Bob was always there for me, providing me with encouragement and comic relief every time we met. My life is better as a result of his being a part of it. I will always cherish the time that I knew him and attempt to live up to the jovial, witty, focused, intelligent, and talented example he set. I will miss you, Bob.

- Alanna Walker

Dear Bob,

I am so thoroughly pleased to have met you and to have known you. Upon arriving in New York and at Columbia, I was a bit overwhelmed but your friendly guidance made the transition a pleasure.

Upon our first interaction, we sat next to each other at a dinner following a lecture on changing the face of palliative care. Your jovial and insightful comments made the dire topic of the dinner feel empowering and full of possible triumphs for us. I have no doubt we have lost a great man in bioethics.

I welcomed your invitations for trips up the Hudson Valley over autumn to see the leaves change and to Scarsdale for wine tasting. I wish there were time for more.

On our last meeting, I spoke to you seeking advice on how to enter the world of clinical bioethics. Your knowledge and advice on entering a field still in its adolescence was invaluable and will continue to resonate with me.

I thank you most sincerely for the pleasure of having made your acquaintance. I look to you as both a peer and a mentor. You are and will always be a role model.

Thank you for taking the time to welcome me and include me in your world, Bob.

- Sylvia English

Dear Caren,

I want to extend my deepest sympathy to you and your family at the passing of Robert Whiteman. Robert was a real leader in the Columbia University Bioethics Program. He pioneered a Bioethics Writing Group and in that context, he very generously offered his time and energy to me in commenting on a piece I had written on research ethics for high school students. I was a new student at the time and his interest was especially significant to me.

Recently, I decided to submit the piece for publication and had retrieved what Robert had written. His suggestion that I look at the style in which the articles are written for the particular journal has been very helpful. More important though, I think, was his encouragement to me about developing my work. He said, "I think you raise an excellent point about the importance of teaching science research students early about ethics so as to avoid scientific misconduct and some of its consequences and you support that with references."

My thoughts and prayers are with you and your family at this time of such a great loss. I will always remember Robert and truly appreciate his good will, intelligence, and zest for life.

- Donna Light

Bob was assigned to be my mentor. We were both trained in the law so this made sense. Being new to the Program, I reached out to him for ideas on how to best navigate the full assortment of course options and strategies. What I liked about Bob was that he had a calm presence that spoke volumes. He knew best the type of personality that would win over others and he had a gift for displaying that personality in a believable and likable way. Although I did not have the pleasure of spending much time with Bob, the few times we were able to speak proved to be a great help. I felt special that we could both share our ideas about the Program. His foresight and contributions will truly be missed.

- Jared Silberman

Whiteman, Robert G. "Medical tourism and bariatric surgery." *Surgery for Obesity and Related Diseases* 7.5 (2011): 652-654.

<http://www.soard.org/article/S1550-7289%2811%2900493-X/fulltext>



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