

Philosophy at Boston University: A Remembrance of Things Past

By Erazim Kohak, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erazim_Kohák

Oct. 10, 1994

“Though for no other cause, yet for this: that posteritie may know we have not loosely through silence permitted things to passe away as in a dreame, there shall be for mens information extant thus much concerning the tradition established amongs us and their careful endeavour which would have upheld the same”

(Paraphrased from Richard Hooker’s *Of ye Lawes of Ecclesiasticall Politie*, London: Iohn Windet; 1594: p.3)

It is, I fear, more than a bit pretentious to preface these reminiscences with the lofty words of the judicious Hooker. Yet things do pass as in a dream and few recall the shining present and the illuminating absent—the words are Brightman’s—of just thirty five years ago, when first I came to Boston. So bear with me as I try to call up the shadows of yesteryear, of what we have been and whereon we build.

When I first came to B.U. in 1960, Dr. Brightman had been dead but a Sabbath of years and there were still graduate students around who had taken his courses. Bowne’s writings were on the required reading list for qualifying exams and the typical dissertation would deal with a topic such as “Categories in Plato, Kant and Bowne.” That, though, was changing fast: my appointment was a part of the conscious effort to broaden the department, up to then solidly Methodist and Personalistic Idealist—though it would be another four years before we would timidly appoint a Catholic. There were people still around who remembered the Brightman glory days before the second world war—Harold de Wolf, Dean Muelder, Janet Newhall and others—as well as an occasional alumnus whose memories reached even before that. Peter Bertocci and Harold deWolf debated the question of substantival and process self: the story, we used to call it, of “Peter and De Wolf.” I heard a great many stories, and so I pass on to you what I also have received.

There was not much said then of the very early days, when B.U. was a Methodist seminary somewhere north of Boston. Whatever the official histories may say, in the memories of my older colleagues B.U. was really born of the ferment that followed the American Civil War and of the need to provide a gateway to America for the tide of immigrants landing in great part in Boston. B.U., long the doorway to the city for the children of farmers, took on the task of the stepping stone. Its students were typically the children of laborers and immigrants, the first in their

family to seek higher education, and often otherwise handicapped – Protestant Irish, not welcome at B.C., Italians and Jews, not welcome anywhere, and women. Of the first generation of women medical doctors in America, all hold their degrees from Boston University, the only school ready to accept them. Unlike the glory that was Harvard, it was a working class school: there were no dormitories, only lockers—a few remain in the basement of CLA—to which students commuted daily in a quest for open horizons.

Philosophy first came to Boston University with Borden Parker Bowne, the first Dean of the Graduate School and the founder of the Philosophy Department, sometime in the mid-1870s. Its task was given by the concerns of its students. For the most part, they came from homes earnestly religious in the evangelical tradition and remained religiously committed. Yet at the same time, coming to B.U. meant a commitment to learning and a confrontation with the problem of the time—how to reconcile the religious faith, to which they were deeply committed, with rising new science, which they eagerly wished to believe. At the time, there were schools committed to safeguarding the time-honored verities of “that old time religion,” and schools prepared to discard it in an infatuation with what Russell was soon to call “the scientific world view.” Boston University's distinctive commitment was to taking both seriously. The pressing task of the new Philosophy Department was to reconcile Faith and Science, both with initial capitals.

There was a second constraint as well. In its early days, B.U. was not a finishing school for the wealthy but training ground for young people who were making their way from the blue-collar world of their parents to the white-collar—albeit with frayed cuffs—world of their children. Each of them would have to earn a living. Unlike their Ivy League counterparts, Boston University students would have to look for jobs in their chosen field, and for philosophy students that mean the teaching profession. The Philosophy Department had not only to reconcile Faith and Science, but also to prepare its students for teaching.

Borden Parker Bowne (1847-1910) was ideally qualified for both tasks. At a time when American philosophers were typically persons of independent means—witness William James—Bowne was the son of a moderately prosperous farmer from western Massachusetts, wholly dependent on his efforts as a teacher for his sustenance. The prodigious teaching loads he carried reflected not only a love of teaching but also the need to earn a living. Philosophy for him could not be an idle pastime. It was incredibly earnest, for Bowne and his students alike, as a way of coping with the coming new world.

Bowne was philosophically well equipped for his task as well. He did his graduate study in Germany, under Herman Lotze. Lotze is generally classified as a minor Kantian though in his time he was a very major presence precisely because he wrote extensively about the urgent issue of the day, the relation of the faith the West was not prepared to give up and of the science it was not prepared to reject. Lotze's solution was basically to reaffirm the fundamentally moral nature of reality but to recognize the validity of science as a regional symbolic system (he did not use the term: Marburg neo-Kantians introduced it much later) which functions as something of a special case theory within the matrix of a morally ordered reality. So a noumenal and a phenomenal dimension of reality, even if in a rather idiosyncratic reinterpretation. There is a distinct Kantian heritage here: the relation between Faith and Science—morality and materiality—is essentially *structural*, not sequential, historical.

Bowne brought something of that Kantian heritage to Boston University. Just incidentally, the B.U. Graduate Philosophy Club, which in its heyday published a reasonably respectable annual magazine, *The Philosophical Forum*, was an officially registered and active *Kant-Gesellschaft*—Hegel did not make his appearance at Boston University until the 1960s. For his version of Lotze's revised Kantianism, Bowne adopted the label Personalism, to which the department remained committed also until the 1960s.

Basically, Personalism is a variant of idealism committed to the proposition that *person* is the ultimate metaphysical category. Person here refers to the mode of being of a being who, in terminology Bowne would find incomprehensible, constitutes a morally ordered *Lebenswelt* around it. Only God can be said to be Person fully, though God's creation approximates personhood. From that basic tenet, Personalism moves out in two directions. One is metaphysical, considering the cosmos ultimately as a community of persons, that is, of beings to whose relations moral categories are relevant (though biological and mechanical categories can be applied to specific aspects of their being.) The other direction is ethical (and psychological): the task of humans is one of becoming Persons in the fullest sense. The task of education thus is one of helping young people to grow to the full stature of their Personhood. It was virtues ethics with a vengeance, and ideally suited to a school whose primary task remained one of helping its students make the transition from drudgery to culture.

Bowne made one other contribution to the Department: he won for it the freedom of learning. When the openness to the secular world incurred the wrath of the more traditional dignitaries of the Methodist

Church, it was Bowne who as the Dean of the Graduate School defended the autonomy of the University against the Church. He got himself charged with heresy for his pains and underwent a harrowing trial. At no time, though, did he deny what he was teaching. Rather, he insisted that the freedom of inquiry is a part of the freedom with which Christ set us free. His premature death at 62 may well have been hastened by the trial, but he won for us the freedom we now take for granted. Whatever you may think of his philosophy – and William James in his two-volume *Psychology* treats Bowne as his authority on the subject in numerous footnotes – he was a noble, immensely humane man and, by all accounts, a much beloved teacher. (Yes, it was Bowne who would take his seminar swimming in Boston harbor off Cop's Hill and would discourse on metaphysics while bobbing, walrus-like, in the water.)

It was the Personalist legacy that blossomed at Boston University after the first world war. As America entered the world and the twentieth century from its pioneer and fundamentalist past, Personalism became more relevant than ever. Its reconciliation of faith and science made it possible to be at the same time the two things America treasured, religious and scientific. Its conception of *Bildung* was the tool needed for the transition from the frontier to gentility. Its political liberalism, a heritage both of its working class past and of its Personalist commitment to cherishing every human being, provided the social dimension. Altogether, Boston Personalism was what America needed on the level of a philosophy to live by, and for some thirty years lived by it to a greater extent than we usually realize, since its impact in professional philosophical circles remained limited.

Edgar Sheffield Brightman, the towering figure of Boston Personalism, shaped the department into a Personalist school in the best sense. (By the way, if you read nothing else of his, read a slender volume, E. S. Brightman, *Nature and Values*; as for Bowne, either *Personalism* or the first three chapters of his *Metaphysics* are a good sample.) The Boston University Department of Philosophy and Dr. Brightman personally hand-crafted their students into persons in the best sense, living up to the highest standard of personal integrity and concern for their students in turn. It was this total commitment to personalized teaching that made our reputation and guaranteed that there would always be a job for a B.U. graduate – though for the most part at small teaching schools rather than at research universities. Philosophically, the metaphor of reality as a community of persons is close to the Husserlian conception of the *Lebenswelt*, a kinship Brightman recognized, and a solid basis for systematic philosophy. Finally, the unambiguous commitment to freedom and justice was very much in tune with the mood of America in the thirties and forties – and made B.U. a

refuge for many of the victims of the McCarthy hysteria in the fifties and a bastion of liberty and justice in the sixties.

Brightman's pupil and successor, Peter Anthony Bertocci, had a rather more difficult task. The agonizing conflict between a religious commitment and a will to science, which survived into the 1950s – many of our students then came from the fundamentalist south – was no longer an issue in the 1960s. Philosophy took a different turn. On a popular level, existentialism filled much of the function which Personalism performed for the prewar generation. The civil rights movement, for which Personalism helped provide a philosophical foundation – Martin Luther King was a product of Boston Personalism – in the sixties turned in new directions as well. The Department had to open up.

Part of the greatness of the personalists was that they were able to recognize it. Guided by Peter Bertocci and by its able Chairmen Richard C. Millard and John H. Lavelly, all Brightman's students, the Department set about appointing people who shared the Personalist commitment to teaching as the handcrafting of character and of philosophy as the stubborn attempt to form a coherent conception of the way things fit together morally (or "personally") as well as materially, but not in the tradition of Boston Personalism. There came Quine's student, George W.C. Berry, Marxist Hegelian Marx Wartofsky, Erazim Kohak (a Czech student of Husserl who, ironically, discovered Personalism at B.U. and embraced it gladly), analytic philosopher Michael Martin, and Enlightenment scholar, Bernard Eievitch – though here the names become familiar.

The Department's great good fortune, though, were the appointments of John Niemayer Findlay and of Alasdair MacIntyre. Neither would have described himself as a Personalist. The label had simply become obsolete. Still, John Findlay, though he would deny the similarity (he considered himself an absolute idealist, not a personality one) proved the same kind of presence that Bowne had been – infinitely gentle with students and utterly devoted to their learning, a scholar for whom the issues of systematic philosophy were alive, a morally earnest man. Alasdair MacIntyre would similarly deny any similarity to Brightman most vehemently. And yet he, too, was that kind of a presence. The Department to which they came was rather different than the one I first met in 1960. Marx Wartofsky – another beautiful man very much in place in a Personalist department, though he would deny it no less – and Robert S. Cohen built up an institution which made B.U. genuinely internationally famous, the Boston Colloquium for the Philosophy of Science. Without exaggeration, all over the world the

words “BU” evoke either a blank stare or a warm smile. “*Ach, ja, das Boston Kollokvium, nicht wahr?*”

And yet for me, whose first impressions of the Department were from the waning of the Personalist age (and from something of a love affair with Bowne’s personality and Personalism), it was clearly recognizable as the same department, carrying on a tradition. Though its students were far more affluent – after the University of Massachusetts opened its Boston campus, with tax-supported tuitions, B.U. had to build dorms and reach out to a more affluent clientele to survive – much of the shirt-sleeve atmosphere of a working class college remained. B.U. Philosophy Department was still committed to the needs of the underprivileged, to social justice, to the heritage of visionaries like Norman Thomas and Martin Luther King. It remained no less committed to teaching not as information transfer but as cultivating of people into persons, the handcrafting of humans of integrity. Even when we had to accept the anonymous large courses, we sought to make them adventures in self-discovery and cultivation: our 100s were not skills courses but courses in which students could grow to the stature of persons. And the third component: though in the late 60’s Hegel arrived with a vengeance, originally riding Karl Marx’s coat tails, B.U. Phil remained committed to philosophy as a morally earnest quest for understanding, not as an exercise in virtuosity, remarkably free of pretensions, open to a plurality of views and options. The direction which philosophy of science took at the Colloquium is characteristic: it is not positivistic, it is an inquiring open approach which Bowne would have appreciated.

Such, in the eye of fond memory, was the heart of the old B.U. and of its Philosophy Department. It was committed to education as the building of character, not just acquisition of skills and information – and it attracted students who sought personal growth, not just self-indulgence. It was morally earnest, seeking in philosophy a broad understanding, not just virtuosity – and it attracted students who struggled to integrate their moral and religious commitment with the world of learning. It was committed to social progress – and it attracted students who wanted to go out and change the world – or at least “make it a better place.”

Or such was the dream. Peter Bertocci, in his once popular character building course, PH 310, Philosophy of Personality, would evoke a nautical imagine and speak of it as “the distant star” by which we steer. In actual practice, that star was often quite distant. The old B.U., though much beloved, was often shabby and down at the heels, its preaching pretentious and often just plain corny, its philosophizing well

meaning but often naïve, its idealism – no, the idealism that produced a Martin Luther King was always real, just perhaps less widely shared than we would have liked to believe. The dream was noble. the reality left a good bit of room for improvement.

Which is what we are about. Times have changed, and so have the needs of our students. Reconciling a strict religious background with modern science is not, for the most part, their primary preoccupation. Nor are they typically the children of shopkeepers seeking to make their way into the white-collar world. They have few illusions about social experimentation. They are for the most part far more sophisticated, affluent and hard-headed than their predecessors of a century ago. Their school has changed with them, from a well-meaning streetcar college to a major research university with one of the finest philosophy departments in the country.

For all the changes, though, B.U. remains the school where learning is not just a matter of skills, nor philosophy a matter of verbal virtuosity. It is still a school which handcrafts its students and where senior professors teach first year courses. Though none of us was aware when we passed it unanimously, Charles Griswold's *Plan for the Department* is a reaffirmation of the best of our past minus some of its less desirable aspects. Walking the deserted halls after my evening seminar, I sense a walrus-like smile lingering about me.

You might think it overdoing it to read the long ago writing of the persona lists, solving different problems of a different age, though they might surprise you. Do, though, stop by my office sometime and pause before the photograph of Borden Parker Bowne before he was worn out by the struggle, looking his most walrus-like! Lest we let loosely through silence pass away, as in a dream, what was precious to those on whose shoulders we stand.

Boston University
October 10, 1994

e.k.

Post scriptum a decade later: I wrote my reminiscences as a farewell to the school which had been my home for thirty five years. After the fall of the Soviet Union, I returned to my native Prague, where I still teach at the University and write as B.U. taught me, though now in my native Czech - and, since I share Bowne's conception of philosophy as a passionate commitment, am standing for the Senate in this fall's election.