

GEORGE BOX CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION

The context in which I came to know George Box was different from most of yours. Neither as faculty colleague nor student, and certainly not as a statistician (I barely passed the one statistics course I took as an undergraduate). I had, rather, the privilege of engaging with George at the spiritual level, and as his minister in his later years. Furthermore, for almost ten years he and Claire lived across the street from us in the Village of Shorewood Hills - the best neighbors one could hope to have.

I am indeed honored that Claire asked me to share a few of my own thoughts about George this morning, as you come together to observe what would have been his hundredth year on this good, green earth. It hardly seems possible that more than six years have elapsed since his quiet exit from our company, and I retain vivid memories of his interment at the Natural Path Sanctuary on a calm and cool late winter day. It was a simple, unpretentious celebration very much in keeping with the sensibilities of the deceased himself.

Now, George was a mathematician and I am, by training and disposition, a humanist. But while I, like the late Sam Cooke, don't know much about math, George was also a humanist in the broadest sense of that word. Until he became too disabled to do

so, George attended services regularly at the First Unitarian Society, and I came to admire him as a man of wide-ranging interests and informed insight. George could offer a judiciously expressed opinion on practically any topic.

From an epistemological standpoint, humanists are folks who place primary emphasis on the powers of human reason and the rational pursuit of truth. And George Box was nothing if not rational. But I also knew him as a man of deep and fine sensitivities, of tender emotions, and of openness to other ways of knowing. George was admirably irenic and non-doctrinaire, although he could be outspoken on matters of social and political justice. Indeed, he chafed at the hardness of heart exhibited by too many contemporary politicians.

On the whole, though, the George Box I knew was both a gentleman and a gentle man - gracious, inviting, self-effacing, accessible. He was no ivory tower intellectual and had a knack for putting people at ease. With his lack of affectation and an ability to leaven any conversation - no matter how serious - with a wry observation, it was easy to be charmed by George.

Despite his professional stature, George was remarkably down-to-earth. I never heard him toot his own horn or try to impress me with tales of his academic triumphs. He understood that the world is so much bigger and more interesting than George Box, or any one of us. And, as Claire herself has

suggested, her husband was sufficiently aware of his own limitations to take himself lightly. Perhaps that quality, in addition to his statistical brilliance, is why so many students continued to seek him out long after his formal teaching career had ended.

I only knew George as an older man. He was already past seventy when I became aware of him at the First Unitarian Society. I knew nothing of his amazing life's journey until Claire filled in the blanks by gifting me with a copy of George's autobiography, "An Accidental Statistician." But as an elder, George made quite an impression on me as a model of graceful aging. Over the years I would watch as he and Claire set out on their daily stroll. Eventually, he transitioned to a walker, their sojourns became shorter, and then they stopped altogether.

But George never failed to smile when he saw Trina or me and he always seemed appreciative of the assistance Claire and others gave him. If he did not embrace his infirmities, he did seem to accept them patiently and as inevitable. In the end and despite any lingering regrets, George felt appreciation for the life he'd led, and was grateful to all those who helped make that life possible. Would that each of us could say the same.

At his memorial, I read a selection from the Irish poet John O'Donohue and I'd like to close with another that struck me as

appropriate for this occasion. And by the way, it was Claire
Box who introduced me to the work of O'Donohue initially. This
brief piece is entitled, "For Equilibrium."

Like the joy of the sea coming home to shore,
May the relief of laughter rinse through your soul.

As the wind loves to call things to dance,
May your gravity be lightened by grace.

Like the dignity of moonlight restoring the earth,
May your thoughts incline with reverence and respect.

As the water takes whatever shape it is in,
So free may you be about who you become.

As silence smiles on the other side of what's said,
May your sense of irony bring perspective.

As time remains free of all that it frames,
May your mind stay clear of all its names.

May your prayer of listening deepen enough
To hear in the depths the laughter of God.