

6/15/89

BILL TURNBULL

I feel extraordinarily humble offering recollections of a man who offered so much and who demanded so little from this world. He has left a void in my own life and in the community of educational and academic leaders that no one can fill.

Bill Turnbull combined an exceptionally brilliant mind with unusual sensitivity to the needs and feelings of others. Completely without arrogance or presumption, this gentle man accomplished so much in his too brief life.

I first met Bill Turnbull in 1964--almost twenty-five years ago--when I came to ETS to interview for a job. I wasn't sure, nor I think was he, what I could do for ETS, but I never heard a more lucid explanation of the world of tests and measurements and what might be done with them to improve education and give young people an opportunity to develop their potential. His commitment was firm, his analysis penetrating, and his desire to do work that mattered impressed me so much that I, who had thought of my visit to ETS more as an educational experience than a job opportunity, decided then and there to go to work for ETS. I never regretted that decision.

I suppose there are people here today who can attest to the far-sighted vision of Bill Turnbull better than I because they know the alternatives from which he made choices. But the evidence of his vision is all around us, eloquently expressed in his writings as well as imaginatively implemented in programs.

Whether working in small groups or gauging the state of national trends, Bill had an uncanny ability to anticipate trends and influence outcomes. I remember debating with friends at ETS whether the notes that Bill inevitably took at meetings in his careful hand, recorded what was happening or what was going to happen.

Certainly his annual reports spoke more to future needs than to past accomplishments, and they set forth visions that were far ahead of the times. In 1975, he wrote, "Now the flood tide of students has abated, and concern for quality demands our primary attention." A decade later, A Nation At Risk came to the same conclusion. But Bill went on in his 1975 annual report to make an observation about quality that is just beginning to emerge in the national debate. He said, "Quality cannot be defined in relation to a single standard. It must be related to the diversity that has come increasingly to characterize American education. Each segment, each program, each purpose of education has its own scale of excellence."

His 1976 annual report was equally far-sighted with respect to the hottest buzz word in education today--assessment. And once again, he not only predicted the trend, but he foresaw both problems and potential. A decade ago, in a report entitled, "Power to the Person," he wrote, "The process of assessment is a navigational aid of exceptional promise for enabling individuals to make decisions more wisely about their own education and careers. We are entering an era, I believe, when assessment--and testing is only a part of the process--will help the individual understand, evaluate, and expand his or her abilities and

choices." We aren't there yet, but Bill's leadership has done much to move us in that direction.

On a personal note, I am grateful to Bill for an observation that he made in a recent article for Change magazine because it helped to clarify needs and to set the stage for my own work. He was pointing to our general failure to make the necessary connections between assessment and the improvement of education, and he wrote, "The overriding purpose of gathering data is to provide a basis for improving instruction, rather than keeping score or allocating blame." That quote is especially characteristic of Bill because it reflects so accurately his desire to accentuate the positive and to get on with the task at hand.

His interest in "getting on with things" is perhaps one of the characteristics that made Bill a natural bridge between the world of ideas and the world of action. While he could talk ideas with the best of the academics, he was interested in doing something to make education better for everyone. In the environments in which he lived, good ideas abounded; they enlivened meetings and crowded file cabinets, but Bill wanted to put ideas to work. When colleagues appeared who wanted to implement ideas, new or old, they could be sure of getting a hearing and plenty of encouragement and help.

On the surface, Bill was the ultimate rational man. He collected, synthesized, and digested vast amounts of information, making quite clear what was relevant and what was not. He listened, patiently but critically, to what others had to say. Then somehow he drove straight to the heart of the matter. The

"heart of the matter," however, always included considerations beyond my ken. Bill's vision included peripheral vision that saw beyond the immediate boundaries of the task at hand to the implications for other people and other times. Vision, I suppose, has to be clear, but its implementation requires understanding context and perceiving the place of the vision in the larger scheme of things. Bill had that kind of vision.

I spoke of the far-sighted and rational Bill Turnbull first because I think that all who met him admired the extraordinary brilliance of his intellectual power. But to know him well was also to know a sensitive man.

I had reason to appreciate his sensitivity quite recently. This is such a simple and recent example that I'd like to share it with you. Somehow I had received the wrong information about the day and place of an award I was to receive at AERA in Washington this year. After some friends and I had laughed about the awkwardness of my situation--they heartily, me much less so--I set out to see if I could find some answers to this distressing situation. Bill, I am sure, had places to go and people to meet, but not before he slipped back quietly after others had left to see what he could do to help. Moreover, it was not an empty gesture. He had program in hand, some useful information about officers of the association, and some very constructive suggestions about next steps. It wasn't a big deal; but it was typical of Bill Turnbull's rare combination of sensitivity to people and his ability to solve problems.

There is no way to comprehend why Bill left us when he did. At no time in the past twenty-five years has education been in a

better position to use Bill's extraordinary talents. Assessment is a nationwide issue today, looking desperately for leadership. Bill, in his quiet way, was destined to be that leader. It seems that he had been preparing all of his adult life for that role. He had accumulated the knowledge, the experience, the skill, and the national and international visibility to offer leadership in the new assessment movement.

After some years of absence from working directly with Bill, I had the opportunity this year to work with him once again in the Harvard Assessment Seminar. When Derek Bok wanted someone to engage the Deans at Harvard in a fruitful discussion about assessment in higher and graduate education, Bill Turnbull was the man to whom he turned. When the Harvard Assessment Seminar was launched a year ago, Bill was asked if he would share his vast knowledge and experience with the Seminar participants, which included some of Harvard's most distinguished professors, along with leaders from other colleges throughout New England. Bill graciously consented to lead one of the working groups of the Seminar and came faithfully to meetings each month through all kinds of Boston weather--most of it bad.

Here, as in other groups where I saw him work his magic, Bill was completely unconcerned about turf or credit or prestige. His full attention went into the development of the best assessment plans and procedures that could be designed. "Best," to Bill meant using everyone's talents. It made no difference to him whether the idea came from the president of Harvard or the graduate assistant in charge of arrangements. All contributions were treated with equal respect, and I have heard more than one

person say that he got more from them than they knew they had in them. Bill didn't demand much, but he expected a lot, and people worked hard to justify his faith in them. Equally important, they worked with honesty and integrity. Bill knew a charlatan when he saw one. Perhaps that is why they faded into oblivion in his presence.

The tribute that seems most fitting as I conclude these fond remembrances is inscribed on a modest stone that stands on a university campus to recognize the accomplishments of an early president. It reads, "If you would seek his monument, look about you." We have only to look about us to see the monument to Bill Turnbull's influence--on education, on measurement, and on those of us who were privileged to know him and to work with him.

K. Patricia Cross

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