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My SMU Smith

When I was an undergraduate student at Southern Methodist University, I majored in Spanish and Comparative Literature. SMU was then a small school of some twelve hundred students. The faculty was small, too, of course: yet, there were a number of Smiths in the School of Arts and Sciences. I was never able to take a class with Professor Henry Nash Smith, but Paul did and his enthusiasm for Dr. Smith's classes in the History of American Ideas almost made me regret my Spanish and Comparative Literature majors, for they left no space for such electives. We both had Arthur Smith for a course in Economics and enjoyed his informative, suave instruction. But the Smith I became best acquainted with was Frederick Smith, one of two professors in the Comparative Literature Department. Dr. Smith was also Dean of the Faculty and taught only two courses a year, rotating among six year by year. I took them all. Dean Smith had several eccentricities which might have made him easily forgettable if he had not been such an excellent teacher. To begin with, Dean Smith was very short, barely coming to the level of my shoulder. He had a military bearing, walking briskly about the campus and sitting soldierly still and upright in his chair as he taught. He was neat and trim, always impeccably dressed in a gray business suit with an unexceptional gray tie. He was fastidious in appearance and his actions were precise and always unhurried. He gave the appearance of timidity, lecturing seated and apparently talking to his tie. I had reason to know that he could indeed be forceful, for he was also my advisor and always conducted our advising sessions with firmness and dispatch. His austere appearance and his no-nonsense approach to his courses did not encourage any of us to become friendly with him, including invariably referring to him outside of class as Dr. Smith, certainly never as "Fred."

His posture of looking down and addressing his tie was not in order to read from his notes. He never needed any, and, in fact, he always placed his briefcase on the floor by his feet and kept the table almost entirely bare. The first course I had with him was one on the writings of the ancient Greek philosophers, beginning with tracing the fragmentary knowledge we have of Socrates and continuing on through Plato and other memorable Greek and Roman philosophers. The class, which had only five students, met in a small room on the top floor of the library. We sat around a seminar table, with the Dean at the head of the table. Despite his lack of eye contact with his small class, he was an interesting lecturer, keeping us always alert and interested. He did encourage questions as he talked. He conscientiously answered all such questions but did not encourage extended dialogue. The six-weeks tests he gave were thorough and fair, asking for a well organized and reasoned essay response to no more than two questions. He invariably returned the papers to us at the next meeting of the class with carefully worded responses to our essays. He did not tolerate sloppy writing or faulty reasoning, causing me to consider carefully how I organized and stated my answers. I always felt that his objections to my style were instructive. In fact, I consider that the way he reshaped my writing style was probably his major instructional effect on me. During the three years I took his classes, which ranged from the Greek period into European Renaissance writings, I learned to look forward to them.

At the same time, I had a Latin class under his wife, a diminutive woman who taught Latin vigorously, invariably stretching her compact little body as far as she could reach on her tiptoes. The class gossip was that she was a demanding spouse who would not allow her husband to smoke his occasional cigar in the house, banishing him to the backyard or garage. That picture was somewhat shocking for the time but appealed to us for it seemed to fit her positive approach to life and his diffident adjustment to circumstances at a time when most people saw no harm in secondhand smoke. I was sympathetic with Mrs. Smith, because on the rare occasion when I passed her husband on the campus when he was smoking his cigar, I found the aroma decidedly unpleasant. I think the student consensus was that he was thoroughly "hen-pecked."

That speculation, however, was about the only personal information we had about Dean Smith until almost the end of the last course I had with him in my senior year. Since we had observed his military bearing throughout our classes with him, one bold soul in the class asked him, in a lull at the beginning of a class, if he had had military service during World War I. He was prompt to reply that indeed he had, albeit his career was not an outstanding one. "I spent my entire military service as a private," he said, "because I never met a sergeant who was my intellectual superior."