

'Foubert Remembrances'

by Jeff Martine



Jeff Martine (at left) with Val Foubert, age 82, in November 2006

***From remarks originally prepared for delivery at the
Memorial Service for Val J. Foubert on March 13, 2007***

This will be something of what Mr. Foubert would call, charitably, an 'Impromptu Speech' -- and I sense he will be tuned in, and I **will** receive a grade in due course.

I was NOT among his top students, or a top debate or forensics competitor. I realize that my observations include remembrances going back over 50 years, and also reflect sentiments or memories relayed to me by more skillful but absent classmates - Erik Peterson, Elaine Bowe, Chester Miller and Ranney Eddy to name just four of at least 10 times that number, just from our class. They also treasured him, felt themselves in his debt, and would wish to be here today.

I'm sure there is long parade of students winding back through all the years Val taught, and at all of his schools.

In this impromptu effort, I'd like to make four points:

1. He could be difficult.
2. He was a fighter – or at least “feisty.”
3. He was a terrific teacher.
4. He was a helluva guy.

Anyone who's known Val for five decades knew he could be difficult. Lovable, fun, stimulating, fascinating, entertaining – but also difficult.

The past year of 2006 included Val's relocation – kicking and screaming – from his home in Bellevue to a full-time care facility operated by Linda Gonzalez in her home near Dash Point. I somehow wound up 'helping' in the process. In this, I came to understand some of the challenges he presented to his family, and also to Linda.

It was interesting to note how consistent Val has seemed to all of us – difficult and feisty, but also such a special individual that we're all happy to accept the full package. During the past six months, Linda in particular really, really got to know 'Uncle Val' and I've been struck by how her observations today parallel my remembrances from half-a century ago.

Funny – she, like anyone else knowing Val when talking to another 'Foubertian' – would often raise an eyebrow and sort of smirk when discussing him. I know she came to love the geezer, that he added something extremely valuable to her life as he had to ours, and none of us will ever forget him.

I noted similar reactions from Val's old neighbors and family members I'd not known previously.

Part of his “difficultness” stemmed from a streak of feistiness. He loved a fight! And he had the testosterone, if not the physique, of a ferocious fighter.

I remember him urging our debate team – in the late 50's – to attack our opponents (or their arguments at least) with unmitigated, in-your-face confrontation. No weasel words – if they argued up, we should assert down. If Left, then Right! If Yes? No! If the opponent proposed a solution, we should attack it with all our might. Even if the issue being debated was as irrelevant to us as agricultural policy, we should be passionate and visceral in our arguments. He told us judges liked that. Don't 'spar,' don't 'disagree,' don't 'debate.' Don't 'skirmish.' Hell no! Confront! Conflict! Clash! Mix it up! Fight! Go for the throat!

He was a legendary debate coach.

It didn't always work – at least for me. I have a vivid memory of attempting to follow this advice at a tournament. My partner (now a psychiatrist in Atlanta) and I did our best, and brought an opponent, a young girl, to tears. She and her partner could barely finish. We felt kinda bad, but were certain we'd triumphed. Wrong – the judge gave it to the other team – and we got a lesson in manners and humility.

Val's weapon of choice was the English language, but not the genteel Oxbridge of scholars or measured prose of the **NY Times** or TV newscasters. His English was correct but festooned with slang, and colorful metaphors and similes. He urged us to read sports columnists because he considered them our best writers. And he loved Mark Twain and H.L. Mencken, Voltaire, Thurber and anyone else who could write memorable copy, particularly if it was funny. He loved to laugh, and a humorous response would disarm him, and make a lifetime friend.

After more than 50 years, I can still see him rising to a conflict – beady eyes peering out behind thick glasses, darting left and right, reddening face, clearing of throat, then launching a stream of invective. It was always a terrific display - shocking, funny, outrageous. Laughing back at him provoked another barrage, so someone always complied.

Many of us would pick fights with him just for sport. We knew his hot buttons, and knew he would always rise to the bait. Corporations, Republicans, TV. Almost anyone in authority – including those running his school!

Over the subsequent years, Val and I would meet once or twice a year for lunch. I remained the student, and neither of us was seeking anything except company. But we always had at least one fight out of common courtesy. It was my unstated duty to raise a topic that we both knew enough to share a rudimentary scuffle. Politics, usually – though sometimes it would be public education, sports – whatever.

My assignment would be to goad him with some smart-aleck remark, keep a straight face, then slink back into my chair and absorb an endless series of verbal body blows. I can still see him peering out behind his glasses, growing red, lurching from side to side, pausing as if to load another clip into his weapon, then blasting away.

'Thank Gawd' it was all for fun – it would have been terrible if we were in a real argument.

In between our visits, he would sometimes volunteer email tirades – always fascinating and fun to read, and filled with references to intellectuals in various fields, funny anecdotes, people we both knew from past decades, issues that somehow seemed important to him if no one else. Email was a perfect medium for him, and he loved it until his eyes failed altogether.

His son Philippe just sent me a 'Letter to the Editor' he addressed to the **Seattle PI** in 2003, when the UW's football coach, Rick Neuheisel, had recently been nailed for gambling by the NCAA:

"Your pious, self-righteous blubberings about Neuheisel's latest little indiscretion reveals your ineptitude. Art Thiel writes at middle-school mimeo level; John Levesque, a feature writer who hasn't a clue about sports; and Jim Moore, trying too hard to be funny about his own ego-pronouncement -- not a first-rate sports writer in the bunch."

Final incident:

During a visit a month ago he seemed out of it. I wasn't sure he recognized me, he was incoherent, and I couldn't get a rise out of him on any of our usual subjects. I remarked on this while chatting with Linda afterwards and she agreed, almost. It seems that a day earlier, while Val was lying in an apparent comatose state, she'd gotten into a routine household dispute with a teenage daughter, which to her surprise, 'Uncle Val' happened to overhear. Like an old war horse hearing a distant cannon, she told me he'd perked up and hurled a stream of unintelligible invective, and insisted that he be invited to participate!

That would be our Val – defiant, argumentative, and feisty as hell to the very last.

Third, Val was a terrific professional teacher. His students developed exceptionally effective skills, and left his classes far better prepared for their futures than those with 'ordinary' English teachers.

Part of this was because he just loved teaching. It showed:

- ✓ He loved kids.
- ✓ He had been trained by tough-minded Jesuits at Seattle U – guys also known for their love of argument.
- ✓ He had already accumulated more learning than most teachers by 1957 – and his knowledge grew until his final months.
- ✓ He was continually excited about a book he'd just read, or a new idea and eager to discuss it as his TELOS students can confirm.
- ✓ He was passionate about the subjects he taught, and his passion was infectious.
- ✓ Finally, he *worked* very hard.

His methods often raised eyebrows – and lit up switchboards – but they were effective.

He got kids interested in ideas. He'd present a controversial situation from literature or current events and assume a provocative position. This would stimulate impassioned reactions which generated the energy to be harnessed for learning. If we wanted to argue, he demanded a proper argument – fallacy free, logical, coherent, and expressed properly. He assigned reams of written work, knowing that there's no better way for students to learn the skills. And he'd read each student's paper carefully, circling errors, making comments and suggestions.

I didn't always like my grade, but I always knew my paper had been read carefully for content as well as for the punctuation, spelling, and grammar. Then as now, English teachers were not paid for this special service performed late at night and on weekends. Val – while ranting over poor teacher pay – never shirked this or any other task for which no payment was made.

For Val, it was all about the students. They and the tax-payers always got a great bargain.

I remember a few months ago when he suddenly stated, out of context:

'I love teaching. I have no regrets. I never wanted to do anything else. I'd do it all over again.'

How effective was he? We've heard from Rob McKenna, and seen correspondence from others.

To appraise Val's teaching 50 years ago, it's helpful to remember what was going on. Ike was president; it was "Leave it to Beaver" time - literally. Mercer Island was establishing its own high school. Our class, that of 1958, was to be its first. There were only 78 of us, plus 86 in the class behind us. I have a photo of the staff - I think taken in 1956 - which shows 17 teachers and a secretary. Ten of the teachers were men, average age about 32, and I think every one of them owed his degree to the GI Bill, V12, or some other World War II-era college program. The 18 make a wholesome, healthy looking group. Housing was more affordable - some of our teachers even bought homes on Mercer Island! The world seemed a comfortable, predictable place. Mrs. Birkland - whom we considered a 'hottie' - taught our girls how to run washers and dryers, sew and cook in "Home Ec." We had one minority in the district, and he was Chinese.

It seems far away now.

But there was angst hovering around too - and Val Foubert made sure we received our full ration. Beyond **Moby Dick** and **Pride and Prejudice**, and **Oliver Twist**, he had us reading **The Lonely Crowd**, **The Affluent Society**, **Man in the Grey Flannel Suit**, **A Face in the Crowd** and similar works. We heard terms like "existentialism," "inner and outer directed." I think he hurled a few grenades into the early women's movement too - with Simone Beauvoir's **The Second Sex**.

All these exciting new ideas - even those sourced in the emerging TV world - generated plenty of grist for Foubert's learning machine. And he loathed TV. Bob Tjossem (classmate in attendance) reminded us of Val's term "Vidiot", and how he'd employ his wonderfully expressive face to imitate a bleary-eyed dolt being absorbed into a sofa.

Val was delighted when arguments erupted, because he knew his students were engaged and driven by peer group pressure (outer directed!) to tackle the issues and 'win' the conflicts he'd fomented. In our eagerness to get our teenage points across, we had to learn to use his weapons - which of course were English and logic; speech, rhetoric, identifying fallacies.

I remember the impact he made on me and other kids in my classes. Not surprisingly, we had several lawyers in our class, and many more followed - including our Washington State Attorney General, Rob McKenna. When I delivered McKenna's letter and read it to him, Val perked up and reminded me that 'He's the only Republican I ever voted for - and I'll do it

again.’ Then, smug and satisfied that he had the AG in his hip pocket, he started ordering Linda around, warning her that he could get her thrown into Walla Walla!

But it’s often the case that the biggest impacts made by a teacher don’t show up right away – they may take generations.

Late last year a veteran ***Chicago Tribune*** National Correspondent, Tim Jones, was assigned to develop background information on Illinois State Senator, and now presidential candidate, Barack Obama. Many here will know that Barack’s mother, Stanley Dunham, was a 1960 graduate of Mercer Island High School and a student of Val’s. The reporter’s contacts with Stanley’s schoolmate friends told him that Foubert and co-conspirator Jim Wichterman had been huge influences on her.

Jones was thorough, interviewing Wichterman and numerous students. He told me that he was profoundly impressed with what he had learned about Val and Jim – and volunteered that some of his interest could be attributed to the fact his own son was an English teacher.

Sadly, Jones was about a month too late to speak with Val directly, but I had the pleasure of relaying to him what students, remembering back over 50 years, had told the reporter. I know that Val was very pleased to think he might have played a role in producing an American presidential candidate.

(Among those Tim Jones told me he’d interviewed: Elaine Bowe, Chip Wall, Susan Blake, and Jill Burton-Dascher)

When I say he was a ‘helluva guy,’ I mean this in the sense that he walked his talk.

Val taught us, even before any of us had ever heard the term ‘existentialist,’ that we were important, that our lives had meanings, and we should ‘go for it.’ We should seize the day, take chances, aim high, DO SOMETHING! Don’t just sit there occupying space and time. Assume responsibility for our own lives – don’t blame ancestors or teachers or your boss or your government, even if it is run by Republicans.

This seemed more controversial during the placid, regimented, overly conforming world of the ‘50s than today, but the larger issue remains. Too many of us, Val would argue – and did argue – are stage props, furniture, somehow willing to float along mindlessly, never asking, “What the hell is going on around here?” We blame our problems on things outside our control, abdicating personal responsibility.

Val was difficult, feisty, an outstanding teacher and a helluva guy – a very special, very *human* human being. I am very thankful to have been his student and a friend for so many years, and know that I speak for a legion of others in saying that we shall all miss him terribly.