

8 May 2010

The Language of Humility: Extrapolations from Bill Sibley's Pedagogy

Guy Yasko

First, I would like to thank Norma and Sarah for providing us with a chance to mourn Bill. I had been in touch with Bill off and on through the years, and I had known that he was ill --- in fact, the last time I was in Hyde Park before today was to visit him, a little over a year ago. Bill put on a brave face. He remarked on how sharp I looked --- I had just come from a job interview and was wearing a suit and tie. I knew he was seriously ill, but I knew Bill through Bill, and so I didn't learn of his death until months after the fact. For that reason, even if I had known of his illness, I was taken aback; I regretted that I had not had as much contact as I would have liked. I also regretted that I had missed a chance to remember him to and with others. For that reason, I am thankful for this opportunity to mourn him.

Bill was a friend of my parents, especially close with my mother. I knew him almost all my life, from the time I was five. But I also knew Bill as a teacher, and it is his pedagogy that Norma asked me to talk about today.

As Norma can attest, I was an abstract and mathematical student, given to making charts, diagrams, and lists. I would make lists of words or phrases that I didn't know or thought noteworthy in some way. I think it was while reading "Bokutte nani" in a reading course when Bill noticed this. He asked me to stop and suggested that I adopt what he called the "mud against the wall method." As he explained it, one should look up what one needed to look up. After enough repetition, what would need to stick would. This seemed sloppy and lazy to me at the time, and I'm not sure that I followed Bill's advice. I might have put the lists away and simply hid them from Bill. Or perhaps I did follow it. In any case, Bill's methods worked for me, and I went on to do a fair amount of translation, some of it rather difficult.

It is often the case that the lessons one absorbs are not really learned until ten or twenty years later. In my case, the significance of Bill's pedagogy only became clear to me when I myself became a teacher and found myself with students who were very much like the younger version of myself. From my new perspective as a teacher, I recognized the impulse to organize, to wall off little domains of mastery within language. This was probably the way Bill had seen my lists, as an attempt to wall off a zone which one controls. Like Bill, I wanted my students to put themselves in language, to submit themselves to it, to put themselves within it, to adopt an attitude of humility toward it. This is because mastery --- or the attempt to establish it --- eliminates what makes language language, its openness and undecidability. One has to be in it to use it, and one has to be in it to learn it.

Bill's other courses also seemed ad-hoc and contingent. I understand after the fact that he had set up a social space and situations for learning. Bill went to Exeter and I believe that he took the basic setup for his classes from his own education. To use a musical metaphor, he used the classroom very much in the way that the later Miles Davis guided the storm of music around him with just a few well-chosen notes here and there. Like the critics who wanted Miles Davis to play more, I might have wanted Bill to do more, but I understand now that he was getting me to learn on my own. And again, when I found myself teaching, I unconsciously fell into using Bill methods. Being rather full of myself, I forgot where I had learned these methods. It was only after Bill's death, which became an opportunity for some regretful taking-of-stock that I understood how much my own pedagogy was his.

The social space that Bill set up also included his home, which was an essential part of Japanese studies at Chicago. That social space was probably more important than many of us realize. Dinner or lunch with Bill was an important ritual. At the very least, it was significant to my social and intellectual

development. I say that because I took from Bill's apartment or a spur-of-the-moment invitation to lunch in Chinatown a sense that I could be taken seriously, that I was part of a community. I could have done with less drinking, which got in the way sometimes, but nevertheless, I think the social space of Bill's home and hospitality was an enabling condition for much of the inquiry and learning at the University of Chicago. It was also there that I first met many of you.

Finally, I would like to relate a story about Bill that I have never told to anyone. I think it sums up Bill and how much he gave me. My family couldn't afford to send me to the University of Chicago, but fortunately it was still an era when one could work one's way through school. I had help from the federal government, which still gave grants in those days, and the university. Still, I didn't have a lot leftover for clothes. That never bothered me too much because, as some of you may remember, I was never that mindful of my clothing anyway. One day I had a rip in my jeans. Bill asked me "Guy, why do you look so ragged?" I don't remember how I answered, probably with a remark that I didn't have money for clothes. I didn't think anything of it, but a few days later when I came back home from school or work, my roommates told me that someone had come by and left a bag of clothes for me. And for a year or so afterward, I wore Bill's clothes.