

“Memories of Bill Sibley”

Kevin M. Doak
(matriculated in EALC, UoC, 1982)

I’ve been blessed with many memories of Bill, so many that it’s difficult to choose a few for reflection on this occasion. Should I reflect on Bill’s hospitality when he invited Therese and me to house sit for him back in the mid-1980s for most of a summer?; or some years later, when he invited all of us (by then Anatole had joined us) for a visit to his new digs, with swimming in his basement pool a delight for us all? Or his wise counsel when I was feeling the stress of life as a graduate student at Rikkyo University in the later 1980s, counsel that was, as is his trademark, filled with humanity and wisdom, and a good measure of common sense? I will instead select two “moments” with Bill, separated by nearly a quarter century and yet linked in surprising and important ways that showed me how Bill was always capable of being yet another person than the one I thought I already knew.

The first. Leaving the old EALC seminar room on Woodlawn Avenue as a new graduate student—and filled with the kind of euphoric arrogance not untypical of the graduate student experience—I loudly opined in a dogmatic and negative fashion on religion in general and Christianity in particular. Bill came sweeping out of the department chair’s office before I could get away and quietly confronted me about the statement. I was surprised, assuming I was “in friendly company” on this issue, and suggested no one in EALC would be offended by my secularist broadside. As anyone who knows Bill would know, he rarely expressed personal affront, but indicated that perhaps Helen, the secretary sitting 10 feet away, might have been offended by what I had said. At any rate, I left—duly chastened—with a renewed sense of the complexity and humanity of Bill Sibley, whose sometimes critical writings on aspects of Christianity did not extend to an unwillingness to defend it from verbal abuse.

Twenty-five years later. I got to know Bill again in his later years as he often visited his sister in Washington, and then his father who faced his final days in Sibley Hospital in D.C. Bill introduced me to the legendary Georgetown landmark, Martin’s Tavern, where we had many good meals and talks. On one of those, as Bill was nearing the end of his final struggle, he suddenly turned to me and said, “I don’t know if you are the praying type.” I assured him, perhaps to his surprise, that I was (now). Then, he added, “please pray for me.” I assured him I would—and did.

I can’t think of any words that more eloquently expressed the humanity, the humility, and the common sense of Bill Sibley as my friend, a scholar or as my teacher, passing down to me what he had learned through his own life and reading. What wisdom can surpass those few, precise words of his: “Please pray for me” ?

Georgetown University