**Commemorating President Myers**

**by Janet McNew  
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A slumber did my spirit seal;  
I had no human fears:  
[He] seemed a thing that could not feel  
The touch of earthly years.  
  
No motion has [he] now, no force;  
[He] neither hears nor sees;  
Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course,  
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

This haunting elegy by William Wordsworth expresses the shock of the extended Wesleyan community upon realizing our loss of President Myers. How could someone so full of vitality, so constantly in motion, be stilled? How could someone whose dynamic personality made him seem a force of nature be drained of life? We must have been in a happy slumber for these past 14 years, dreaming with him that we could make our college a kind of contemporary Camelot, where no one, least of all our leader, sickens and dies an untimely death. Today, in this commemoration of President Myers, we seek to call him to our minds in hopes that this communal act of remembrance will assuage our loss and begin the process of bringing him back to us, in many different forms. It’s fitting that for hundreds of years "Commemoration," the name we chose for this gathering, was an annual summer celebration in honor of former university leaders at Oxford, one of the institutions that Minor revered.  
  
"[He] seemed a thing that could not feel the touch of earthly years": Every day for these past months, this poem had echoed in my mind because it perfectly captures the stark disbelief of most of the University community upon hearing the news that President Myers was fatally ill. He has been the motive force of Illinois Wesleyan’s dramatic progress over the past decade and a half. Despite his trademark shock of unruly white hair, our President radiated the energy and charm of youth. Wordsworth elsewhere wrote of the hardening we suffer as we become adults and cease to experience those childhood moments of "splendor in the grass . . . glory in the flower." Minor never lost those childlike gifts.  
  
Many of us will remember going into his office to talk about a problem and finding him enthusing over a new toy — usually in his case, a very old leather-bound volume of arcane lore. "Look at this!" he’d exclaim, and we’d be off in another world, talking of 18th century manners and morals, the problem that had brought us there, forgotten. In frazzled moments, while drudging away, some of us might have wondered at the President’s ever-ready delight in his newest enthusiasm. But now, I believe that we can all understand that his playful enthusiasm is one of the greatest gifts he bestowed upon us. Universities are all about learning, and learning should, above all, be joyous.  
  
By emphasizing President Myers’ blithe spirit, I do not forget his incisive, sometimes startlingly brilliant, wit. More interested in Machiavelli than in contemporary politics, he had a canny grasp of what moves organizations as well as people. As Ellen Myers reminded a group of us gathered a few weeks ago to share memories of Minor, he was a president whose actions and attentions were designed to inspire and motivate those around him. A conversation with him would range dazzlingly over disciplines and centuries, with far-flung analogies and ideas tumbling from him like innumerable seeds tossed to the wind. In my first few years as provost, I came away from conversations with him reeling: How on earth could we do all that he had been proposing? A national conference on liberal learning and the multitalented — or, whatever, anything to get a bunch of deans onto campus; a new major program in a language we’d never taught — or, maybe a summer language institute for teachers from all over the country; a palatial new building and more than doubling the number of books in our library; and on and on.  
  
Gradually, I learned to listen calmly to the flow and focus on the one-out-of-eight-or-ten that we should take on first. Again, it takes a poet, Theodore Roethke, to describe the way that many faculty and staff members have felt as we followed our prolific leader: "[He] was the sickle; I, poor I, the rake,/ Coming behind [him] for [his] pretty sake/ (But what prodigious mowing we did make)."  
  
Ah, yes, what prodigious mowing we did make. Much of President Myers’ impact on us came from the sheer force of his personality. While he adored learning minutia about coins or writers or campuses or, really, just about anything, he never dwelt on little thoughts. There was a grandeur about him, and his large ideas always swept away small impediments like so much dust: "Wesleyan is in Connecticut. And, don’t talk about Illinois Wesleyan as an up-and-coming place. We are a national liberal arts college. We will have graduation rate above 90%, just like the rest of the best." Yet, whether big or little, President Myers loved just about everything about being president — the ceremonies, the relationships with his faculty, staff, students, and alumni, the whole environment of a residential liberal arts college, among much else. For a man who seemed the very picture of the absent-minded professor, he was a remarkably keen observer of people and things. Many of you have told me that you treasure the notes that he wrote you, usually in praise of some accomplishment that most others may not have noticed.  
  
He produced, among much else, a pamphlet detailing the species and offering a guide to the trees on the IWU quad. One summer in the mid-‘90’s, he became fascinated with the big catalpa tree that’s just east of Stevenson because he’d seen a steady line of bees going in and out of the trunk. So, I shouldn’t have been surprised that morning when he burst into my office and spirited me away from my computer to see the "bee-tree" from which a huge swarm had just dropped to the ground.  
  
>For President Myers, Illinois Wesleyan was a wonderland. If we remember him justly and right, we will honor his spirit by taking his wonder and delight into us. Milton’s "Lycidas," perhaps the greatest pastoral elegy ever written, concludes by declaring, "Now, Lycidas, the shepherds weep no more;/ Henceforth, thou art the genius of the shore." "Genius" in the sense that Milton used it refers to the "tutelary and controlling spirit … connected with a place [or] institution." I propose now that we honor President Minor Myers by acknowledging him as the spirit, or genius, of Illinois Wesleyan University.  
  
To elaborate this proposal a bit further, let me take you back to the poem with which I began this commemoration. Critics have debated endlessly about this simple lyric: Does the elegy end with horror at the thought that the dead loved one is now inertly "Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course/ With rocks, and stones, and trees," or did Wordsworth, nature-poet that he was, find consolation that his friend had joined nature’s majestic rhythms? I put most emphasis on the poem’s last word — "trees." I know that Minor adored that bee-tree. If President Myers has become part of the rocks, and stones, and trees of this campus, he is happy, and so should we be, now and henceforth, to have his spirit as the genius of this place.