

## Eulogy for Angus Johnston

April 17, 2017

For here the lover will turn, in his boundless love of wisdom, to gaze upon the vast ocean of beauty and, intent on this, he will give birth to countless beautiful ideas and speeches.

Plato *Symposium* 210d2-5

In the very midst of life Angus Munroe Johnston left us.

It was so sudden that I know many of us were simply unable to get our minds around it. As I am sure many of you know, he had been out with friends the night of his death, listening to a musician he delighted in, whose career began here at King's. The day before, he had had a long conversation with his daughter Phoebe—and, after his evening of song, he watched a movie with his other beloved daughter Harriet. And of course always there was Sandra.

“In the midst of life, we are in death.” That last evening, in fact, Angus was talking about architecture, and he spoke of exactly this—the need for all of us to face mortality. What a College can hope for, or a life can hope for, he said, is “an odd hope” – that “in the midst of life...we are crafting also a beautiful ruin.” His family shared with me a letter Angus wrote as a young man from Germany, to his mother and uncle: “Last night I read a delightful story by Dylan Thomas about a boy and his grandfather who sets off periodically to be buried where he wants to be. He goes on foot and the village people always catch up and tell him he is not

dead yet. That is what it is all about – we roam the world in order to get to the place we want to be buried.” Angus found that place.

In his obituary we read these words: “He always said he was the happiest person he knew, and we believe this to be true.” In our grief on this Easter Monday, I want to talk about just this: the happiness, the *eudaimonia*, the blessedness, of the life of Angus Johnston. In what did it consist? We could say in many things: in his family, in his deep friendships, in thought, in art, in teaching and reading, in his College, in his final work of Halifax Humanities, in the conversation of life. All of this—and more—is true.

But to honour Angus, I want to try to put this more obscurely.

Borrowing from Aristotle, and from faith, I want to say that Angus’s happiness arose from his recognition of what I will call “the actuality of grace.” Grace, *gratia*, meaning both thanks and gift—both the gratitude itself, and that for which we are grateful.

Last Monday, before the final lecture in the Foundation Year Programme, I said just one thing about Angus to the last group of FYP students to know him in person—that he loved life and he loved thought with a joy and gratitude unequalled. He loved life in all its givenness, its immediacy, its glowing presence; and he loved thought in its deepest, most obscure, speculative freedom.

He loved living thought, and thoughtful life: the life of dogs as much as the thought of gods—and above all, those stranger beings between dogs and gods, both dog and god: we humans. And so he loved stories: that mixing of life and thought in which our lives become thought. And all of this I want to call his recognition of the actuality of grace.

Now one can speak of this actuality of grace in many ways: as the wonder that Aristotle tells us is the beginning of philosophy, in the *philia* of friendship, in the insight of faith, in what Hegel calls “the living good” of institutional life that meant so much to Angus. But here I am going to focus on one particular way of seeing this actuality of grace—in the love of the beautiful.

Angus found, saw, and loved the beautiful. He loved the beautiful in his family and his friends, in strangers and acquaintances of a day. He loved the beautiful in the souls of his students – and even of his colleagues. He saw all of them not as people to be taught or “administered,” but as fellow travelers in the life of thought and wonder.

This year he gave a lecture in FYP on Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*—and, as Director, I can tell you it had all the marks of a disaster. The novel is 238 pages long, and by the break we were still pretty much on the first page; with 15 minutes to go, we were at page 98. I was also co-ordinator of the section – I had invited this guy to give the lecture! And then...and then, he completely departed from the text, and told us in a story, a story that had nothing to do with the novel,

everything we needed to know to understand *Northanger Abbey*. The novel is about a seventeen-year-old—like so many of our students—trying to find out who she is as she faces the world. Angus recounted a time when he was in the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium, waiting for a concert to begin, and a former student came along, someone who had graduated and gone on to do well. He sat down beside Angus, turned to him and simply asked, “I just want to know: what did you see in me?” And, as Angus said to the class, because he asked that question, in the way that he asked it, the question was answered.

But this is not just a one-off thing. Continually colleagues asked Angus, what did you see in me? Or how did you see that in me? I can remember when I was a Junior Fellow in FYP and feeling pretty much out of my league, what it meant to me that Angus saw something in a lecture I gave. And I do remember thinking: what an excellent thought, I only wish *I* had had it. But Angus recognized it, and was able to see in it “something rich and strange.” This is the love of the beautiful, this actuality of grace that I am trying to describe in Angus.

For Angus this love of the beautiful was a full-time occupation, and it was so multi-faceted. His love of art, his love of music – perhaps especially opera. His house is a kind of catch-all for this magnificent, multi-dimensional love, as the strangest array of beautiful things all sit together in splendid profusion.

His family was very long-suffering. You could come in and there would be a branch or a rock or yet another piece of leather work he had picked up. The family

told me that after his death they needed to find his wallet – and they actually found *six* wallets, picked up for their workmanship from Value Village—but the one with his driver’s licence? No such luck. Jane Reagh Bruce-Robertson, told me about the time Angus was faced with a dilemma: he could only afford either to have a hole in the kitchen floor fixed, or to buy one of her paintings – of which he already owned several. Well, you know where the money went.

But perhaps it was, as in the quotation I began with from Plato, in “countless beautiful ideas and speeches” that Angus was most profligate. Angus was famously obscure, and this is in a way true. But one always had the sense that the cause of the obscurity was not in *him*, but in *us*. He gave us wonderful metaphors and images: the problem was somehow in seeing the fullness of these thoughts, catching hold of the beauty he discerned. I think part of the challenge is that Angus sought to be both present to “the things themselves” and to see in those things visibly before us all that is invisible in that visibility.

Eli Diamond told me that he had sent Angus some chapters from his thesis before it was finished, and they met at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia where there was a special exhibit of Egyptian, Greek, and Roman art. As they went around the gallery and looked at each work, Angus brought forth from these works a marvellous commentary on Eli’s thinking about Aristotle on the soul. This was the demand of Angus: to think what is before us in its beauty and reality, without dissolving it into abstractions.

Angus always perceived the beautiful that exists within finite time. He saw it in family and friends, in the Lake Centre Canoe Club, in a game of golf, in watching the World Cup with friends, in organizing a concert trip, in going to New York City to see operas.

But I especially want to speak of his love of the beautiful in institutional life, above all, in King's, his college. Angus was a beloved and generous friend, a teacher of staggering gifts, "Mentor" —not in the contemporary sense, but as the goddess Athena in human form, guiding this College to be what it could be. He endlessly called us simply to have the courage to be that actuality.

We can speak about what his obituary recounts so well, and all that he built— certainly the New Academic Building—but also, with Colin Starnes, our curriculum, the upper year programmes of Contemporary Studies, Early Modern Studies, and the History of Science and Technology. Certainly many others had important roles, but it was the clarity of Angus's curricular vision, the beautiful in that vision, that made it into a whole.

The beginning of that vision was earlier than his vice-presidency. It was there in the Foundation Year Programme under his direction—though again with others, always with others. That vision finds its final form in Halifax Humanities. I recommend to you the chapter he contributed to Susan Dodd's collection for Halifax Humanities, *Each Book A Drum*. There Angus quotes one of his teachers, Robert Crouse: "Teaching is not showing students what sun they should orbit, but

rather what sun they are orbiting.” Angus expands and develops this image: “Our work may bring out the “center” for students but we do not turn them towards it. We leave that to them.” Dennis House wrote to me, “Angus has a wonderful way of leading one to the door but leaving you to find your own way in.” This is just what I mean by Angus’ recognition of the *actuality*, not just the possibility or potentiality of grace. Our task as teachers is to do nothing more than illuminate what has been given, the beauty of that given, and the gratitude for the gift.

In my time at King’s, I have heard Angus lecture on an astonishing array of topics, always with wonderful insight and freshness of vision, but I think above all I have heard him lecture most often on Homer’s *Odyssey*. For me there was always a sense that he was revealing himself more directly here. Angus delighted in the delight that Athena felt in Odysseus – “Two of a kind are we,” she tells him.

But I always felt that there was also something at work in the relationship of Odysseus to Penelope that spoke to him. The story of the *Odyssey* is the story of a home-coming, the story of travelling in the wide world, but also of being at home: the circle and the center, as Angus put it. This is Angus: he was always at home – I never knew anyone so at home in his own skin – and always in the circle, always active and developing. He was in both places at once.

This is the actuality of grace – he was the happiest person he knew. This is the beauty he saw and loved in his family, among his friends, in the students he taught and who taught him to see things in new ways, with his colleagues, and

with those who helped build worlds of wonder at King's and in Halifax Humanities.

I know too that he knew himself to have lived a blessed life. A week ago, as a small tribute to Angus before the final lecture in Foundation Year Programme, we played Bob Dylan's song "Forever Young." Angus told me he listened to this song while working in seclusion on his doctoral dissertation, and that it always spoke to him of the spirit of ancient Greece. But it surely speaks of Angus's spirit also – forever young. And perhaps it can also speak to us, even as our hearts are broken:

May God bless and keep you always,  
May your wishes all come true,  
May you always do for others  
And let others do for you.  
May you build a ladder to the stars  
And climb on every rung, [- And, when he read it, Angus always emphasized that "every".]  
May you stay forever young,  
Forever young, forever young,  
May you stay forever young.

Neil Robertson