



Dr. Stephen R. Briggs

# TEACHER-MENTOR-SCHOLAR

When Professor Peter Lawler died unexpectedly on May 23, the nation lost a perceptive observer of

the American soul. Highly regarded as a political philosopher, he was a prolific author and provocative thought leader. Within days of his death, a dozen heartfelt essays were published commemorating his life's work.

Berry College's loss was even more profound. Lawler was one of Berry's most celebrated faculty members, every bit a living legend. Alluringly quirky, he would no doubt have chuckled at that characterization and then glanced to the side, muttering something ironic about not wanting to be confined to such an unforgiving corner.

Ben Riggs (15C) captured the essence of his professor's eccentricity in a post to Lawler's Facebook page, recalling a rainy day when he was sitting in Dr. Michael Bailey's office as Lawler walked slowly by with a cup of coffee – as if it was a sunny spring day.

"Bailey and I both stopped our conversation and admired what was occurring," he wrote. "Dr. Lawler lost in thought as rain is pouring down. *He never stopped wondering as he wandered.* Something about Lawler drew you in and made you want to know more. It was as

if his smile was concealing a secret that everyone wanted to know."

In many ways, Lawler was a study in contrasts, as described by *National Affairs* editor Yuval Levin: "He was a Southern gentleman, though he had actually grown up in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. He was deeply conversant in the popular culture, but also deeply learned in the Western tradition. He reveled in irony and absurdity, but was more earnest than pretty much any political thinker of our time. He had a habit of speaking in riddles."

Lawler seemed willfully inattentive to matters of appearance. His hair was habitually disheveled, and he managed to look ruffled even in a jacket and tie. He had a distinctive way of walking and sitting that conveyed a measure of indifference. And his office was heroically messy, brazenly untended. It was as if to say such things matter little compared to the weight and wonder of ideas rightly understood.

Lawler's interests were wide-ranging, but the heart of his work was "about coming to terms with the full truth of who we are." As self-conscious creatures, we are necessarily both moral and mortal, and so we must learn to think rightly about love and death if we are to live well.

This core thesis runs through his 18 books and numerous essays; it also

shaped and informed the manner and the content of his teaching. His project was more than an intellectual pursuit; it also was a relational conviction. The truths that animated his writings and public presentations also invigorated his classroom, his mentoring of students and his down-to-earth befriending of people from all walks of life.

Although Lawler was complicated and sometimes hard to pin down, he provides an inspiring example of what it means to be a teacher-mentor-scholar.

## SCHOLAR

Lawler was a student of *Democracy in America*, in practice and as observed in Alexis de Tocqueville's seminal work. He showed how the concept of the individual framed in the U.S. Constitution – a compromise encompassing Christian and enlightenment perspectives – has veered increasingly toward a preoccupation with individual freedoms and rights.

We now believe we should be free to do whatever we want as long as it does not directly harm someone else. And in a world enriched by engineering wizardry, we can, more and more, pursue happiness free from the constraints that nature would impose as well as the binds of family, nation and God.

Across many areas of interest, Lawler reminded us that this present-day view of the individual as self-sufficient and autonomous is a myth, a convenient



fiction constructed as a means to limit the rule of authority over us. Our problem is that we have come to believe the myth and thus have become “mere individuals,” uprooted relationally, restless and no longer fully human.

Lawler applied this insight to such diverse topics as science and technology, political and economic policy, higher education, and popular culture. He had a curious affection for television shows, movies and books that depict individuals pursuing freedom with abandon only to find themselves emotionally adrift and confused as to what they are now free for. According to Hope College Professor of Political Science Jeffrey Polet, Lawler’s “interest in shows such as *Girls* resulted from his interest in reaching out to the lost and showing them that they had not lost the truth of their own condition, that they could aspire to more.”

Lawler was conservative in that he sought to conserve the best of human insights from pre-modern thinkers. He embraced innovation and progress, but believed that, despite our modern sophistication, we still have much to learn about the human soul from the wisdom of the past.

#### TEACHER

For Lawler, higher education at its best involved teacher and students together reading a serious book and then arguing with both the text and each other about important ideas and questions. For that reason, he refused to use PowerPoint in the classroom, to compress something complicated into something simple to be memorized. As he teasingly put it: “I occasionally tell students that there are two beautiful things in this room – the great ... text we are studying ... and me. So why would I have you looking at a screen?”

Lawler wanted to complicate students’ understanding of what it means to live together in community in a way that allowed them to become fully human. He thought it important, as Damon Linker of *The Week* wrote, to “find oneself productively confused about the most basic questions of human life” and “come face to face with one’s own ignorance



about oneself,” believing that to be the “best place – the truest place – from which to begin thinking about how to live, how to worship, how to engage in politics, and how to make sense of ourselves and the world around us.”

These classroom conversations were captivating. Students loved his seriousness of purpose quickened by his humor. They loved most of all that he took them seriously.

“Some great men make the rest of us feel small,” explained Matt Barrett (97C). “Though a towering figure, ... Lawler had exactly the opposite effect. Every class, every discussion, every unselfishly spent office hour, every pithy comment scribbled in the margin of a blue book, every mirthful wink left me, many, feeling a bit taller, better, encouraged.

... He always delivered the praise, encouragement and criticism that my twenty-year-old self so badly needed.”

Lawler taught a range of courses – from American Government to Ancient Political Philosophy to Constitutional Law – and in each, part of his method was to spark classroom debates; his intent was for students to form and defend their own ideas. As Dan Alban (00C) described, “Engaging with Dr. Lawler is one of the reasons I found being a student at Berry College a far more intellectually challenging and rewarding experience than attending Harvard Law School a few years later.”

#### MENTOR

Lawler’s formative influence was noted by students time and again.

“He listened to our questions and acknowledged our confusion while we floundered,” wrote Kate Agnew (16C).

“Rather than offering answers, he gave us his friendship. He held our hands along the path and pushed us into the mud without warning. Then he’d jump in with us so that we could all wallow in the unknown together. He cared about us and never left our side.”

Sara Hinson Bond (05C), one of the self-described “crazy students who tried to restore order to the mad genius of Dr. Lawler’s office,” wrote: “No one has ever challenged and pushed, directed and guided, or inspired and awed me more. At Berry, I was often pulling myself in twelve different directions, trying to figure out who I was, what I wanted, where I wanted to go. But when I went to his chaotic office, I found stillness. He had a way of cutting to the heart of things with his dry wit and forcing me to stop and think.”

His continuing presence in the lives of his former students also was made clear.

“The whole decision-making process has been difficult and yet so markedly filled with grace,” Marissa Peace (15C) wrote. “I can’t begin to say thank you enough for teaching me that I don’t have to have everything figured out to move forward. Your guidance and support continues to challenge me to push myself out of my comfort zone amidst doubt.”

#### FULLY HUMAN

Lawler was every bit the individual and wonderfully idiosyncratic, with a deep awareness of his freedom to choose. Yet he intentionally committed himself to the ties that constrained his freedom in many ways but that also freed him to be more fully human and deeply happy in all the ways that matter. And he committed himself to Berry for nearly 40 years.

Although he had opportunity to choose other universities, he loved Berry as a virtuous community that valued human dignity and an education of the head, heart and hands. He also loved Berry because he believed that the superiority of a four-year college teacher comes from reaching beyond one’s own specialized discipline. After all, as he once said with a twinkle in his eye, “Everyone who really knows me knows I have no discipline. Just take a look at my office.” **B**