Bill the Boundless

Jordan Corrente Beck

The first time I met Bill Miller I was in a crowded teacher’s room in rural Japan. The two-by-two-inch video player was having a hard time containing him, the glacially slow shared connection taking his voice out of sync with the facial expressions I would later come to know so well as his student. I had heard of him, of course—that to study Icelandic sagas with a man whose listed scholarly interests included “vices and virtues” could be part of traditional legal study played no small role in determining where I would attend—but now I was hearing him, in that distinctive Wisconsin voice he so proudly defends. Not ready to stop listening when the video ended, I took to reading whatever was available without fee or subscription or was downloadable by e-reader—The Anatomy of Disgust, Losing It, a law review article on horsemeat—in all of which he criss-crossed the borders of disciplines and even of tone, at once self-reflective and bordering on the confessional and academic.

I originally proposed “On Boundaries” as the tentative title of my contribution to this Festschrift, thinking it an appropriate nod to the many facets of Bill at Michigan in the student mind—the demarcation and dispute of boundaries studied on day one of Property; the weighings and counterbalances of violence and gift in Bloodfeuds (the turns too of the shifting borders of the saga landscape); the dual roles of performer and observer in Faking It—in each case the focus being on the determination of the boundary line, whether it is hard or soft, and what sort of consequences follow if it is crossed. But this theme of defining, weighing, and even stepping over boundaries is equally suited to a portrait of Bill the teacher, who seems seamlessly aligned with Bill the man.

His classes draw enough students that it’s a challenge to get into them, the competition less for the subject matter (though, in response to the occasional critique that they lack seriousness, all who take his courses can speak to their rigor and relevance to the law school curriculum by term's end) than for the chance to spend a few hours a week with Bill Miller being Bill Miller. But once one gains that access, his lessons are an invitation to cross the threshold and share what he loves (more often than not the sagas, and when not, his dog) or his latest outrage (just as likely to have been prompted by smartphones or pedestrian crossings as by faculty meetings). There is no pretense with Bill; or at least, whatever pretense there is he identifies quickly and very publicly outs (and then teaches another oversubscribed course on).
But there are other lines crossed as well. Bill’s comments on student response papers step over any boundaries its writer might have tried to set up, his reactions interjected in tracked changes every few sentences to make a different reference, to slightly chide or—the kindest of interruptions—to simply write “nice.” In his lectures, sentences are stopped to discuss the etymology of the word last uttered, and whole classes can be interrupted by some deliberate provocation to see how the students will react. Sometimes, when he decides he has crossed a self-imposed boundary of his own, he will send out an apology note, which of course is never necessary and so never serves as an apology proper but rather as another invitation into his psyche, drawing students closer to him.

Then there is that uncontainable Miller presence. The walls of the Hutchins’ lecture halls can barely contain him, and he is larger still once outside. The nights spent out drinking with students are legendary, with apparently no limit to how much he can drink. These occasions also see no boundary between Bill and student; or for that matter, Bill and wait staff, who more often than not know him by name. On one memorable occasion after Bill had a bicycle accident, my fellow students and I received the message, “Class canceled until Weds. Miller concussed.” We held class anyway, with beer, in his honor. This accident seemed to cause an increase in the number of Bill’s “helmets are for sissies” diversions in lecture, despite the rumor (or was it fact?) that he taught a Property class afterward that he couldn’t remember—the rumor has it he was also still bleeding; this hasn’t been verified.

What I am calling a lack of boundaries, a delight in the pushing of boundaries, and the continual transcending of boundaries might better be termed “transparency,” but the transparency would have no significance if what it revealed were not so rich. The lack of bounds allows an amount of intimacy that lets me hold equally dear both receiving from Bill the Christopher Smart fragment beginning *For I will consider my Cat Jeoffry* when my own cat fell ill and, after a night of exceptional drinking with some former students, receiving the quick morning-after message: “How hungover are you?”

And yet I can’t even say the man’s name: Bill. He knows this, of course, and I know that he knows this; of his messages received as a student and since, my favorite was signed “BILL—bet you choke trying to say that.” Even though it’s clearly permitted, I have yet to graduate to using the informal “Bill”: except, inexplicably, in this small piece. In consequence, I have adopted the practice of not using his name at all. Given that our relationship has grown almost entirely out of writing and letter reading and exchanging notes on his books, it won’t surprise him that I have taken this first bold step on the page and not to his face.