

Lessons from a memorable teacher

January 4, 2015 by Daniel J. Bauer

I have never written an obituary, and do not plan to try to write one here. In my view, an “obit” is mostly about the past. It speaks of someone's life now having come to an end. An obituary reviews a few milestones of that person's story, and tells us in an apparently objective way why we might want to remember her or him. An obituary attempts to sum up, but of course only in a very limited way, the effect that person may have had in the world by force of personality or deed.

A bit of an obituary as a genre may happen in what follows, but that is not my intent. As I remember a special someone, I hope to speak of the present and the future as well. A life is not, after all, only about yesterday. A life is also about today and tomorrow, and the time to come.

A dear friend, and a major contributor to our local educational scene, has passed away. Father Arnold Sprenger (“Sun Shen-fu” in one variation of his name) left us two days ago at the age of 86 while under hospice care at Tien Hospital. He had suffered bravely and long. We who knew him are in grief, but are happy for him. He is in a better place now than the one we could give him.

Forgive me for speaking in such an unabashedly subjective manner. I cannot view this man in any other way. Obituaries are shorn of emotion and tend to focus on cool, verifiable facts. Again, this is not an obituary. I make no apology for speaking with emotion, and from my heart.

It is literally true, you see, that Father Sprenger is the reason these words are on this piece of paper, or computer screen, if you are reading us on line. It was he who reached out to me in old fashioned letters forty years ago, before we had email and these current high-tech luxuries of ours, to tell me about Taiwan, China, doctoral degrees, and his students at a place called Fu Jen Catholic University. I had heard of Fu Jen as an undergraduate student and met a few impressive priests (“shen-fu”) who had taught at the original Fu da in “Peking,” but I knew almost zilch about the place.

Father Sprenger was already Dean of the College of Foreign Languages and Chair of the German Department at Fu Jen when I was studying for the priesthood. He was in the early years of his life in

Taiwan and China when I looked up Fu Jen's address back in Chicago in 1972, and wrote to him about the possibility of finding work here as a “shen-fu” and college instructor. As the cliché puts it, one thing led to another.

I became a “shen-fu” at Christmas, 1974, and finished an M.A. in philosophy at DePaul University in January, 1976. I flew to Taipei, began language study, and was (more or less) ready to teach in the English Department in the fall of 1977. When I returned to Taiwan in 1988 after Ph.D. studies abroad, Father Sprenger was a professor in Beijing. It was a true honor to be one of the many who welcomed Father back home to Fu Jen about five years ago. Speaking personally, he did much these recent years to teach me how to prepare for another life. With limited space, it seems impossible to point to only a few lessons this man has taught a host of us, but I have no choice.

The greatest Sprenger challenge in matters large and small has been to do myself what I tell my students to do. He told me to never memorize Mandarin words in isolation. Always grasp vocabulary in phrases and sentences, he said, and repeat them ad nauseum. He urged me not only to speak, but to read Chinese. I saw him leave his office occasionally to play soccer with his students. I saw him attend their weddings, share quality time with them after graduation, boast about their successes, and pray for them in times of trial. I saw him work late into the night to prepare classes, write, and listen to people's problems. I saw him enjoy a beer or two, puff a cigar on Sundays, and support people with a smile and a compliment. Countless times, I saw him deny his own comfort and put others first. He was always friendly and always a “shen-fu.”

Until the end Father said “Thank you” to his closest care-givers, Brother Johannes, Huang Tai-tai and our Filipino friend Ray. All of us who loved him want to thank these folks, too. But most of all, we want to thank a very good man for teaching us so much about how to live a life. Bravo!

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