

Warm Memories of Bill Vickrey

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The evening of the day Bill Vickrey won his Nobel I impulsively, hesitantly dialed his home. His phone surprised me by ringing unbusy, and Bill surprised me more by answering, and sounding unhurried. After congratulations, I asked "Bill, was this for a lifetime of achievement, or some specific work?" "I don't know," he replied. "Well," I persisted, "Is there a citation? What does it say?" "Yes," he said, "there is one, but I can't understand it." If you and I find it a puzzle, we have good company.

Mission performed, I hastened to ring off, but Bill kept me on the line. To Bill, the transaction was incomplete - too one-sided. He turned things around and said "Tell me about yourself. What are you working on now?" I told him as briefly as I could, and he immediately offered to help. It was not a perfunctory sham offer, he's helped me before. "How are the wife and children?" He really wanted to know, and report back to Cele. That was Bill, thinking of others, in the time of his greatest triumph, at the end of a long, wearying day of praise and celebration. What a saint! And I thank that other saint, my wife, who nudged me to call right away: two days later Bill left us forever.

Bill was born in Victoria, B.C., his mother's home. His middle name was Spencer, as in Spencer's Stores; they had merged with, I believe he said, Eaton's. From the Spencer side he got his sense of how business works. His father was a preacher from Illinois who raised money for starving Armenians - literally. From him Bill got his firm sense of social justice, plus a reflex against spending money on his own creature comforts. At professional meetings he sought out cheaper lodgings than anyone else, though his expenses were covered. He did it inconspicuously so as not to make others uncomfortable: his humility was not for flaunting, he just lived it. Again, what a saint!

Bill had a degree in mathematics from Yale, before turning to economics at Columbia. He was not one to hide behind phony math, as most economists do now, nor to intimidate others; but none could snow or intimidate him, although many tried. In spite of the phonies, genuine math can be truly useful, and that's when he drew on this skill plus his insight and talent, which went far deeper than mere skill. He gave freely of them. At one point he dashed off a mathematical appendix to an article I had struggled over for months. His page of squiggles pretty well comprehended and tied together and validated all the points I had spread over 50 pages. He gave it to me gratis - that was Bill. For him, it was effortless: "Just a matter of inverting the order of integration," he explained casually. What a saint!

Bill had high standards, but no false standards. He feared no contamination or loss of caste by consorting with less reknowned economists, or supporting ideas that lacked mainline "respectability" and "prestige." If he had a fault, it was projecting his own virtues onto others. He was delightfully ingenuous in personal dealings, and could not impute base, careerist motives to social and professional climbers.

It was in 1964 or so that I called Bill impulsively and hesitantly the first time. Art Becker and Weld Carter and I were growing a committee of economists to meet annually and produce a modern Georgist literature, but who were we in the world? Bill had published works on financing mass transit that breathed a distinct sweet odor of Georgism. Like a bee to a flower, I buzzed him. It was a good impulse; he accepted, suddenly we were somebodies, and other somebodies joined up, too. Soon we had our academic-Georgist Camelot, if only for one brief shining moment. Our committee, named TRED, produced about ten volumes of neo-Georgist literature, published by the University of Wisconsin Press. Bill had a chapter in our first volume, and also helped me, as editor, straighten out a headstrong contributor who insisted on turning rents into earned incomes. When Bill wrote, people heeded, and Bill was ever ready to lend a hand. I thought of him as a big brother to call on in need.

How I shall miss my big brother!

At Columbia, Bill rubbed elbows with Harold Hotelling, the most brilliant and creative economist of his generation. Hotelling was a closet Georgist who never fully came out, even after a lifetime of professional acclaim for his technical triumphs - a measure of the pressure used to squelch academic Georgists. The nearest he came was to let Will Lissner include him on a roster of "Editorial Advisers" to the AJES. Francis A. Walker, first President of the American Economic Association in 1885, had written "I will not insult my readers by discussing a project so steeped in infamy" as taxing land values. Bill Vickrey, President of the same Association 106 years later, wrote on the same subject that we should tax 'em to the max. He joined Nic Tideman in composing a letter to Gorbachev advising the then-Soviets to base their privatization strategy on taxing land values. Together they signed up 20-30 highly visible economists, including four earlier Nobel laureates. This did not stop Bill from winning his Nobel in 1996. Perhaps our cause has progressed within the ivied walls, after all; or perhaps that is just a measure of Vickrey's personal courage and conscience, and the power of courage and conscience to overcome fear and win confidence - even of Nobel prize committees.

A reporter asked Bill what he would do with his prize money. Bill said he didn't care about the money, and he spoke truly, for his conscience would not let him live it up while others were down. He said he valued the "bully pulpit" the prize gave him to spread his ideas. He didn't say which ideas; he had many. I am morally certain, however, that near the top of his list was implementing George's proposal to raise public revenues by taxing land values. The last thing he asked me before hanging up was, "Will I see you at the TRED meeting?" Bill never missed.

Bill died, as you know by now, en route to that meeting. He drove at night, true to his principle of easing peak-hour congestion. Had he arrived, I know he would have raised his head from the doze he affected and told some unwary journeyman, "This paper would benefit from an application of Henry George's idea of taxing land values." How do I know? Because he always did. I imagine by now he has mentioned it to God, too; and God has said "Actually, Bill, that's how we've always done it here; but thank you for urging folks to have my will done on earth as it is in Heaven."