

Dr. Richard Burke

In the book *Cat's Cradle*, Kurt Vonnegut creates a religion for the inhabitants of a faux Caribbean island. One of the tenants of the fictional faith is that we live life as a member of an organized team, called a "karass," with the mission to work together to do God's will. Tied with a purpose, you may be lucky enough to meet people in your "karass," or you may not. I was lucky enough to learn from one of the wisest members of my "karass," Dr. Richard Burke.

My relationship with Dr. Burke could be called many things: Friend, mentor, professor, or advisor. Whatever term is used, our relationship demonstrated the potential of breaking down the traditional barriers of professor and student. Dr. Burke was open to the potential possibilities of connecting with others in a way that was not focused on assignments and grades, but rather on wisdom and friendship.

I met Dr. Burke while working for the student newspaper. Although I was a philosophy major, I had not met Dr. Burke. He had retired a year prior to my involvement in the philosophy department. As a reporter, I was covering the visitation of Peter Singer for the Burke Lecture Series. The interview extended far beyond a discussion of the upcoming event. We talked about many subjects, and, in a moment of synchronicity, we both realized there we had a connection and that the conversation was not over. We agreed to meet again. And again.

The interview was the start of a conversation that lasted the next five years. We met a few more times (always for a minimum of three hours) until Dr. Burke gave me his book entitled *Philosophical Bagatelles*, a collection of short philosophical observations, to help guide ongoing discussions. For each meeting, I would select a "bagatelle" that we would talk about.

Dr. Burke said we could make our meetings an independent study, however, he preferred to meet informally in order not to increase my tuition. For Dr. Burke, it was always about the ideas, conversation and connecting with people.

We met every week for my last two semesters at Oakland University. And, after I moved out of state, our conversations continued. Upon each return, one of the four mandatory activities in my schedule was to catch up with Dr. Burke. Whether there had been one month, or six months between our talks, it was as if time had not passed.

Our conversations were diverse and exciting: from complaining about Republican candidates, to solving the divide between religion and atheism, to discussing the next Burke lecture series, we always had something to talk about. Additionally, we even chatted about travel experiences, my comedy act, the curious adventures of my love life, and the most recent visit of a deer to Dr. Burke's window.

Dr. Burke supported the first protest I organized on campus. He even came to see me perform stand-up comedy. Last year, Dr. Burke told me he would write a recommendation letter to law school, which he did. The first time I saw him after I had been admitted, he said, with a tear in his eye: "You're going to be a lawyer ... but not just a lawyer, a lawyer who wants to make the world a better place."

One of my favorite memories of Dr. Burke takes place in the philosophy department office, with fellow professor Dr. Paul Graves. I had been researching the

philosophy of laughter for another class, and had shared some ideas with the two professors.

When I asked Dr. Burke what he thought in regards to the philosophy of humor, he said: "I think laughter is good, but I know that there are times when laughing too much is going too far."

In response, I said a joke and Dr. Burke laughed heartily. Real heartily.

With a deadpan expression, and a glimmer in his eye, Dr. Graves looked at Dr. Burke and said: "you've gone too far Dick, you've gone too far."

Everyone laughed heartily.

We will all remember Dr. Burke for his reason, his dignity, his humor and his compassion. I will remember Dr. Burke as a friend, mentor and one of people in my life who helped me make the intellectual and emotional transition to manhood.

Dr. Burke's last bagatelle was written in the fall of 2011. It was entitled "10 Commandments" for Our Time." The final commandment, I think, is an embodiment of Dr. Burke's spirit of life and philosophy and are words we should follow: "Thou shalt work, and play, and try to combine the two."

Alex Cherup, OU alumnus, philosophy major