

Sam Devons Memorial

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May 29, 2007

PROLOGUE

I am honored and touched to recognize our dear friend Sam, alive among us today, immediately following Memorial Day, as spring triumphs around us in the tender green of our forests and in the songs of birds and waters.

As I reflect on Sam's too-brief life, I am reminded of the emotion my students experienced as they registered in the magical voice of Dante and Petrarca the constant presence of death within our lives:

*Tu nota e si' come da me son porte
Cosi' queste parole segna ai vivi
Del vivere ch'e' un correre alla morte*

*« Note well my words : what I will say to you
You will repeat as you reach those who live,
Of that life which is a race to death. » (Musa transl.)
(Purgatorio XXXIII, 52-54)*

Beatrice warns Dante in earthly Paradise, as he is about to leave earth.

And closer to us, Petrarca, deeply touched by the passing of time and the presence of death within each passing moment of our life:

*La vita fugge e non s'arresta un ora
E la morte vien dietro a gran giornate*

*« Life flees and does not rest one hour
And death follows straight behind at long marching days »
(Canzoniere 347)*

I.

Sam was, among us, deeply aware of this copresence in a positive and noble way, as was my husband, as were many of the EPIC friends who left us since EPIC was founded. Sam believed, because of his devotion to science, in the supreme dignity of the human spirit and mind and, without openly preaching it, he expressed this belief with the intensity of the poet in everything he did while physically alive, in his own very behavior.

I witnessed this fact from the moment I met him, as a young classicist teaching Renaissance literature and at the same time creating transatlantic alliances together with enthusiastic colleagues. Sam stood high among them. Besides being an academic collaborator, he was a close friend of my husband, Ray, and an inspiring teacher of my daughter Lavinia.

I place Sam's creation of EPIC among the most important and meaningful of Sam's contributions to our university community.

II.

Sam and I—close friends from the onset of the enterprise—did not always agree on strategies and methods in the development of EPIC. We differed in age, personality and upbringing. He, an English scientist from Cambridge who had helped professionally the victory of the West in World War II, had entered Columbia in 1958 through the great portal—a professorship in physics after a year as visiting professor. I, a frontier woman from the central Alps, educated as a classicist in a fascist Rome, had reached these shores ten years before him as a humble war bride, and entered Columbia as a young assistant professor after four years of teaching in a suburban college. Sam and I met through Ray at Barnard College.

What I admired in Sam was his devotion to science as an intrinsic part of his ethics. Far from resenting our differences on individual issues, Sam welcomed them, as he welcomed all forms of debate. He did not seek collaborators but cobelievers in a shared vision.

III.

What inspired Sam in the creation of EPIC was a faith in the dignity of our profession. He expressed this faith visibly, sensually, aesthetically in carrying, year after year, the mace of Columbia during the ceremony of Commencement. Faith in our profession as indispensable to the survival of a democratic society. In the creation of EPIC, he brought home to the University the fact that our profession does not end with our retirement from active duty.

Today, six months after Sam's physical death, I see the carrier of that mace as the symbol of what we stand for—the older we are, the more intensely so —the permanence of the belief in an immortality—as far as we mortals can speak of it—the presence of the human spirit and mind, an indispensable presupposition to those "responsibilities of choice and reasoning" which are central to leading a human life.

We, members of EPIC, welcome Sam among us today, as our leader and companion in overcoming not the depressing solitude that the present youth-oriented society may impose on us, but in fighting for the just recognition of the immeasurable contribution we can give to it.

I know Sam would want us to recognize today the five women in his family for whom he lived and who lived for him. Humanly, the family he raised and which kept him alive with the help of science and with tremendous human warmth, shall remain as an example to us that our responsibilities to society are not limited to our profession.

They have deep roots in the simplest and most basic aspects and expressions of human life. In the love for and dedication to those around us, Sam still carries the mace.