Friends and Family Celebrate the Life and Work of Columbia Luminary Edward Said

Said’s power of cultural theory, Orientalism, established him as one of the world’s most revered intellectuals: a deeply caring human being whose formidable intellect and passionate devotion to friends and family fueled his remarkable talents as an educator and social activist.

Edward Said gathered to remember him. The service, which took place in St. Paul’s Chapel, featured a video commemorating Said’s life.

To see him teach was to have an X-ray of a mind perpetually in motion.

—Gauri Viswanathan

Edward Said came to know Said. “As a person, he exuded a seeming ease in almost any setting, but he also seemed slightly out of place wherever he was. Through all the complex layers that made up his personality, Said was always using his amazing talents to find a way to connect through the layers. That is why he contributed so much to the University and the world.”

President Lee C. Bollinger began the tributes by recalling an anecdote from his first meeting with Said, several years ago. Upon being introduced, Said had commented favorably on Bollinger’s tie to which Bollinger had responded that he wasn’t sure he went with his outfit. Said had answered that it doesn’t matter whether everything goes together, noting that he loved just to pile colors one on top of the other. That comment, Bollinger said, served as a metaphor through which he came to know Said. “As a person, he exuded a seeming ease in almost any setting, but he also seemed slightly out of place wherever he was. Through all the complex layers that made up his personality, Said was always using his amazing talents to find a way to connect through the layers. That is why he contributed so much to Columbia.”

Reflecting on his long years of friendship with Said, Jonathan Cole, John Mitchell Mason Pro- fessor and former provost of the University, echoed Bollinger’s praise of Said’s contributions to the life of the mind. It was through his relationship with Said, Cole said, that he came to understand the true role of an intellectual within the university. “He did not insist that he was right,” Cole explained, “but insisted on the right to have a conversation. He helped me realize that he needed the University, and universities at their best were made for people like him. Only in this fragile and unique institution could [intellectuals] feel free enough and reasonably comfortable enough to develop and air new ideas that might offend those who refuse to confront new ways of thinking as well as their own biases and pre-suppositions.

Other friends who shared personal memories and professional accolades included: Gauri Viswanathan, Class of 1933, Columbia Professor of English and Comparative Literature; Vanessa Redgrave, a longtime friend of the Said family; and South African writer and Nobel laureate Nadine Gordimer. Each in her own way emphasized the genius and humanity of Said. Viswanathan offered a glimpse of Said’s teaching style, noting that he would pace furiously in class. “To see him teach was to have an X-ray of a mind perpetually in motion. He never offered prepackaged ideas or theories. Rather, he had a way of zeroing in, his teaching opened a window onto the thinking process itself. Vanessa Redgrave told of the profound personal effect Said’s works had and still have on her. “Reading Edward’s writings has kept me sane—the existence of Edward and his writing and what he’s said and done,” she said. “His unique intelligence, which surpassed boundaries and borders every day, helped me start to dismantle my own walls and barriers inside myself.” From Nadine Gordimer: “If the true renaissance of contemporaries can be counted on one hand, Edward Said is the index finger. He was an academic of celebrated originality of mind. Above all, Said had an intelligence of grasping something—an elusive truth that is somewhere in our human existence.”

Testimonials about Said’s intense desire to continue to contribute to the University and the world despite his failing health came from other quarters of Said’s life. His doctor, Kanti Rai, under-scored Said’s courage in the face of illness, for instance, and described how his professional relationship with his patient had evolved into a deeply personal one as well.

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Columbia Alumnus, Newly Elected President of Georgia, Speaks at Law School

Columbia University is my favorite place in America,” Mikhail Saakashvili, the newly elected president of the former Soviet republic of Georgia, told an audience at the Law School on Feb. 26. And while that might sound like a politician warming up his audience, he has reason to be genuinely fond of the University: Saakashvili is a Columbia graduate who received his master’s in law degree here in 1994. During his first visit to the United States since being elected in January, he spoke to more than 100 people at the Law School, just a day after meeting with President-Designate Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell in Washington. In November, Saakashvili helped lead the so-called “Rose Revolution,” which toppled former President Eduard Shevardnadze amidst an atmosphere of political corruption and rigged elections. “We held a peaceful revolution in the eyes of the world,” he said.

Saakashvili, who was accompanied by several of his Cabinet members, is just 36 years old, making him the youngest president of a European nation. He earlier had served in Shevardnadze’s government as Minister of Justice and noted that, during that time, he had served Columbia law students working for him as interns. He outlined some of the issues at the top of his political agenda, including the importance of Georgia’s ties with the U.S. and his desire to improve his nation’s tense relationship with Russia.

The tension between the nations partly stems from Russia’s continued control of two military bases in Georgia. Situated in the Caucasus Mountains, Georgia, a nation of approximately 5 million, is bordered by Chechnya, Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan and the Black Sea. Its location is strategically important to the U.S., one of several countries working to build a pipeline that will carry oil from the Caspi-an Sea across Georgia into Turkey. In addition, a small number of U.S. troops have been in Georgia since 2002 conducting anti-terrorist training for the Georgian military, and Georgia has been cooperating in the U.S.’s “war against terrorism.”

During his White House meeting with Bush and Powell, Saakashvili said he discussed such topics as the oil pipeline, battling the government corruption that plagued Georgia’s previous administration, and what he termed the United States and Georgia’s “shared system of values and beliefs.”

“We have a rare window of opportunity” to effect reform in Georgia, Saakashvili said in his talk, sponsored by the Law School and the Harriman Institute, which is devoted to the study of the successor states of the former Soviet Union. He credited Columbia for opening his eyes to “imagining a new future for myself and for my country” and urged students to consider that “one of your options after studying here is becoming a president.”

For more information on the Harriman Institute, go to http://www.columbia.edu/cu/sip/a/REGIONAL/.