



## **Dirk t. D. Held Memorial**

Friday, April 27, 2012

### **Reflections on Dirk t. D. Held**

*By Wendell John Coats, Jr., Professor of Government*

We gather here today to celebrate the life and memory of our dear colleague, Dirk Held, who left us so suddenly last month. My contribution to this memory will be to share some reflections on a friendship with Dirk that began two and a half decades ago. I leave to others an account of Dirk's achievements and accomplishments and focus on what has been on my mind continuously since his sudden death, and what was most dear to me about him, his character.

Human character has been defined as a fairly consistent way or pattern of meeting change. The pattern or way of Dirk Held that I came to know and expect and admire over some 25 years, is what I would like to share with you today.

Dirk Held was one of the most decent human beings I have ever known from any walk of life. He embodied consistently in his sentiments and actions toward everyone, great or small, one of our most attractive cultural ideals - - an aversion to taking himself very seriously combined with great seriousness about his duties and obligations toward others; a capacity for ironic self-deprecation combined with a steady but unobtrusive devotion to duty towards those dependent on him, especially students and junior faculty, and junior administrative staff as well, and the Department of Classics, for which Dirk habitually carried inordinately heavy

teaching loads. This rare and unusual capacity was reflected in Dirk's personality as all knew him - - someone with just the right touch in various situations - - now humorous, now caring, now skillful, and so on.

Although in our friendship it was not our practice to speak of ourselves, I believe that what lay behind Dirk's unobtrusive concern for others was a belief in the fundamental moral dignity of each individual, regardless of their status on our own little campus or in the world at large, and certainly regardless of what they could do or make happen for him.

For me, Dirk embodied some of the best ideals of our civilization, and of the liberal arts tradition in particular. His whole life was testimony to a reflective moderation combining concern for what was happening around him and a desire to see others grow - - combining these with urbane literary sensibilities.

Dirk's office was for me a haven from the transitory mischiefs of the college and the world at large, a place where I went to discuss ideas from especially the Greco-Roman world, about which Dirk knew so much. Toward me Dirk was always helpful without ever being solicitous. He would conscientiously and expeditiously provide careful and detailed commentary and suggestion on whatever book and article drafts I gave him to read, including those on modern topics. And he was always in good humor no matter what was occurring with his own life or health, and not just toward me, but toward everyone I ever saw him interact with. (I honestly do not remember Dirk ever saying anything critical of anyone.)

In fact, Dirk had such a stoic aversion to discussing any of his own problems that one might be led to assume that he had none. To adapt a thought from Michel de Montaigne, Dirk seemed to possess an aristocratic sense of his own unimportance and a humility devoid of humiliation.

For myself and others, Dirk was also a source of quiet but steady support of which we may not have been fully aware at the time but the sudden loss of which has now made us painfully aware. This is true not only for those who knew Dirk at Connecticut College, but for others as well, in particular a small, local society which Dirk was secretary to. This society meets monthly to exchange papers on various subjects in a setting of intimate conviviality; I cannot begin to convey to you the sense of loss felt in that small group by Dirk's sudden passing and the difficulty it will experience in continuing without his presence and support.

As I reflect in the midst of loss on Dirk's character he seems now to me a private person who could best be known by his actions towards others. "By their fruits ye shall know them" seems especially apt in Dirk's case. And the character revealed in surveying those actions over a quarter century of friendship might be summarily rehearsed as this: Most dutiful and caring to any who depended on him, who yet managed to wear his sacrifices for others most lightly.