



CONNECTICUT COLLEGE

Dirk t. D. Held Memorial

Friday, April 27, 2012

Reflections On Dirk t. D. Held

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Dirk's life was a long conversation with the Greeks and the Romans. If they could speak today, what would they say of him? That he lived their ideals.

When the Romans of the republican period found themselves with an empire they had to govern, they invented a new virtue. They named it *humanitas*. It meant kindness, generosity, affability and wit. *Humanitas* wasn't something you were born with; it came from culture. And by culture the Romans meant broad learning. Dirk was a modern exemplar of ancient Roman *humanitas*. The culture that gave him *humanitas* came primarily from ancient philosophy and especially from writings of the two most influential of all ancient philosophers: Plato and Aristotle. The writings he chose to investigate are not only among Plato's and Aristotle's most profound, but, in a striking way, they describe Dirk. Here are two examples.

Dirk wrote about Aristotle's concept of magnanimity, the virtue of the great-souled man. The magnanimous man, the man with the great soul, rises above everything petty, trite, and limited to do, in a seemingly easy and effortless way, great deeds for others, even at considerable risk to himself. Magnanimity is generosity writ large. Since Dirk's passing, generosity is the word most often spoken of him.

But Dirk was more than generous. True philosopher that he was, as his life moved towards its close Dirk sought wisdom. The title of Dirk's last scholarly article is "Eros, Beauty, and the Divine in Plato." It was published three years ago. For me, it is the most profound and eloquent piece Dirk has written. The title alone invites deep reflection: "Eros, Beauty, and the Divine in Plato." The article

discusses Plato's *Symposium*, the most profound and beautiful meditation on love and beauty in Western literature. Dirk explains Plato's great discovery: that the experience of beauty leads to self-transcendence. As Dirk put it, "The overpowering experience of the lover . . . intimately links a rational accomplishment to a transforming affective response. It is transformative because the lover of Beauty has risen to a unity with the cognized entity Beauty. For Plato truth indeed *is* beauty and not an inert result of syllogistic reasoning" (162c). Summarizing what Socrates learns in the dialogue, Dirk writes that Beauty appears "with dramatic suddenness to the true lover. As a mystical vision, the experience is short lived but has profound and lasting effects." (161d). The effects are lasting because, as the poet Rilke said, the experience of beauty is a command to change your life.

For the ancients, to know something is to become assimilated to it. They would thus say that the generosity, kindness, wisdom and wit we found in Dirk came from the culture he acquired by investigating along with them the essence of the highest things: the nature of magnanimity, of beauty, of truth, and ultimately of the divine. Cicero said that he learned *humanitas* from the Greeks; so too did Dirk.