

BILL CONGER, THE BLIND PRINTER

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I got to know Bill Conger at lunch. Or rather, at a series of lunches during which we would indulge our common weakness for hamburgers. Bill introduced me to a number of fine dining spots. My favorite, I think, is the Runway Café at Wiley Post airport,¹ but our most memorable lunch for me was in the stockyards. Not the Cattlemen's Steakhouse that everyone knows and loves (or not). This was the restaurant inside the gates of the stockyards that I believe is called the Stockyards City Café. As I recall, we went in through a door off the street, but guys with boots and big hats came in through another door, where I imagined that you could "see 'em swimming," as the lobster restaurants at home used to say.² The image of the exquisitely dressed lawyer (Bill) and the near-vegetarian (me) sampling out-of-the-way burger spots captures the incongruity of Bill and my friendship rather well.³

I found some aspects of Bill's life and nature completely incomprehensible. He was able to converse comfortably with anyone at any time. He knew practically everyone in Oklahoma City. He was incredibly well-dressed. He had a funny accent. He drove a gigantic Lexus. He had hundreds of wonderful stories about his varied life, which he told with great charm. He seemed indefatigable. In all these respects I found him a strange and foreign creature. But Bill's ability to be at home with "strangers" made our differences unimportant and amusing. That

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1. We invariably got lost on the drive to Wiley Post, a fact which I now find almost as mysterious as the location of the airport. On one occasion we gave up and ate at a tiny greasy-spoon we happened upon. Of course, Bill ran into several people he knew, and the burgers were excellent.

2. This was a particularly bizarre experience for me, considering that the cattle trucks on I-70 had turned me into a vegetarian (mostly).

3. Bill and I often ran into each other at the supermarket on Sunday evening, when each of us was wearing our "hope we don't see anyone we know" clothes—another incongruity I always found hilarious, for some reason.

ability was an essential part of him, and it ultimately, of course, enriched my life as it had so many others’.

As some of the other tributes in this issue note, Bill was an extraordinary teacher and mentor. That is what he was known as around the law school, and the many lawyers (and others) he has mentored will be an important part of his legacy. I, however, would not describe Bill as my mentor. Rather, for me Bill was a promoter. I moved to Oklahoma City in 1996, but Bill, whom I met in 2003, was the first person here who encouraged me to use my talents outside the classroom and opened opportunities for me to do so. Bill treated me as a peer; he sought my advice about university matters and got me more involved in university affairs. I am convinced that I would not have been asked to serve on the 2009 Presidential Search Committee, for example, were it not for Bill. When I was asked to chair the 2011 Law School Dean Search, Bill convinced me, despite my extreme reluctance, to take the job. Although I say it who shouldn’t, I did not need a mentor to be able to do those things—I had been trained and mentored in my previous life as a lawyer. What I needed in my professional career were opportunities and an ally. Bill provided both. Unlike everyone else I knew in Oklahoma City at the time, Bill did not see me as a woman and an out-of-towner who had none of the local credentials, family, or social connections that make one important. Bill saw one’s strengths and one’s promise; he saw opportunities—ways to help build those strengths and fulfill that promise. That is why he was such a good mentor and teacher.

But what made Bill truly extraordinary was his blindness to all the other things that most people, unfortunately, see so clearly. He was blind to those external characteristics by which most of us judge each other; he did not notice or care that a person differed from the typical. Whether in burger joints or people, he saw only what matters. I believe that was why Bill was a mentor to so many women lawyers in our boys’ club world, a fact that is particularly remarkable considering that Bill was part of that world himself. He was firmly fixed in the establishment, but he had no fixed notions. He was an Okie who loved the Ivy League, a conservative who loved the Aspen Institute,⁴ a real-world trial lawyer who loved academia. All because he judged for himself based on what he saw, and he saw so little.

4. The Aspen Institute is staunchly non-partisan, but it has, I believe, a reputation for being liberal.

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The word “stereotype” comes from a printing process that uses a solid metal plate.⁵ Earlier processes printed from a type-set “forme” comprising many individual loose “sorts” of type.⁶ In stereotyping, a mold is made of the forme, and the mold is then cast into a metal plate, which is called the stereotype. The stereotype was able to reproduce text perfectly over and over, while the sorts were then removed from the forme and used for other purposes. The stereotypes could be stored so that printers could make additional print runs later without resetting the type. In other words, the stereotype replicated a piece of text, without any change, for decades. Our use of the word seems stunningly apt: the typical lawyer, the typical leader, the typical professor, reproduced mindlessly, decade after decade.

Bill Conger was a blind printer. Somehow, he failed to see the stereotype; he went to the other “sorts” who could complete the text. In his blindness to the stereotype, he was willing to reset the forme and change the font. Bill pulled me out of the box into which I had thoughtlessly been cast and set me into a new story. Today, there are whole volumes of new stories, and new editions of old stories, because Bill did not see so many of us in the usual way.

5. The word comes from the Greek for “solid type.” See 16 THE OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY 651–52 (2d ed. reprt. 1991).

6. See HARRIS B. HATCH & ALEXANDER A. STEWART, ELECTROTYPING AND STEREOTYPING 45–48 (1918). Sorts are the characters or letters of a particular font of type. See THE AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE 1720 (3d ed. 1992). The forme is a metal frame filled with individual pieces of type, set with quoins to hold the type in place. See *Forme*, MUSEUM VICTORIA, <http://museumvictoria.com.au/collections/items/1311155/forme-franklyn-typesetting-early-20th-century> (last visited Feb. 28, 2013).

