

January 2001

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Recommended Citation

Frank M. Coffin, *David Gregory: "Fellow Seeker"*, 53 Me. L. Rev. 7 (2001).

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.minelaw.maine.edu/mlr/vol53/iss1/8>

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DAVID GREGORY: “FELLOW SEEKER”

*Frank M. Coffin**

Like all of us sharing this platform, my task is to try to fix in the amber of our memory something of the beautiful butterfly wing that was the spirit of David Gregory. I speak with deep affection and pride as the person who married David and Jane almost seventeen years ago.

In that deeply moving book, “Tuesdays With Morrie,” Henry Adams is quoted: “A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.” Although others know much more about David’s work as a teacher, I have an indelible memory of seeing the butterfly wing in action, when I once sat in on his class.

The large classroom was full of buzzing students settling their gear. Then elegant David saunters forth, with enigmatic smile, relaxed. In measured tones he describes a case. One would not have suspected that he has been up since 5 a.m., fine tuning the scenario. A student is called on and, after a bit, cobbles together his thoughts about what the result should be. David takes time to digest the answer, then, saying, “Suppose we change the facts a little,” introduces a discordant element that suddenly makes the answer seem entirely inappropriate. “Same result?” he asks. After attempts to reconcile facts with principle comes the clincher, “Is it fair?” This from the Princeton Theological aspirant who changed his career path because he thought justice was better served through the law.

At this point, sitting in the last row, I could see 80 or 90 students sitting forward, straining, listening intently. Hands go up. Several tries are made. Nothing flies. Only heavy breathing and a cacophony of mental wheels grinding. Then light appears at the end of the tunnel, but then there is more tunnel. And so the hour flies by—on butterfly wings—till final resolution—perhaps the discovery of a principled exception to the general rule.

You’re right, Henry Adams. A kind of eternity, consisting of twenty-eight years of students sharing the very best quality of analytical thinking laced with a passion for justice.

But nothing David did surpassed the courage and grace under pressure with which, supported so sensitively by Jane, he faced his remorseless illnesses. When his throat condition would not let him speak, he would fax love notes to Jane. When cancer recurred, his comment to Jane was “feeling sorry won’t help.” And he went on teaching up to the end.

A year ago, David, although a confirmed Anglophile, condescended to accompany Jane and her parents, Randy and Patty Backlund, on a trip to Florence. During one day he set off by himself for a couple of hours. On his return he was exuberant. He could not wait to announce his discovery—the home of Dante, a fellow seeker.

Like Dante, David has a journey ahead. But David’s, already begun, is a journey through the lives of every one of us.

* Senior Circuit Judge, United States Court of Appeals for the First Circuit.