Rememberances of Student Life with Benjamin Nelson

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WITH BENJAMIN NELSON

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Benjamin Nelson enthralled students as a man of the widest interdisciplinary expertise, as a "single-minded partisan of scholarship,"¹ and as a teacher ever giving of his time, ideas, understanding, and hospitality. Whatever the setting—classroom lecture, seminar discussion, formal address or informal conversation—he continually generated new ideas, insights, and perceived unanticipated connections between events and concepts. He fairly surged forth as a dynamo charging us afresh with energy and purpose, challenging us with difficult questions and tasks, and working to clarify and simplify our way by serving as a guide to the perplexed.²

I first came under his masterful influence as a beginning graduate student at the New School for Social Research, when I enrolled in his course, "Max Weber: On Religion, Rationalization, and World in the Orient," given during the Spring of 1972. I remember well that encounter and the first class meeting.

Promptly at 6:00 in the evening he entered a classroom overflowing with matriculated students, auditors, guests, and visitors from other New York City schools. He made an impressive entrance, burdened with his customary armload of papers, notes, and books. A retinue of three student assistants followed along in train with additional articles, a portable lectern, mugs of coffee, syllabi, and sundry items.

After a perfunctory treatment of practical course matters and a review of the eight-page bibliography appended to the syllabus (a reading list he encouraged us to master), Nelson solicited questions and comments from the students present. Thus began his lecture. The first question required clarification of a passage in Weber’s Sociology of Religion which prompted a two-and-one-half-hour reply. Nelson’s lecture was a virtuoso performance by a scholar thoroughly at ease and conversant with his subject. He spoke with passion and directness wholly capturing our attention. At times he read from his published essays, or plunged into a spirited polemic concerning secondary interpretations of Weber’s work, or digressed into the history of ideas, or historical narrative, or the telling of a tale. Repeatedly he urged upon us the rigors and challenges of an analysis of topics which was at once comparative, historical, and civilizational.
Truth to tell, I felt overwhelmed. Never had I met anyone with such brilliance, passion, and seriousness of purpose. Doubtless, hundreds of graduate students have had a similar experience after attending their first class with Professor Nelson. During his eleven-year tenure (1966–1977) as Professor of Sociology and History in both the Sociology and Liberal Studies programs at the New School for Social Research, he had the opportunity to teach an unusual number of students. This was due, in part, to the large and profitable degree programs operated by the New School, and in part, because of Nelson’s appeal to students. They sought him out, for he encouraged scholarship, creativity, and originality from all, whatever their point of view. Thus during class, he delighted in spirited debate with those who professed points of view different from his own. And he believed that such debate helped put his own ideas into “marching order.” It furthered his search for what he termed “veritates sociologicas”—sociological truths. He valued the diversity of his students, their willingness to share their work with him, and his chance to teach them the skills of sociological analysis.

While the many passed through his classrooms on their way to a terminal master’s degree in Sociology or Liberal Studies, the few remained, seeking his sponsorship and supervision for doctoral work in Sociology. Nelson demanded that these students enter and remain in the relation of mentor to disciple. This relation was never explicitly formalized. Neither he nor his students ever spoke of their relation in this fashion. But he acted, in fact if not in name, as a mentor: a wise and faithful teacher, guide, and friend. In this way, he exerted a powerful, dominant, consuming influence over a small, and select, group of students.

As a mentor, Nelson advised his students by directing their course work, advising them on their extra-curricular reading, and even guiding them in personal matters. He required an unqualified loyalty, devotion, and commitment to his scholarship. At any given time, between five to ten young men made up his group of disciples, each at a different stage of studentship. He was mentor to no more than fifty students in his eleven years at the New School.

Some students were initiated into the mentor-disciple relationship through service as Nelson’s student assistant, a demanding task, for he required over twenty hours a week of work from this young man, who also carried a full course-load. Not surprisingly, Nelson wore out assistants year by year. He burdened them with seemingly endless tasks. In addition to their work as teaching assistants and researchers, they served as “go-fers,” clerk-typists, receptionists, photocopy operators, and...
mail clerks. Frequently, and most unselfconsciously, he made the most demeaning requests for personal service; you had to hail taxis or meet him at the Long Island Railroad station each week and carry his baggage to school.

Mercifully, the student assistantship was but temporary, an initiation, and many escaped this service. Each and everyone of Nelson’s student-disciples, however, had to demonstrate his acceptance of the disciple’s role. This required: 1. submission to his authority, 2. a willingness to accept and learn from his criticism and correction, and 3. a receptivity to his style of sociological analysis. The student assistant offered but the most visible and dramatic example of a discipleship undergone by all.

In return for their devotion, Nelson opened up his work and his life to his students. He always found time for them despite the frenetic daily round he always pursued in New York. They frequently received invitations to spend the day at the Stony Brook home office, or more relaxed weekends at his summer cottage in Montauk. On those weekends, he brought together trusted colleagues, student-disciples, and other friends for days and nights of ceaseless talk and discussion. The “Land’s End Seminar,” held yearly at the Montauk summer retreat, was a time when students and colleagues read papers and shared their latest work with one-another, the more formal occasions naturally giving way to walks by the sea wall, late afternoon drinks by the cafe at the docks, and hearty meals hastily thrown together by Marie Nelson and other wives in attendance.

Nelson’s willingness and need to foster a mentor-disciple relation stands in sharp contrast with the typical experience of sociology students at the New School. During the early 1970’s, the Department had nearly four hundred and a faculty of seven. I likened student life to the cold, impersonal, anonymous experience of commuting on the subways. Most classes were large with over fifty students enrolled. Fewer than one student in ten ever completed their Ph.D. Those who did needed, on average, in excess of ten years to finish. With large numbers of students and few faculty, students had difficulty finding an involved thesis supervisor. Add to this harsh department politics, an absence of fellowship support, and the high attrition rates for students, and gaining a Ph.D. resembled a tortuous journey through a maze analogous to John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress. Becoming Nelson’s student meant an escape from the unbrotherly impersonality of studentship through his recognition, sponsorship, and protection. He fought hard in the intricate battles between colleagues regarding his students’ work, and struggled hard to secure scholarships, fellowships, awards, and recognition for them. Thus he used his considerable influence with colleagues to help
his students publish articles, give papers at scholarly gatherings, and find jobs in an increasingly inhospitable academic marketplace.

As mentor, Nelson exercised the most profound moral authority over his students (and colleagues). Guenter Roth acknowledged him as a “critic with a Weberian temper” who “insisted on standards to which mortals have difficulty measuring up.” Benjamin Nelson demanded excellence from himself and his students whom he considered to be a reflection of his work. He would spend hours working over a dissertation chapter, copy-editing, recasting paragraphs, scouring the document for weaknesses, and going beyond seemingly reasonable expectations in his demand for quality. When handed a paper, he turned immediately to the end notes and bibliography to assess the student’s research. He sought evidence that the student had become immersed and saturated with the topic, era, or problem. Scholarship demanded that the student track down published, out-of-print, archival and primary sources. He continually advised students to lose themselves in their work. He imposed a standard of excellence upon students that provoked reactions of dread and frustration as re-write followed re-write. When the work finally “passed muster,” as Nelson termed it, both mentor and disciple shared a fleeting moment of reserved jubilation and satisfaction at having surpassed themselves. Yet, true to his Faustian nature, he needed to apply himself to new projects, and never permitted himself the full measure of enjoyment for a task well-done.

He was a complex, difficult, and taxing man. Driven by the need to achieve public recognition and scholarship of the highest caliber, and working in intellectual dialogue with the seminal thinkers of the twentieth century, Nelson frequently kept a pressured, frenetic pace. He gave ten or more papers and addresses each year, published essays and reviews, attended conferences, and traveled tens of thousands of miles across the United States and throughout western Europe.

Under pressure, he tended to lose perspective. His temper would grow short and his tolerance for fools and foolishness diminished. In these times he relied upon his students and secretaries to anticipate his needs and meet them. Not infrequently we failed to satisfy Dr. Nelson. We then felt the brunt of his anger. But his students agreed that despite the rigors of their existence, working with him at the New School provided them with a unique milieu where they could receive training in the European tradition of sociological theory, interdisciplinary scholarship, and historical sociology. They considered themselves to be outsiders, special, and distinct from the narrowly empirical theory and research of much of “mainstream” American sociology.

Like many of Nelson’s students, I feel that much of what I have...
become and value, I owe to Dr. Nelson’s influence. He taught more than comparative, historical, and civilizational sociology. Nelson embraced a philosophy of existential commitment to sociological truths, academic achievement, and generativity through his devotion to teaching. He demanded clarification about the world and its various histories, and self-clarification and self-knowledge as a prerequisite to all endeavour. Benjamin Nelson demonstrated how to live in the academy and elsewhere with courage, integrity, creativity, and intensity. He leaves us this model of life of scholarship through his publications, his unfinished research agenda, and the enduring devotion of students and colleagues who continue to seek truths “in the spirit of Benjamin Nelson.”

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NOTES


2. In the Spring of 1973 I indicated to Nelson that a fitting title to an essay that would review his work in psychoanalysis and allied fields would be: Logics, Paradigms, and Metaphors, A Guide to the Perplexed. I never did write this essay but the title, with its allusion to Maimonides, proved a designation that pleased him and he referred to it often.

3. I have often wondered why so few women ever became Nelson’s student-disciples in the time that I knew him. It appears that few modern, liberated women in an era of renewed feminism would willingly submit to the unequal, asymmetrical relationship of mentor-disciple. He relished more Victorian styles of formality and address. I always spoke of him as either Professor or Dr. Nelson. Only students of very long association used informal modes of address such as “Ben” in informal conversations. He did not offer a breezy, egalitarian relationship with student-disciples and this did not appeal to women in search of symbolic and actual liberation.