



Robert Booth Fowler (1940-2024), an emeritus professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, departed from us in the afternoon of January 13 in a hospital in Tucson, Arizona after a sudden illness. Booth was an esteemed and beloved colleague who excelled in research and campus service while achieving legendary status as a teacher. As a professor in both Political Science and Integrated Liberal Studies, he impacted thousands of students at the undergraduate and graduate levels as well as countless citizens with whom he interacted in talks and encounters over the years. As a testament to Booth's prowess as a scholar and teacher, the department of Political Science was able raise money from students, colleagues, and acolytes to fund a departmental chair after his retirement, the Robert Booth Fowler Professorship.

Booth spent his entire professorial career at Wisconsin, where he taught in the Political Science Department as well as the Integrated Liberal Studies Program, which he chaired for several years. He came to Madison in 1967 after receiving his Ph.D. at Harvard University, where he worked with such notable scholars as V.O. Key, Michael Walzer, and Louis Hartz—an intellectually diverse trio that foreshadowed Booth's own eclectic originality of mind and spirit as a professor. He formally retired in 2002 but spent several years thereafter teaching seminars in the school's honors program.

Booth specialized in political theory, American politics, and religion and politics. Indeed, he was a pioneer in the latter field. Possessing a keen eye that scrutinized things in his own distinctive way, Booth was able to tap into the budding political importance of religion in the polity. The growth of the field's significance was due in significant part to his influence.

A sampling of Booth's many books testifies to the breadth of his thought: *The Greening of Protestant Thought*; *The Dance with Community: The Contemporary Debate in American Political Thought*; *Unconventional Partners: Religion and American Liberal Culture*; *Carrie Chapman Catt: Feminist Politician*; *Enduring Liberalism: American Political Thought since the 1960s*; *Religion and Politics in America* (with Allen Hertzke, Laura Olson, and Kevin den Dulk), and *Wisconsin Votes: An Electoral History*.

A great professor is often larger than the sum of his or her parts. This maxim applied to Booth in spades. Many friends and students described him as an engaging and thought provoking "enigma" who defied definitive encapsulation. His elusiveness reflected the Socratic nature of the pursuit of truth itself—a connection not lost on his discerning students. On his department website, Booth described his personal intellectual perspective as "part Enlightenment liberal, part Burkean conservative, part Emersonian anarchist, and part religious existentialist." One looks in vain across the landscape of higher education for another such intellectual personality.

[The following commentary on Professor Fowler's teaching is drawn from a tribute to his teaching written upon his retirement in 2002.]

Students flocked to Booth's classes not only because of the subject matter, but because of him. They learned the material from a master, and they learned how to think critically, insightfully, and fairly about the great thinkers and issues he taught. Former students recalled his classes with remarkable vividness, regardless of when their graduations took place. And Fowler alums commonly bear the telltale mark of all true Fowler students: the alert, challenging smile of the inquisitive mind.

More than this, Booth brought the great political thinkers to life in a fashion that linked the past to the present without detracting from the independent significance of either time. His distinctive approach to teaching — which embodied unusual passion, seriousness wedded to inimitable humor and dramatic impersonations — breathed life into the cardinal question of political philosophy: How should we live? And as Booth taught, no one has a monopoly on the answer.

Students generally appreciate the significance of this question when it comes to grappling with the pressing controversies of their time, but they are prone to consider the likes of Plato, Augustine, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and Nietzsche to be of merely antiquarian interest. Booth shattered this complacency by shaking the dust off the past and revealing how the struggles of today are extensions of the struggles of yesterday.

By skillfully bringing philosophers to life in class, Booth showed us these thinkers were not just purveyors of abstractions, but driven individuals who sometimes courageously dedicated and even risked their lives to address the crises and important questions of their time with the power of their minds. He helped us to see what it means to think seriously about our lives. And he never whitewashed the thoughts of the thinkers he presented, honoring Nietzsche's warning that "in casting out your devil, be careful lest you cast out the best that is in you."

Booth achieved this quietly subversive feat not by being an ideologue or tilting the other way, but simply by doing what he does best — treating all great thinkers from across the political spectrum with the respect that is their due. He opened the doors and provided some cover but left it up to individual students to decide for themselves their intellectual and ethical destinies. In so doing, he broadened horizons while showing regard for the individual freedom that is a necessary ingredient of intellectual life and moral commitment.

Booth gave us liberal education at its best. The university and community will be a different place without him.