

A EULOGY FOR MY COLLEAGUE, MICHAEL M. MENDIOLA

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by Mary A Tolbert

While Michael did not have the biggest shoes on the PSR faculty, he certainly did have the biggest sole/soul! Yes, as you guessed, that is a slightly revised “Michael pun.” One of the “million” he delivered at just about every conceivable point. Those puns lightened the tension in many a meeting and made hard discussions easier. Indeed, another PSR colleague told me a wonderful story that illustrates this so well: Just a few months ago, Michael was telling this colleague about the return of the cancer and the deeply pessimistic prognosis he had received. At the end of the conversation, as Michael was leaving, he smiled mischievously and said, “This is a **grave** concern” and then went away laughing. He was absolutely irrepressible! His warmth, humor, compassion and profound joy in living---that so marked his life with his family and friends---was just as clearly on display in Michael’s professional life as a faculty member at Pacific School of Religion and the Graduate Theological Union. As a teacher, as a scholar, and as a colleague, Michael was unforgettable and irreplaceable. In his death, we have all lost a truly “great soul.”

I had the privilege of teaching several classes with Michael over the last 14 years that I served with him on the PSR faculty. In fact, we had planned to teach a class together this past Fall before Michael became so ill. Teaching with Michael was pure joy! In the classroom, Michael was inspiring, funny, and profound, and the breadth of his knowledge was often breath-taking: one minute he could be talking about Aquinas and Natural Law and in the next minute, the latest positions of Queer Theory; from the classical world to the postmodern one, Michael was equally at home. In the beginning, students would come to his classes maybe because they had to or needed to; after a session or two, they came because they wanted to; and after a few more sessions, they came because they could not

imagine missing even one word Michael had to say. Michael loved learning, and in the classroom, he was uniquely able to communicate that love to students. He changed the thinking and indeed the lives of so many of the students he touched with his inspired teaching. Without question he was one of the best teachers PSR has seen in many years: passionate, committed to high standards for himself and everyone else, a superb communicator, and a compelling classroom presence. Those are shoes that will be very hard to fill!

Michael's excellence as a teacher sprang directly out of his commitment both to students and to his own scholarship. Michael gave fully of his time, resources, and skill to any student who needed and wanted help (the "wanted" was very important). From meeting students during vacation days to reading and rereading papers and theses to all hours of the night, so that students could get important feedback in time for deadlines, Michael was, as another colleague put it, "impeccably responsible," or as I often put it to Michael, "too damn committed for his own good." But Michael's commitment to students was part and parcel of his scholarly commitment to a profoundly embodied narrative ethics, a development of contemporary ethics that takes with great seriousness the real, lived experience of people in day to day life expressed in their stories. In his book on suffering, for example, he spends a great deal of time developing what he calls a "thick" description of suffering. He wanted to know what people really experienced and meant by suffering in detail before talking about possible ethical responses to it. As a gay man and as a Latino, Michael was especially concerned with the suffering that comes from social injustice, and as a bioethicist, he took the pain of the body, a pain that in recent years, he himself knew only too well, with compassionate seriousness. However, scholarship for Michael was not only something one did in books, lectures, and classrooms; scholarship for Michael needed to act in the world to change the painful realities it analyzed. At PSR, Michael was the founder of the Bay Area Faith and Health Consortium, bringing

together health professionals from across the region and especially from Cal's School of Public Health with theologians and ethicists to work out best practices for patient and community care. Moreover, Michael was one of the faculty leaders in establishing PSR's ground-breaking Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry. Without Michael that Center would not exist. Scholarship in action; compassionate reasoning; theory and praxis working together---those were not just slogans for Michael; they were the embodied soul of his life and work.

As a faculty colleague, Michael was, as scripture puts it, a man in whom there is no guile. Michael did not participate in the behind-the-back machinations that often plague small faculties---and let's be honest, large ones as well. He was who he was at every moment, an enormously rare quality in my experience. What he told you in the privacy of his office was exactly what he would say in a public meeting. I always felt relieved when I was in a meeting with Michael because I knew he would be articulate, fair-minded, reasonable, and absolutely accountable in all that he said and supported. Michael always spoke the truth, as he knew it, about his views, his feelings, and his life. If he was angry, he told you; if he was happy, he told you; if he was depressed, as he was so often in the last month of his life, he told you. You never had to wonder or guess what Michael thought or what he felt. It is such a relief to work with someone like that, such a joy. I loved working with Michael, even on those rare occasions when we did not agree, because I had enormous respect for Michael's carefully thought out positions, and because we could talk about anything, literally anything: death, fidelity, sex, his desire to go to beauty school, finances, family, politics, anything. He always spoke out courageously at injustice, and he **always** expressed his gratitude at the work and words of others. After many meetings, Michael would knock on my office door just to tell me that he really appreciated what I had said or done in that meeting. And I am not the only one; many faculty colleagues found Michael at

their doors expressing his gratitude for what they had said. He let us all know that he, at least, appreciated the time and work everyone put in to making the school a successful enterprise. And in return, Michael was held in enormously high esteem by everyone who worked with him, which often meant that he was elected or appointed to crucial committees and important faculty posts—all of which he carried through with utter competence and full accountability. How can you not love a colleague like that? Gratitude, humility, courage, fair-mindedness, humor, intelligence, and an enduring personal honesty were the hallmarks of Michael's collegial life. We will not see his like again anytime soon. Michael was a rare soul, one who was with us much, much too short a time.

Writing this piece about Michael has been one of the hardest tasks I have undertaken in a long time—not because there are not many things to say about this wonderful man. I could easily spend hours telling you about Michael. But because I simply cannot believe that he is gone. I keep expecting to hear his laughter in the PSR hallways, to find him at the center of every group of excitedly talking students. He is too vital, too alive to be dead. I want to close my remarks with a poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay that says what I am feeling today:

Dirge without Music

I am not resigned to the shutting away of loving hearts in the hard ground.
 So it is, and so it will be, for so it has been time out of mind:
 Into the darkness they go, the wise and the lovely, Crowned
 With lilies and with laurel they go; but I am not resigned.

Lovers and thinkers, into the earth with you,
 Be one with the dull, the indiscriminate dust.
 A fragment of what you felt, of what you knew,
 A formula, a phrase remains---but the best is lost.

The answers quick and keen, the honest look, the laughter, the love---
They are gone. They are gone to feed the roses. Elegant and curled
Is the blossom. Fragrant is the blossom. I know. But I do not approve.
More precious was the light in your eyes than all the roses of the world.

Down, down, down into the darkness of the grave
Gently they go, the beautiful, the tender, the kind;
Quietly they go, the intelligent, the witty, the brave.
I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.