

MEMORIAL MINUTE FOR PRESIDENT AND EDWIN F. AND JESSIE BURNELL FOBES PROFESSOR IN GREEK (CLASSICS) PETER POUNCEY

Peter Pouncey, Amherst's 16th president, died on May 30, 2023, a result of the senile dementia he had suffered from for the past several years. He served as Amherst's president from 1984 to 1994, and was the College's first president in more than 50 years to have assumed the presidency without any previous connection to the institution. He had previously been a professor of classics at Columbia University, where he had also been the dean of the undergraduate college from 1972 to 1976.

At a memorial service in New York City recently, Peter's best friend summed up his early life as follows: "A Brit born in China, Peter was preparing to become a Jesuit until he was undone by bodily lusts." He received his undergraduate degree from Oxford and eventually came to New York City to teach classics in a temporary position at Fordham University. After earning a Ph.D. from Columbia, he immediately joined Columbia's classics faculty as an assistant professor. Not long afterwards, he was appointed Associate Dean of Columbia College, and, after only one year in that position, became the Dean of the College—an appointment especially extraordinary because it was made even before he had been granted tenure.

Peter's performance as the dean during those perilous years was in itself extraordinary. One anecdote from that time will have to suffice; it involves his first official act after becoming dean. It was the early summer of 1972. Peter had just been named dean when a small delegation of gay students came to his office and asked if he would establish a lounge for them in one of Columbia's dormitories. What in 2023 would scarcely cause a ripple of attention was a very big deal 50 years ago. There were no lounges for gay students at any American university in those years, and no administrator from the central university wanted one. The president of the university hated the idea; the Trustees hated the idea; the eminences of the senior faculty hated the idea. Peter thought simply it was the right thing to do and had no problem taking on the whole university in the interest of what he construed to be the morally correct decision. The gay lounge came immediately into being, and the story of it, and of the controversy surrounding it, received prominent coverage in the New York Times. The lounge continues to exist to this day.

After stepping down as Dean of Columbia College, Peter returned to the faculty, published his first book (*The Necessities of War: A Study of Thucydides' Pessimism*) and was granted tenure. Amherst chose him as its president in 1984, an especially fraught time at the College, since the Trustees had just voted to abolish fraternities and the previous acting president, Professor of English Armour Craig, who had initiated the move toward abolition, had been burned in effigy by a large group of students opposed to the decision. While Peter's immediate task was to help drag the students into a new set of arrangements for their social life—a task that was facilitated by the inevitable wholesale turnover in the student body over the next four years—he also came to Amherst with a longer-term agenda involving the nature of both the student body and the faculty. When he arrived here, he was appalled to discover that only a third of the students received any sort of financial aid, and that the financial aid budget had actually been underspent for the previous several years. The Dean of Admission at the time was a very smart and accomplished Amherst alum—a historian with a Ph.D. and several publications to his credit—who had come to the Amherst position after a long stint as the head of the upper school at a widely-known and respected New England boarding school. The dean had, as a result, a pretty narrow view of the kinds of secondary schools that "prepared"—we use the word advisedly—a student for the academic rigors of Amherst. The consequence was a student body composed primarily of graduates of the classier private schools and public schools from the more affluent suburbs. A running joke among Amherst faculty at the time involved a comparison of the car models one spotted in the faculty and student parking lots. Within a couple of years, and at Peter's behest, the Dean of Admission had

returned to the world of private secondary school education, replaced at Amherst by a young woman of much more democratic leanings.

Peter believed firmly in what has nowadays come to be called “diversity, equity, and inclusion,” though his own more eloquent phrase—reiterated in speech after speech and conversation after conversation—was that Amherst’s student body needed to reflect “a full sample of the nation’s talents.” By the time he relinquished the presidency in 1994, the proportion of financial aid recipients had increased from 33% to 45%, and the percentage of students of color had risen by similar amounts. In percentage terms, that is, the progress that the College made under Peter’s leadership rivalled, and perhaps even exceeded, the admirable gains Amherst has made during the 21st century so far.

Peter was equally concerned with the demographics of the faculty, and his immediate goal was to increase the proportion of women in both tenured and tenure-track positions. By the time he stepped down as president, the percentage of women on the faculty had risen from 16% to 33%. And the overall numbers of faculty members had also increased. For many years, the Trustees had capped the number of faculty members, even though the student body had expanded in size by 25% when the College began to admit women in 1976. It was Peter who finally convinced them to lift the cap and allow the faculty to expand in proportion to the student body.

On a personal level, Peter was known by students, faculty and staff alike for his willingness to extend himself to help out people in difficulty. Despite his superficial appearance as an elitist Englishman, he was a small-d democrat through and through, which is one reason he was so beloved by the people who worked for him, including the whole staff of the president’s house. He had an instinctive sympathy for the underdog, which he displayed in ways both large and small. He exercised this inclination countless times over the years, often when faculty, staff members, or students got themselves in difficulty—financial or otherwise—and approached him for help. Greg Call remembers one seemingly trivial example of this inclination from the time he was first hired as a member of the Math Department. In those days, the practice was that the President, along with the Dean of the Faculty, interviewed all candidates for tenure-track faculty appointments. During the interview, Peter asked Greg if he wanted something to drink, and Greg chose a bottle of grapefruit juice. He proceeded to shake the bottle vigorously, only to realize too late that the cap wasn’t fully engaged. “I’ll always remember,” Greg writes, “Peter’s kindness in putting a very nervous candidate, who had just spilled juice all over his rug, at ease.” Appropriately enough, or perhaps as a result, Greg is now, of course, the Peter R. Pouncey Professor of Mathematics.

After relinquishing the presidency, Peter remained at Amherst for another four years as the Burnell Fobes Professor of Greek, before returning to Columbia as a member of the Society of Senior Scholars and teaching for several more years in Columbia’s core curriculum. It was during those years, though, that his career took one of its most astonishing turns. Unbeknownst to almost anyone, he had been working for many years on and off on his first novel, called *Rules for Old Men Waiting*. It was published in 2005, garnered much attention and critical praise, was nominated for the Commonwealth Writers Prize, and won the McKitterick Prize, given by Britain’s Society of Authors for the best first novel by an author more than 40 years old. It’s fair to say, I think, that unless and until the long-rumored secret stash of erotic poetry allegedly written by Amherst’s second president, Heman Humphrey (1823-1845), is discovered, Peter is the only Amherst president to have produced such a literary triumph before, during, or after his presidency. Bill Pritchard, no literary slouch himself, writes that *Rules for Old Men Waiting* was “a long-contemplated “first novel” full of technical and moral wisdom put in the service of what Henry James called “felt life.” Re-read for the third or fourth time, as I have just done,” Bill continues, “this wholly unexpected novel marks for me the final achievement in a career filled with them, and never once predictable in its scope or direction.”

President Elliott, I move that this memorial minute be adopted by the faculty in a rising vote of silence, that it be entered in the permanent record of the faculty, and that a copy be sent to President Pouncey's family.

Respectfully submitted,
Gregory Call
Ben Lieber
William Pritchard
Lisa Raskin