

A REMEMBRANCE OF JACK CHATFIELD

BY AMY TATKO '93

“A little gentle mockery of intellectual conceits is in order. We all want love and repose.”
— Jack Chatfield, personal letter, 1996

An unexpected telephone message awaited me one day when I returned to my Goodwin single in the fall of my senior year. Professor Jack Chatfield, who taught American history, had called about my latest essay in *The Trinity Tripod*. The man whom I had observed from afar—the man of legend among my nerdy acquaintances who hung out in the History Department—had been reading “my writing.” I grew nervous as I listened to the voice through my telephone invite me to meet for coffee. I would not be able to keep up with him, and I would never be able to hold his interest. Yet, I was thrilled: Professor Chatfield, who inspired a cult of personality and enjoyed quasi-celebrity status among students, wanted to meet *me*.

The year was 1992, and I was 21 years old and back on campus after a year in Russia. A friend and I co-edited a new opinion section in *The Tripod* called “Dialogue” that was making waves on campus. I stated in my first few mini essays, with the subtlety of prose used as a sledgehammer, that Trinity was lacking intellectual discussion and that the newspaper could be a catalyst for candid exploration of serious matters. I was a senior, and I had nothing to lose. My “Dialogue” pieces were an invitation to others to step forward and enter into conversation. My year in Siberia had given me a fresh perspective. I returned to campus changed, and I wanted to change the campus. Others did in fact step forward, and I found wonderful new friends that year.

And now Professor Chatfield had stepped forward, too. Despite my nerves, we met at The Cave, and we talked for two hours. We talked about my writing, his writing, my year in Russia, his year in the South during the civil rights era, my thesis, his scholarship, the social scene at Trinity, and the need for intellectually stimulating conversation of the sort that “Dialogue” was intended to stir. Professor Chatfield saw profound parallels between his time in the South and mine in Russia, our respective love for the literature of those places, and the subsequent deep effect that our experiences away in a different culture had on us. His generosity in expressing those parallels and their significance as a connection between us made me feel worthy of his company. This was my first look inside his character, of which generosity was a cornerstone. He helped me to believe within our first hours together that I had something to offer him. There could be no question of what I stood to gain from him.

We discussed Dostoevsky and Faulkner, Yeltsin and Clinton, the disturbing side effects of political correctness, and the role of the campus newspaper in the life of a liberal arts college. He entrusted me with his thoughts and convictions. He listened in a way that assured me I could trust him with my thoughts and convictions. We talked like two old friends who could not fit everything into an hours-long conversation. We talked like two new friends hungry for more of the delicious treat that we were tasting for the first time. We talked like two people with many common interests, a slew of intriguing differences, and a growing desire to know each other better. At the end of our conversation, we found easy words to express our mutual joy. We parted with a promise to meet again soon. In the years to come, that was how we always would part.

I walked back to my room that afternoon intoxicated from bliss. The beautiful mind of Jack Chatfield, combined with his earnestness, his gentle presence, and his interest in everything that mattered most to me, made him from that day my most beloved college friend. Our friendship spanned nearly 22 years and never failed to intoxicate me.

When he died in September at the age of 72 from Parkinson's and cancer, we were mid-conversation via e-mail about James Joyce's story "The Dead." As Professor Chatfield detected all those years ago, I am a writer—mostly of novels, also of essays, and a former newspaper reporter. From the beginning and until the very end, he was a mentor and a muse to me. He read my essays and my novels, and he commented in detail about the strengths and the need for revision. We always discussed literature, in our letters and in our conversations. A few years ago, he returned to the classics precisely at the time when I began a focused reading of the Western canon. I had hoped to continue our discussion in person. I had hoped beyond hope for one more visit, one more conversation with my dear friend, one more glimpse inside the most beautiful mind that I have ever had the pleasure of knowing.

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I was a Russian studies major, and at times I struggled to keep up with Professor Chatfield when he traipsed through American history and related events from the past to current politics. I struggled to keep up with his English, too. I had never met anyone who spoke with the beauty, power, and precision that he did, not to mention the sense of fun. He played with language with the ease of a kitten rolling around on the floor with a ball of yarn between its paws. Strings of words moved gracefully through him. Every word in the language seemed his for the taking. When I spent time with him, I learned far more than U.S. history. He made me a better listener, thinker, reader, and writer. I would reach for my dictionary when I returned to my dorm room after each of our conversations.

Professor Chatfield's trusted pal those days was Professor Renny Fulco, who taught women's studies, political science, and pre-law. Once a week, I had the privilege of joining them and a handful of other students for lunch at their "Friday Table" in the faculty dining room. Their minds were beyond my reach, but my efforts to keep up made me feel smarter and inspired me to envision my own potential. For me, the Jack and Renny Show was the greatest show on earth. With friends who also attended the Friday Table, I would replay the highlights, wonder aloud what my professor friends had meant, and never admit aloud that I would have benefited from bringing my dictionary right to the table with me.

Our friendships grew, and during my final semester at Trinity I took Professor Fulco's class "American Political Thought," and I informally audited Professor Chatfield's class on early American history, "The Formative Years." Professor Chatfield was known for his hand gestures, and those of us who adored him also adored mimicking the classic Chatfield hand motion: hand at chest level, palm facing in, fingers pressed together, hand hopping forward like a little jack rabbit punctuating each thought. I had fast become a fan of a particular facial expression that was also classic Chatfield: eyes sparkly with elfish mischief, eyebrows at half-mast, playful smile of disbelief chiseled into his face. He would lead up to a point, sometimes for most of a 50-minute lecture. When he plunged at last at his target—the main point, the big idea—his face would align into that expression to show his incredulity at the propensity for human foolishness and his delight that such foolishness appeared again and again throughout American history as if for no other purpose than his own appreciation. It was the face of incredulity and the face of excitement, passion, and purpose that said he knew no greater joy than standing in that room and speaking on that subject with those people—his students.

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In 2002, a couple years into his trouble with the "vexatious malady"—his term for the neurological problems that would later be diagnosed as Parkinson's—Professor Chatfield received the Thomas Church Brownell Prize for Teaching Excellence. The prize "recognizes consistently outstanding teaching by a senior faculty member." Professor Fulco had contacted alumni about writing letters in support of Professor Chatfield's nomination for the prize. In my letter to the dean

of the faculty, I wrote: “When I had a problem with my thesis adviser, it was Professor Chatfield whom I turned to for advice. When I was unsure about a piece I had written for *The Tripod*, it was Professor Chatfield whose input I sought.” I ended my letter with a sentiment that remains true today: “I know that I am one of dozens, if not hundreds, of Trinity graduates who think of this man during the pivotal moments of my life and wonders, ‘What would Professor Chatfield think? What would he do?’ I can think of no greater influence than a kind, intelligent, thoughtful, and generous person can have on his students. I can think of no better definition of Teacher.”

Professor Chatfield’s thoughts about the Brownell Prize were among the most treasured insights that he ever expressed to me about his life as a teacher. In an e-mail on May 11, 2002, just before he received the award at commencement, he wrote with his characteristic humor:

“As I am perhaps too fond of saying, ‘a novelist would be required’ to explain the complicated emotions now poking around in my mortal frame. There have been times at recent graduation ceremonies when my heart began to race when the dean of the faculty approached the podium to announce the recipient of the Brownell prize. The heart’s beat would then be abruptly arrested when the dean—rehearsing the accomplishments of the still unnamed honoree—uttered a phrase such as ‘the students in his zoology laboratories remember fondly ...’ etc. At this moment, the predictable thoughts would rush in: ‘I am unworthy,’ ‘How could I have entertained such a hope?’ etc. There was one year when the dean read excerpts from letters written by former students, and I could only say to myself, ‘What I would give for a moment like this!’ Now it seems to be approaching. Egad. My knees may be too weak for walking.”

His humorous confession and insight into his “complicated emotions” then led to an unprecedented expression of what teaching and his students meant to him:

“You can have no idea of how often my mind goes back to you and [other students], so that I see those old Seabury classrooms, see the faces, and hear the voices that always sounded like well-tuned instruments. Can there be a more fitting moment to say to you that you, with select others, exercised a power—there is no other word—over my teaching life which was akin to a generative force. In other words, you brought into my life—and to others—the things that completed the equation. There may be no exact metaphor, but you and a handful of others, going back to the early 1980s and extending up to the present day, acted like a dancer’s partners. The dancers must be together to refine—to define—the art. Each dancer generates, creates, each affecting the others. In the plainest language, your little band became not simply the ‘responsive’ students, not simply the ‘inspirational’ students, but rather the creators of what I sought to become. In the past, after our best moments together, I felt the kind of ecstasy (albeit a quiet variety) that one may feel after choral singing. ‘Joy’ is a pale term to express it. How am I ever to explain what I owe you?”

How are we—the hundreds of students and colleagues who enjoyed Jack Chatfield, learned from him, and loved him—ever to explain what we owe him?