

The Passing of Dr. Richard Lawrence Arthur

February 27, 2013



Dr. Richard Lawrence Arthur, Associate Professor of New Testament Studies at UTS, passed away last Thursday, February 27, 2013. Dr. Arthur had gone in earlier last week for heart surgery and had responded well to the surgery. However, while in recovery, complications arose resulting in his passing. This year would have been his 25th year as a faculty member at UTS.

Dr. Arthur joined the faculty in 1988. He came to UTS as an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ and with a Th.D. from Graduate Theological Union and the S.T.B. from Harvard. He was particularly proud of his Harvard degree and stayed connected with his alma mater. Something that students at UTS may not know about Dr. Arthur is that he and his wife served as missionaries and teachers for the UCC in the United States and American Samoa early in their careers.

As a scholar, Dr. Arthur investigated the texts of the Christian Gnostics in their original language, Coptic. These independent witnesses to Jesus and the early church shed new light on the Bible. Armed with vast knowledge in this area, he published an important article in the *Journal of Unification Studies* which argued that a well-known recent find, *The Gospel of Judas*, is in fact a forgery. As the jury is still out regarding this controversial document, Dr. Arthur's views on this matter will no doubt be discussed for years to come.

UTS students will remember him fondly for his courses dealing with various aspects of the New Testament: *New Testament Foundations*, *Life and Letters of Paul*, and *Teachings and Sayings of Jesus* most notably. Students from the Barrytown campus will especially remember the times they spent with him in the dining room late at night over a cup of tea or coffee and cookies just whiling away the hours talking about theology, scripture, UTS and life. Anyone who knew Dr. Arthur knew he was a night owl

and, like all good owls, he came alive at night. It was not unusual for him to make his way to bed after 2:00am.

Alumni of UTS will also testify to the fact that he endeavored to stay connected with many graduates. He even traveled the Siberian railroad in Russia one summer visiting each of the UTS graduates who were on mission in the region. You can imagine how surprised they were to see one of their professors arriving in the train station just to see them. That was real love and concern.

He had many interests, but one interest that engaged his heart and mind over the last several years was the Jesus Seminar. He enjoyed the rich theological discussions with his colleagues and did all that he could to either encourage UTS to sponsor a Jesus Seminar meeting or encourage the Seminar organizers to convene one of their annual meetings in the New York area. Why? Because he thought it was important that UTS students have an opportunity to attend one of the programs as part of their theological education. Eventually it did happen, and no one was prouder than Dr. Arthur to walk into the opening plenary at the Marriott Marquis Hotel in Times Square followed by his UTS students!

Dr. Arthur challenged students to not just read scripture. He invited them to think, to question and to engage scripture on a deeper level. He was at home in the classroom and when he was surrounded by his students – pushing them to go beyond simple answers. One can hear him even now saying, in his distinctive New England voice, “Wel-l-l, I don’t know about that. I haven’t heard that before. Where did you read this?” or “I don’t think that’s true. Who says that?” Nor was he afraid to speak his mind. He would tell students that books were sometimes overrated and that the real source of information were the academic journals and articles because they were more up-do-date. Students in his classes also learned that just because someone was cited in a text didn’t mean that their ideas could not be challenged. It was not unusual to walk past his classroom and hear a lively debate going on.

No discussion of Dr. Arthur would be complete without mention of his wife. UTS students were fortunate because Dr. Arthur often brought his wife with him to class. A scholar in her own right, Dr. Rose Arthur, the other doctor in the house also with a Th.D., always added to the conversation in the classroom. They were comfortable together in the classroom – whether they agreed or not. Either way, they created a vibrant class session and left students with a lot to think about. At the time of his passing, the Arthurs had been married for 42 years.

Dr. Arthur will be greatly missed. But we also know that he is probably already organizing discussions with UTS staff, faculty and students who have also been called home to God. The entire UTS community sends their prayers and love to his wife – Dr. Rose Arthur and we count ourselves fortunate to have had Dr. Arthur in our lives for even this brief moment in time.