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Two Salutes to Robert C. Wood 1923–2005

Richard A. Hogarty

The death of Robert Wood on April 1, 2005, after a lifetime of extraordinary accomplishments and dedicated public service, leaves a void that cannot easily be filled. Even though we should not expect the giants among us to be immortal, it came as a shock to me to learn that my close friend and mentor had passed away at the age of eighty-one. A renowned urban scholar and practitioner, Wood was very much a public person, but his home, family, and privacy meant a great deal to him; and he was, perhaps above all, a kind and generous person, both sensitive and caring. In sum, he was truly a wonderful colleague, inspiring teacher, and original thinker.

Just as Wood's death came as a shock to me, so does the realization that I first met him more than forty-seven years ago. At the time, I was a young graduate student absorbed in the study of public administration and city planning at the University of Pennsylvania. He had just published his groundbreaking book *Suburbia*. This American classic was soon followed by such works as *Metropolis Against Itself* in 1959 and *1400 Governments* in 1961.

A rising academic star, Wood initially taught at Harvard from 1954 to 1957. He then spent nine years as a member of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) political science department and became its first chairman. Indeed, he was a preeminent scholar who specialized in the problems facing urban America and troubled cities across the land. Tough-minded and politically astute, he was an ambitious man with a quick mind and seemingly limitless energy. He had an impressive technical command of the issues. No stranger to controversy or to the world of politics, he fought hard for what he truly believed in — such as preventing urban sprawl and providing affordable housing. After all, he had taken up boxing at Princeton during his undergraduate days. His motto as a practicing public manager was revealing: “There isn't much use in holding power if it can't be used effectively.”

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Richard Freeland, the president of Northeastern University, said,

“Robert Wood epitomized the engaged academic through a career that connected the worlds of scholarship, politics, and public policy. Moving with agility from academe to public life and back to academe, he combined the intellectual’s insights, the activist’s values, and the politician’s skills to advance the things he cared about most — enhanced life chances for individuals and richer, more vibrant communities for all of us.”

This kind of person brings energy and direction to a community and helps define the experience of living in a particular place and time.

Robert Coldwell Wood was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on September 16, 1923, but his family soon moved to Jacksonville, Florida. He and his two brothers were raised there during the Great Depression. The boys learned the values of education and hard work from their mother, who was a schoolteacher, and their father, a shoe salesman. A full scholarship enabled Bob to attend Princeton University, but his studies were interrupted by military service in the infantry during World War II where he saw action in the Battle of the Bulge and won the Bronze Star. After the war, the G. I. Bill enabled him to earn a doctorate in political economy at Harvard.

A public entrepreneur in the best sense of the term, Wood frequently combined theory with practice. While completing his doctoral dissertation, he served as associate director of the Legislative Reference Bureau in Florida. Later, he worked as a junior staff member in the U.S. Bureau of the Budget (now the Office of Management and Budget) in the Executive Office of the President. This valuable apprenticeship prepared him for the road ahead. Those who labored in the vineyards of urban revitalization looked to him for stimulation, thoughtfulness, erudition, and enthusiasm for the American prospect.

During the tempestuous years of the 1960s and 1970s, a few individuals understood the currents of social change and had the clarity of judgment and courage to speak out. Bob Wood was such a man. When he first put his ideas into practice, the nation was asking: Can American cities be saved? That question may seem ludicrous today, but not back then. The flash points were Watts, Newark, Detroit, and Los Angeles. Wood argued that metropolitan development needed to go hand in hand with urban renewal, and he later contended that “cities were written off too soon.” He became a member of John Kennedy’s Academic Advisory Committee, and played a key role in the federal government’s response to the urban crisis. He chaired President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Task Force on Urban Problems, which recommended establishing a new cabinet level Department of Housing and Urban Development. When HUD was created in 1965, he was named its first undersecretary serving under Robert C. Weaver, and he subsequently became its secretary in 1969. During these years, he drafted and imple-

mented key legislative initiatives that dramatically improved and expanded federally assisted housing and urban development programs, including the Model Cities Act of 1966 and the Fair Housing Act of 1968.

Returning to Cambridge in 1969 from his Washington sojourn, Wood reentered academe by resuming his duties as chairman of the MIT political science department and becoming the director of the Harvard-MIT Joint Center for Housing. Governor Frank Sargent soon appointed him chairman of the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority. One of his proudest achievements was the extension of both the Orange Line and the Red Line, dramatically transforming communities such as Somerville and Quincy.

Our paths crossed again in 1970 when Wood became president of the University of Massachusetts. Given his experience and background, he proved an excellent choice for the presidency. I was teaching at the fledgling Boston campus in Park Square as a lowly assistant professor in the department of political science. Over the years, I was fascinated by what a complex person he was. On the surface, he was quiet and soft-spoken. Below the surface, however, one could detect an inner churning. He was a high-energy, assertive, and domineering academic chief executive — small wonder that he was a chain-smoker and fondled a set of worry beads. His sometimes brusque, abrasive style and his determination to concentrate more power in the president's office alienated some faculty. He often micromanaged and even played an active role in tenure decisions. More important, he was as much a dreamer as he was a schemer.

Shrewdly attuned to the temper of the times, Bob Wood brought vision and luster to the University of Massachusetts where he caused the teaching hospital of the new medical school to be built in Worcester and he was largely responsible for the Harbor Campus location in Boston. The latter was built on a former municipal dump and near a troubled public housing project at Columbia Point. In 1976, Wood persuaded Jacqueline Kennedy to locate her late husband's presidential library on its present site next to UMass Boston. He also fostered the creation of a college of public and community service, which he saw as "an experiment in urban public higher education."

During his tenure (1970–77), Wood introduced an education program of college courses in the state prisons, encouraged the physicians at the medical school to go out into the field to deliver urgently needed care at the state schools for the mentally challenged, persuaded the faculty at Amherst and Boston to extend academic credit for community service performed in conjunction with course work, consistently opposed student tuition increases, and pushed the campuses toward affirmative action in faculty hiring. In all, he was a change agent and transformational leader who engendered considerable innovation at the state university.

But such change did not come easy. By the mid-1970s, the Arab oil embargo and soaring inflation caused major problems. The hefty price tag for improving the state university did not jibe with the grim budgetary realities of the day. Governor Michael Dukakis used his symbolic “meat cleaver” to cut the public higher education budget by 30 percent. He also impounded funds that had been appropriated by the state legislature for the construction of a gymnasium at Boston and then tried to stop the medical school from occupying its new facilities. In the nasty battle that ensued, Wood saw the episode as a ploy to subvert the fiscal autonomy and independence of the public university and to bring it under the excessive control of the executive branch of state government. He wound up taking Dukakis to court, won the case, and thus restored the principle of fiscal autonomy as well as most of the budget cuts.

U. S. District Court Judge W. Arthur Garrity named Wood to head the Citywide Coordinating Council that oversaw the desegregation of the Boston public schools. That post led to his appointment as superintendent from 1978 to 1980. The school system was still reeling from the rioting and violence caused by court-ordered desegregation, which had begun in 1974. Wood promptly set about streamlining the central office and delegating administrative functions to nine community district superintendents. In disputes arising over spending and his refusal to meet patronage demands, he lost the support of the School Committee, which fired him on charges of “negligent administration” half way through his four-year term.

Finding a soft landing at UMass Boston, Wood taught in its political science department from 1981 to 1983. He then joined the faculty at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, where he held the Henry R. Luce Professorship of Democratic Institutions and the Social Order. In this period, he wrote two books: *Remedial Law* in 1990 and *Whatever Possessed the President?* in 1993. Neither of them could have been written if Wood the social scientist had not also been Wood the public official.

Our paths crossed again for a third time in 1994 when he returned to UMass Boston as a visiting fellow at the McCormack Institute of Public Affairs. As director of the graduate program, I invited him to address our graduating class that year. By way of professional advice, he offered our graduates five basic rules: (1) Take care of your own; (2) Keep your hand out of the cookie jar; (3) Make commitments very, very carefully but once made, keep them scrupulously; (4) If you “blast” someone, tell her or him first; and (5) Never do a favor for an enemy. Put more concisely, no disloyalty, no dishonesty, no vascillating, no blindsiding, and no hypocrisy. He concluded his remarks by reminding the graduates of two principles attributed to John F. Kennedy: “Civility is not a sign of weakness. Sincerity is always subject to proof.”

In 1995, I had the distinct privilege of co-authoring with Wood a study of public higher education in Massachusetts. It was entitled, *Turnabout Time*. We recommended major changes in the way the state financed education, in the curricula offerings, in the way it used technology, in the criteria applied to evaluate and reward faculty, in the standards used to judge student progress, and in the patterns of collaboration between the public campuses and those in the private sector. Our report rattled the status quo and shook up the university community, especially the faculty. The ideas themselves mattered, but they left the system buzzing with unsettling notions that challenged the old guard. In short, the public university was not yet ready to turn itself around. Even so, Wood remained steadfastly loyal in his support of UMass until his death.

It is as a teacher, motivator, and mentor that Bob Wood's legacy endures. In an age in which academics carefully husband their time, preoccupied by the demands of research and teaching, the door to his office was always open to students, colleagues, friends, and those in search of advice and assistance. He had a remarkable way of helping people understand their problems and identify an appropriate course of action. His intelligence, enthusiasm, and boundless energy sparked and illuminated many lives and careers. His love and encouragement brought out the best in many of us. His reach encompassed thousands of people, many of whom consider him their special mentor, myself included.

All in all, Bob Wood embodied the highest standards in both academia and public service. A visionary and social change agent, he had an excellent sense of the public interest that allowed him to be politically sophisticated without becoming cynical or mean-spirited. He was a Great American (to use his favorite expression) and what my father often referred to as the genuine item. His influence extended beyond a single institution, beyond the academic world, to politicians, business leaders, public administrators, and nonprofit agencies. He enjoyed a rich and diverse life, and we all benefited from his pursuit of the common good.

Marcy Murningham

My last conversation with Bob Wood was in the late afternoon of Good Friday, a week before he died. His voice sounded weak, but he was always soft-spoken — a slight lisp blurred the sharply formed phrasing. Bob was someone who could convey meaning without completing sentences, his conversation cursive, his words tamed to suit his intellect, wit, and keen sense of timing.

Our Easter exchange was like the many hundreds occurring over almost thirty years, usually involving a blend of professional and personal matters. Typical was a message Bob left for me a couple of months earlier, in February, when he thanked me for a journal I had sent him and expressed pleasure at seeing my brother Pat's name as a contributor to one of the articles. Bob was always quick to congratulate me on this or that accomplishment over the years, and he took pleasure in inquiring after my family.

I asked Bob how he felt, knowing that he wasn't doing well at all. Earlier, Peggy had told me that he was rapidly losing ground. Bob matter-of-factly glossed over the state of his health during our chat, but did tell me that son Frank was there at his side, taking time out from his successful acting career to help with things. Frank resides in New York City and is usually working on one production or another, both stage and film, most famously coming to public attention with his Tony-winning performance in *Sideman*. Daughters Maggie and Franny had been there, to, and Maggie, now a state legislator in New Hampshire, was due back that Easter weekend.

Bob, as usual, turned the conversation to me, asking how I was doing. My answer was rote, my mind racing, my heart breaking. I said I was fine, that I was soon heading to California to the annual conference of the Council on Foundations. He asked me who was head of the Council these days, was so-and-so still there, and recalled an earlier time when he knew the leadership. This form of summarizing "who's in" and "who's out" was a staple of many of our chats, a kind of professional score-keeping, a way of gauging whether or not one was still in the game or on the sidelines.

I told him that this trip had special meaning, as I would be there when the Council bestowed the annual Paul Ylvisaker award to a foundation displaying leadership in public policy engagement. Ylvisaker, who died in 1994, was my doctoral advisor at Harvard, the man who, in 1983, ushered me into the work I still do, and the man responsible, in 1976, for introducing me to Bob Wood, two gifts for which I remain eternally grateful. "Isn't that great," I said to Bob, "that there's an award named for Paul?"

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“Good for Paul,” he added dryly, three-words that captured perfectly the mix of affection, competitiveness, and envy he held for his comrade of many decades, a man who, in many respects, was his closest personal friend. My memory is full of dozens of Paul / Bob stories, some experienced first-hand, others recounted by one or the other, going back to their post-War doctoral student days in Harvard’s Littauer program in political science.

“Give me a call when you return, so you can tell me all about your trip,” he said, repeating this instruction a couple of times. I said I’d call him as soon as I returned.

As it turned out, I was in San Diego on April 11, at the same time Bob’s memorial service was underway at the Cathedral Church of St. Paul in downtown Boston. While heartsick that I could not be there, I drew some comfort in the knowledge that both Paul and Bob’s presence was felt, in both material and spiritual form. Indeed, one of the handouts distributed to the foundation attendees was an article written by Paul Ylvisaker years ago, in the beginning of which he recounts an anecdote featuring his old friend Bob Wood. Cosmic symmetry, that.

I first met Bob Wood in 1976, during my second semester in the doctoral program at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education. At the time, I was serving as one of three research assistants to an urban policy seminar group that was hoping to hammer out an agenda for consideration by the incoming Carter or Ford administration and enable the Department of Housing and Urban Development to continue to operate as the lead agent in revitalizing the urban core.

Not yet ten years old, HUD was born in the crucible of violence and idealism that were the particular characteristics of the Lyndon Johnson years. Bob Wood was midwife to this Cabinet office, bringing his remarkable blend of academic and administrative acumen to bear. Among other achievements, he was the architect of Model Cities, a federal program that provided financial assistance to cities and towns, including my home town of Lansing Michigan.

Knowing of my own keen interest in cities and politics (my dad was mayor of Lansing), in 1976, Paul Ylvisaker, then the Ed School’s Dean, suggested I “go see Bob Wood.” Paul knew that Bob was not only an “*urbanist*” (a term Bob preferred to the more clumsy “urban planner”), but an “*institutionalist*,” one who recognized that our world is profoundly shaped by the governance and operation of institutions — bureaucratic inventions that can do great damage if not managed well and wisely. Bob Wood knew that in addition to knowledge of public policy, effective public leadership demands a knowledge of administrative theory and practice, as well as a historical sense of human aspirations and failings,

such as one might see in the sputtering efforts of the War on Poverty, or, later on, court-ordered school desegregation.

By 1978, Bob had left his post as president of UMass after a well-publicized disagreement with Dukakis over funding to public higher education. He was ensconced at the Harvard-MIT Joint Center for Housing, which then occupied a yellow house on Church Street not far from the Ed School. At the time, Bob was “in transition,” a phrase that did not do justice to his ever-restless search for the next big challenge, his hyperkinetic mind engaged with many projects, all devoted in some way to the public interest.

I recall my first meeting with Bob at the Joint Center, which marked the beginning of a relationship that was to last twenty-nine years, one characterized by shared values and commitments, experiences and, to some degree, losses. A few days after the encounter at the Joint Center, Bob gave me a slim hand-bound copy of an oration he had given at Faneuil Hall, on the 192nd anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Entitled “Urban Independence,” Bob’s remarks were in the rhetorical company of a stellar lot — Edward M. Kennedy, Clare Booth Luce, John F. Kennedy, Louis D. Brandeis, Edward Everett Hale, Henry Cabot Lodge, Samuel Eliot, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Horace Mann, Josiah Quincy, John Quincy Adams, and so on — going back to 1783. He inscribed it “For Marcy Murningham, Who, in her own way, has shared and supported the beliefs we talked of then,” Bob’s way of prodding me push harder in the face of setbacks.

For the next twenty-nine years, the beliefs he articulated in that oration — that the democratic experience was an unfolding project; that the system of divided powers, dedication to procedure, commitment to majority action and individual worth was under constant challenge; that the values of equality and justice needed to be extended to all members of society, particularly those left behind; that our urban areas demanded regional governance and certain forms of decentralized authority; that the courts and public agencies needed to respond to the poor as well as the rich; and that public education was a prerequisite to an engaged and informed electorate — animated my professional life, as I watched them animate Bob’s.

After a short stint as a senatorial candidate in the summer of 1978 for Ed Brook’s seat, Bob accepted the offer to become superintendent of the Boston Public Schools. The first non-School Department superintendent to be hired in sixty-six years, Bob’s appointment by the then-elected five-person School Committee was met with hope and enthusiasm among liberals and blacks. Here was a man who had served as a Cabinet officer and a Washington insider, who had honed his skills as a player in the burly politics of public administration, coming in to help rescue the public schools from a community riven by resentments of class and race, and a federal court saddled with the responsibility for redressing constitutional violations. Bob became

superintendent when the city was still in turmoil. Many white parents refused to send their children to the public schools or, if they did, worried about the dangers associated with compulsory cross-town busing and violation of neighborhood solidarity.

Like a boxer in training for the next big fight, Bob, who once boxed in the Golden Glove tournament, relished the opportunity to put his experience and skills to work. His worry beads and Greek fisherman's hat would now grace 26 Court Street, the Boston Public School central administration building and a fortress for the traditions and rituals of this encrusted bureaucracy.

His was a reform mandate that included the reorganization of the administrative structure of the School Department. The already politicized and polarized Department found itself subject not only to the will of the elected School Committee and its constituents, but also to the jurisdiction of the U.S. District Court and the multiple legal parties with standing in the case. The managerial task was to reform a public agency with power dispersed across the executive, legislative, and judicial branches.

I accompanied Bob the day after his appointment when he entered 26 Court Street. We visited each floor, Bob extending his hand to managers and staff, greeting them as if he were on a campaign trail. Ever conscious of balancing BPS "insiders" with those he recruited from the outside, Bob began his tenure as superintendent much like he had begun earlier, more prominent public roles: as chief executive AND thinker, a public intellectual who never forsook his academic roots, nor his early years in the U.S. Office of Management and Budget, a bureaucrat with brains and brawn.

Those two years were the most intense of my life, the multiple challenges and excitement unforgettable. Bob's dramatic experience as superintendent recounts a chapter in Boston's history far different from today. Throughout those years, and the years that followed, Bob insisted on loyalty as the greatest of virtues, held high expectations and standards for those around him (he did not suffer fools lightly), delighted in instructing senior staff on the proper written use of the English language (his instructive memos on the topic are priceless), understood the theatrics that dominate public life, clashed with strong personalities that matched his own, wrote prolifically, displayed boundless energy for mentoring students and apprentices, and demonstrated a keen sense of current events and command of history. Amid all of this, Bob was quick to take pleasure in his family, recounting the latest story about Peggy, Franny, Maggie, and Frank.

Bob's legacy as a public intellectual, a *thinker*, a *writer*, a *teacher*, a *doer*, and an *institutionalist*, serves as a beacon to those who care about the wise use of power in pursuit of the American civic ideal. From his humble beginnings in Jacksonville, Florida (born in St. Louis to a shoe salesman and

fourth-grade school teacher and the youngest of three sons, Bob's family moved to Florida when he was seventeen months old), to his later days in Wesleyan, Connecticut and finally back in Boston, Bob's life made the lives of many others better, including mine. He will be missed, greatly.