

Opening and Closing Remarks of Bill Monroe
Ross M. Lence Memorial Service
December 1, 2006
A.D. Bruce Religion Center
University of Houston

Greetings and Salutations. And welcome one and all to this Service honoring the memory of Ross Lence, our distinguished and distinctive colleague and friend.

Before we go further we should acknowledge the presence here of some of Ross's influential supporters at the University, Harrell Rogers, dean of Social Sciences and Chair of Political Science, who helped raise funds for the Ross M. Lence Distinguished Teaching Chair, Kent Tedin, Chair of Political Science during Ross's long tenure as Director of Undergraduate Studies in the Department, John Antell, dean of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, who supported Ross's promotion to full professor, and Donald Lutz, who brought Ross to Houston in 1971 and remained his ardent supporter and alter ego for 35 years. There are dozens, if not hundreds, of other distinguished colleagues, former students, and friends of the good doctor whom we could also acknowledge, but there is one person here whom we simply must recognize, the most important person in Ross's life: his mother, Nickie Lence.

You will see in your program the names of a very few of the many persons who might well be up here to remember and pay tribute to Ross. I invite you to think of those on the program as living synecdoches, as parts that represent the whole. We will speak individually, but it would be more Lencian if we could all appear at once, as a Greek chorus representing the entire City, dancing back and forth in strophe and antistrophe, singing songs of praise and lamentation for our lost friend. I'm sure that Ross, if he could have his way, would dress us in togas, as he did the students in his Greek Theater courses, and invite us to partake of appropriate libations in true Symposium style.

But then Ross was always one to break out of the frame, to resist conventions and conventionality. He was, by nature, an adversary of received knowledge and conventional wisdom. If there was a prevailing academic or intellectual wind, you would find him close-hauled, tacking against it. He was a shape-shifter, a trickster, and his positions and oppositions were unpredictable and

disorienting. A colleague and mutual friend said that for over a decade he thought Lence was a liberal Jew from Chicago, Illinois, only to discover that he was a libertarian Catholic from White Fish, Montana.

A libertarian Catholic—and what, the hell, is that? -- would probably not be drawn to Ralph Waldo Emerson's smug Gnosticism, but certainly Lence embodied the Emersonian notion that true education begins with provocation. He was a natural antagonist, like Jesus and Socrates, and it's a wonder he didn't meet the same fate.

He was also a natural teller of stories and maker of parables. Parables not in the sense of "earthly stories with a heavenly meaning," manageable nuggets of wisdom; but parables in the sense of baffling narratives that leave you scratching your head and wondering about the myths you've been living by. My first clear recollection of Lence was when he came to visit the old Honors Program, in the basement of the library, some 20 years ago. I was out of sight in my office and overheard his conversation—I say conversation, but it sounded more like the rantings of a lunatic. After he left, I crept out to assess the damage. The entire office staff had been stirred up, which was, of course, Lence's intention.

"Um, who was that?" I asked Ted [Estess, Dean of the University of Houston Honors College], trying to make the question seem offhand, in case this guy was friend, when really what I wanted to know was, "How did he get that way?" and "Has he been diagnosed?"

"That was Professor Lence," came the reply. "From Political Science."

"Was he serious," I asked, "or was he just kidding around?"

Ted's answer did little to alleviate my puzzlement: "Yes," he said, "he was."

Shortly thereafter, this strange man was in front of 400-500 freshly scrubbed teenagers and their apprehensive parents at a student recruiting event, the Fall Honors Banquet. I was seated at a table with a dear honors colleague, a great teacher in his own right and also mad as a hatter, who had just returned to campus after a 2-year stint at Berkeley. Before closing with one of his favorite Latin prayers, "The Prayer of St. Cecilia,"—in itself a provocative gesture on the campus of a Texas state university—this Lence fellow told a story about a woman who had come up after one of the perplexing performances that passed for a lecture on

American Political Thought. The student was obviously upset and accosted him by saying:

“Don’t you realize that the CIA is killing people in Argentina?”

And Lence said that he replied, “I certainly hope so, Madam. That’s what I’m paying them for.”

Well, I’m not sure what the student’s response was, but I certainly didn’t know what to make of it; and I remember the look of consternation on the face of my colleague, a look that seemed to say, “That’s not the sort of story you hear in Bay Area.”

We who love Lence are inclined to forget how many students experienced that same consternation, and with it often a sense of exasperation and rage. The displacement that Lence was trying for, the confusion that he fomented, troubled the hell out of many goal-oriented students. They wanted him to give them answers; instead he asked them questions and told them disturbing parables. But beneath the provocation was a bedrock of concern that eventually made itself known. And once persons realized that the good Dr. Lence had their best interest at heart, that he would do anything to help them along in their journey, they became devotees, Lencians, members of the entourage.

We are going to hear tributes from several such Lencians, students whose lives were changed by their coming into contact with the Reasonable Mr. Lence. And we are going to hear from several colleagues who, like me, had the misfortune of having to wait a bit longer for his disorienting and beneficent provocations.

First there is Susan Collins, a colleague of Ross’s in Political Science, and Ed Willems, who team-taught a knowledge-integration “City” course with Ross for many years. Then we will have a musical interlude, with Judah and Bethany Johns, Houston Honors College students, followed by a reading of Ross’s own teaching philosophy by Andy Little, a former student who is an academic advisor and instructor in the Human Situation course. Tom Kirkendall, Orlando Sanchez, and Jeff Dodd, all former students, will remember their teacher, and Ted Estess will read the eulogy that he presented at Ross’s Requiem Mass in July.

First, then, Professor Susan Collins.

In closing, it is now time to adjourn to The Honors College, where there will be an extended reception for friends and colleagues of our friend and colleague. Through the diligence of Nancy McCaslin and Brenda Rhoden, we have quite a few samples of Ross's favorite foods: a large round of brie, dozens and dozens of mini orange rolls, apple and cherry fruit pies, lemon chiffon cakes, carrot cakes, peanut butter blossom cookies baked from Nickie's recipe, a nice paté with cocktail bread, special loaves from Ross's favorite bakery, and a very unusual cake baked in the shape of a white fish as a remembrance of Ross's home town in Montana. And maybe, just maybe, in Ross's old office, some of you may find a sampling of Lencian, that is to say, strictly illicit, libations. The Memorial Service is now concluded.

Gaudeamus!