Eulogy for Myers

The following is a tribute to the late Sam Myers given by history instructor Myron Marty at a memorial service held for Myers on May 8.

It is my privilege to speak on behalf of the larger family of which Sam was a part — the Florissant Valley community of faculty, staff and students.

It is natural to ask why Sam meant so much to so many of us. Some might think it was because of his fatherly bearing. It wasn’t that. Even though he was in many respects our senior, we never regarded him as anything like a patriarch. We never even thought of him as older than the rest of us. He never acted his age. Nor was it his wisdom that attracted us to him, although we appreciated it, and we shall miss it. It was not his persistence or sense of responsibility or his uncommon decency, either, though these were surely valued qualities.

I believe he meant so much to us because he knew who he was and why he was here. He was on no great quest for his identity or for his role or niche in life. There was no pretense about his status, no burning ambition to be where he wasn’t. He was where he most wanted to be, doing what he most wanted to do.

He knew who he was. He was a husband and father and grandfather. When he introduced me to Helen nine years ago he said, “I would like to have you meet my bride.” For more than forty years she remained his bride. He spoke frequently and proudly and fondly of his children and grandchildren, and they did of him, as well.

He knew who he was. He was a friend. Kindness, consideration, good humor, readiness to help — these were his hallmarks.

He knew who he was. He was a teacher. Sam was 55 when he became a teacher. But that’s not really so. Sam was a teacher all his life. He became a classroom teacher when he was 55. Kindness and helpfulness characterized his teaching. So did patience and enthusiasm and sincerity and radiating warmth, all of which inspired a love for learning in his students.

For the past three years I have shared an office with Sam. There was a bad side to being his office partner. For one thing, he was always there. It took special effort to arrive at the office in the morning before he did and special endurance to outlast him at the end of the day. There wasn’t much time alone in the office.

For another, the flow of students coming to see him was probably the heaviest in the division. Students wanting to give him papers, to go over a test, to make up a missed assignment, to study maps, to talk over summer plans, to share experiences, to show him pictures. And it wasn’t just students who were currently enrolled in his classes. Former students, as well, checked in with him regularly, just to keep in touch, and future students, too, sought him out for suggestions on how to work his classes into their schedules. He spent hours with students, exhibiting the kind of patience and interest and understanding I could only admire, but never emulate.

But we shared more than an office. We shared ideas. We discussed mutual and individual concerns. We talked about families, about books, about historical and contemporary questions. We contemplated the past and speculated on the future. We explored values and beliefs. We discussed the churches to which we belonged and their teachings and their effects on our lives. In effect, we shared our lives.

As I reflect on the hours of conversations I had with Sam I am reminded of a line from Zorba — a line I feel quite certain we discussed several years ago after “Zorba the Greek” played on our campus. Contemplating an old man he knew, Zorba remarked with wonderment: “Him? He acts like he’s going to live forever. Me? I live like I’m going to die tomorrow.”

Sam acted like he was going to live forever.

And yet, he lived like life was too short. He had to pack a whole new career into a decade, as he had done in several earlier careers. There was no time to waste, no opportunity to be missed. And so he set a pace that makes it natural for us to say that he worked himself to death. Nonsense, Sam would say. It’s underwork that kills, not overwork. He worked hard because he wanted to, not because he had to. He thrived on work.

Wha, a shame, we say, that Sam lived to be only 64 years old. And so it was. But how wonderful that he managed to pack all that living into those 64 years.

Of course Sam died too soon. The world needs more men like Sam Myers, not less. But we are reminded, too, that the influence of good teachers and good friends does not die when they do. Only when we do. The influence of Sam will live in many of us for a long time. He has left us a large legacy. We are in his debt. He’ll not be forgotten by those whose lives he touched.