

Memorial Remarks
Rockefeller Chapel
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There is a Yogi Berraism – I first heard it attributed to the anthropologist Clifford Geertz rather than to Yogi – which goes as follows: “So many people are dying these days who have never died before!”

In my view one time is one too many, especially for those of us who took it for granted that Bert Cohler must have been right there in Hyde Park when the University of Chicago opened for classes in 1892 and who assumed he would still be here teaching courses in the College Core sequence and holding up the fort into some indefinite future, and beyond.

Bert was certainly very much here when I first arrived in the fall of 1973. I never met Bert’s parents. Bertrand Russell once remarked in the course of a philosophical argument about nominalism and realism that “just because we each have a mother does not mean there is a mother of us all.” In that regard Bert was a realist and he was very good at convincing everyone in what was then known as the Committee on Human Development (and is now known as the Department of Comparative Human Development) that Bernice Neugarten was the mother of us all. Indeed that she was the great mother goddess of the University of Chicago. My early recollections of Bert are his many stories about Bernice – the phone calls he would receive from her at 3:00 in the morning and the expectation he created by telling that story that in Human Development in particular and at the University of Chicago more broadly the life of mind was a twenty-four hour a day calling, and should never be viewed or experienced as a nine to five job. He was tireless in his curiosity, in his teaching, in his research interests, which ranged from the mental resiliency of the child in the face of sick environments to the role of narratives in giving meaning to a life and as explanatory forms in the social sciences more broadly to questions of gender (especially gay) identity and sexuality.

In the early days he would pick me up and we would drive downtown for colloquies at the Center for Psychosocial Studies organized by Bob LeVine and focused on the theories of Heinz Kohut and psychoanalytic studies of the self. He taught many of us how to worry about the fate of our (as we love to put it “unique”) intellectual tradition, and to fear the mainstreaming of our against the current and maverick University of Chicago cast of mind. He loved to gossip, and always seemed to be on the inside of all the action, in almost every corner of the Hyde Park.

He was also a brilliant black marketeer, which is the way we in Human Development fondly and with admiration think of the role he played over several decades in assisting countless graduate students who had an interest not only in mental health research but in

acquiring clinical experience and clinical psychology certification gain access to internships and externship in hospitals and clinics around the city. When it came to the institutional worlds in the city of Chicago concerned with mental health Bert seemed to know everyone; and he was generous beyond belief in the time he dedicated to assisting his students.

It is very hard for many of us to imagine the department without Bert. He was the member of a very special club of autochthonous University of Chicago faculty – those who rose up out of the soil of Hyde Park and whose blood is not just red, but Maroon.

He always said he would die in the saddle – and so he did. I know we would all like to see him back on the horse, where he belongs. The sense of the presence of his absence is very powerful but so is his spirit, which I am sure will animate the work and lives of all those students he touched. The outpouring of affection and expressions of loss from his students around the country are a testament to his legend. Of course there is so much more to say. Go well Bert, knowing we will all try our best to carry forward your sense of intellectual and moral mission.