

Friend of Freedom

The spirit of Michael Novak.

BY CHRISTOPHER DEMUTH SR.

Early morning on February 17, word was getting around that Michael Novak had passed away in his sleep, and email klatsches were forming. In mine, one of his close friends wrote that “the generosity of Michael’s friendship allowed him to obscure the fact that he was among the few truly great men that any of us have known.” We all piled on with fervent assents. That a man of such towering achievements should also be a down-home, kindly friend (even “cuddly,” discerning women would attest) was so unusual that we had pretended he was just one of the guys.

Which is not to say that Michael was modest. He wrote more than 40 books and countless essays on everything under the sun and many things beyond the sun. He promoted his ideas assiduously, through 50 years of nonstop lecturing, debating, and classroom teaching and in everyday small-talk that never stayed small when he was around. He was driven by a firm conviction that he was in possession of singular talents for educating and improving mankind. Early in my time as president of the American Enterprise Institute, I told Michael that he had exactly 12 minutes, not a minute more, to summarize his current work for a gathering of trustees and donors. He cheerfully agreed and then, as he warmed up at the podium, spoke for 50 minutes (on baseball and American democracy) to a rapt and appreciative audience.

And Michael was ardent for recognition and honors—which, among friends, he never bothered to conceal, treating praise simply as evidence that his labors were indeed moving the world. As he lay dying, a visitor

noticed that his daughter, Jana, was reading him the numerous emails she was receiving attesting to his great works and influence. *Enough testimonials*, the visitor interjected, *it is time to turn to larger matters*. Michael mustered a smile and said: *No, no, read them all!* Which was his way of telling everyone assembled that the Novakian spirit they knew and loved was still burning strong.

Michael’s combination of ambition and friendliness was more than personal disposition. His thinking and writing, too, were at once aggressive and gentle, tough-minded and irenic. This was an expression of his intellectual position and Catholic faith—as I tried to explain in remarks at a dinner in honor of Michael on his retirement from AEI in 2010, printed below. Here let me elaborate with words of his own.

Michael was a Reagan Democrat, proud of his ethnic (Slovak-American) roots and upbringing in working-class Johnstown, Pennsylvania. In the 1970s, his intellectual migration from left to right was inspired by the left’s (and the Democratic party’s) abandonment of working-class sentiments and aspirations for a new-age progressivism that he regarded as utopian and effete. Accordingly, his conservatism was sinewy, and distinctly non-libertarian. Human freedom, for Michael, was not an abstract good but rather a social artifact—the fruit of lived experience, grounded in family and community, and demanding continuous struggle against the forces of moral entropy. Democratic capitalism is the preferred political system for more than its palpable material benefits: It is the most auspicious arena for the incarnate struggles among groups and nations and within the human heart. Economic prosperity is evidence that the struggles are going well for the

time being. “Free to choose,” when we gain it, is an obligation.

I thought of Novak the Reagan Democrat last election night, November 8, 2016, when the early returns from western Pennsylvania were beginning to upset expectations of a Hillary Clinton triumph. (Johnstown’s Cambria County, heavily Democratic in party registration, went 66 percent for Donald Trump.) In my political set, sharply divided between Trump supporters and opponents, we had learned to be circumspect about election preferences—but when I reached Michael he was bluntly at the barricades. “If America is going to come apart into those who went to college and those who did not,” he said, “I want to be with the folks who did not go to college.”

I did not question Michael in any detail, but am certain that he was not rooting for the Trumpsters as if they were the Steelers. I think he regarded the Trump revolt as the rough-hewn, extravagantly flawed, internally conflicted agency of freedom in its latest struggle. But in Michael’s conception the struggle is a noble one, because freedom is at once contingent and divine, and it can succeed only by attaching itself to human goodness. That is the teaching of the stem-winding conclusion of his address at Westminster Abbey on receiving the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion in 1994:

No one ever promised us that free societies will endure forever. Indeed, a cold view of history shows that submission to tyranny is the more frequent condition of the human race, and that free societies have been few in number and not often long-lived. Free societies such as our own, which have arisen rather late in the long evolution of the human race, may pass across the darkness of time like splendid little comets, burn into ashes, disappear.

Yet nothing in the entire universe, vast as it is, is as beautiful as the human person. The human person alone is shaped to the image of God. This God loves humans with a love most powerful. It is this God who draws us, erect and free, toward Himself, this God Who, in Dante’s words, *is the Love that moves the sun / and all the stars*.

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Michael was one of the last remaining (a few are still with us) of those giants who collaborated directly with Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and Pope John Paul II on the great liberal achievements of the 1980s—the defeat of Soviet communism

and the expansion of economic freedom and prosperity in much of the West and beyond. Today we are once again beset by violent totalitarianism, economic stagnation, angry social divisions, and an abundance of unpleasant options. Many conservatives, and

many young people, seem to think we have lost our grip and fallen away from a halcyon past. In the face of such despair, Michael Novak's legacy is that the struggle for freedom is ever present, ever changing, and ever in need of active, tough-minded idealism. ♦

' The Total Novak Phenomenon '

Michael Novak and his work during the past 35 years have been abundantly feted. Celebrants have expounded on his brilliance, his prolificacy, and his influence. But brilliance and industriousness, although highly important virtues, are not nearly as rare as the total Novak phenomenon. And influence, although highly admired, is not a virtue at all—it puts Michael in the company of Eliot Spitzer and Peter Singer. So I would like to take a different tack and remark on Michael's character, in particular his ambition and his bravery.

He spent the first 20 years of his professional life in academics. To the brilliant and industrious, university life offers wonderful opportunities for achievement and fulfillment. Michael could have continued to hold the best chairs at the best schools and to win all the teaching awards. But the academy favors work on discrete, manageable problems “in the literature” and can punish departures from certain orthodoxies. At some point in the 1970s, Michael decided that he would go after bigger game.

I have often marveled that in the midst of the Jimmy Carter administration, the hardheaded businessmen on the American Enterprise Institute's Board of Trustees would countenance the appointment of a theologian, and moreover a theologian with a colorful paper trail in left-wing politics and Democratic party electioneering. But it was Michael who took by far the greater risk in accepting the offer—throwing away tenure and respectability for God knew what (but He wasn't talking, not even to Michael).

Since then Michael's vocation has been the conquest of momentous, difficult, contentious problems. Problems with large practical and political components, where his philosophical learning provided a foundation but everything else was left to his own wits and experience. Today we recognize the moral architecture of democratic capitalism because Michael built it for us—even the terms were unknown before he and Irving Kristol started their work.

And, since publication of *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* in 1982, he has provided many elaborations and applications: on the moral architectures of economic development, of escape from the welfare trap, of nuclear deterrence, of the corporation and business-as-a-calling, and of the income tax, intellectual property, mediating structures, ethnic politics, and even sports (the last however limited to Notre Dame football). If you listen in on Michael debating the progressive income tax with a professional economist, you will get an idea of the moral clarity he has brought to questions that everyone knew to be terribly complicated and endlessly nuanced.

Along the way he has dispatched many cherished liberal

shibboleths and theological wrong-turns. In his 2001 book, *On Two Wings*, he grafted back the second wing of faith onto the long-prevailing narrative (even at AEI) of the American founding as a secular exercise in institutional ingenuity. Bravest of all, he has provided religious instruction to Ayaan Hirsi Ali.

What Michael's greatest projects have had in common is audacity. In taking them on, he was committing himself to originality, which risked failure, and to unflinching truth-telling, which risked elite derision if he succeeded. His brilliance may have given him the confidence to take the big risks; his industriousness may have been inspired by fear of failure. But they alone cannot explain what Michael achieved. They had to be coupled with guts—sheer obstinate confrontational Johnstown guts.

Michael's toughness is often masked by his sweet, magnanimous disposition. Don't be fooled. If you have watched him make a big concession in a debate, or respond sympathetically to a hostile questioner, or provide a generous account of an opposing view in a book or essay, then you know that his kindness is often the sign that serious intellectual vivisection is about to commence.

And then there's his vast philosophical mastery: He already knows Argument 27 better than the other guy, and he also knows that it is conventionally trumped by Argument 8—but he also knows that it is completely annihilated by Argument 131-C, which he derived himself 15 years ago.

But most of all, Michael's sweet magnanimity is genuine and in fact reflects the ambition and bravery of his intellectual position. For it expresses his certainty that there is good in human nature—good that calls for earnest entreaty on its own terms. Among career pundits and haut thinkers, nothing could be more politically incorrect, more embarrassingly naïve. Yet in Michael's choices of projects, and in the particulars of his arguments, one sees three overarching propositions constantly at work:

First, that man for all his failings is ardently concerned to know what is right and just.

Second, that politics for all its flaws is capable of pursuing social betterment and sometimes finding it.

Third, that reason for all its frailties can help us find our way.

To dedicate a lifetime to such propositions in late-20th-century America one had to be not only brave but downright reckless. That the endeavor has proven so astoundingly fruitful is reason to doubt the cynicism of the age and to work, as diligently as he has, for a return of the better angels.

—Christopher DeMuth, July 2010 ♦



Michael Novak