

Martin Meyerson: A Tribute

by Vartan Gregorian

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Martin was a complex person, quiet, yet determined. Self-assured but not self-centered. Ambitious but not a slave to his ambitions. He did not love power—at times he was very ambivalent about it—but he appreciated what it could accomplish. He was not obsessed with money but respected what its proper use can achieve. He loved etiquette and protocol because they provided universal yet impersonal codes of behavior. He believed in institutional authority, individual rights and responsibilities. His character was marked by a fascinating combination of idealism and pragmatism. He believed that social theories must meet the test of reality. Not unlike Thomas Jefferson, he believed that democracy needs an aristocracy of talent. High standards and excellence were his mantras because he believed that democracy and excellence should not be mutually exclusive. He believed in equal opportunity as well as meritocracy.

Martin was both cautious and daring. He broke many barriers. He proved that one did not need to have a Ph.D. to be a university president. And he opened the doors of higher education to welcome presidents who happened to be Jewish. Indeed, there was a joke going around in the 1960s and 70s that there were three famous Jewish American university heads—Martin Meyerson at Berkeley, Martin Meyerson at Buffalo, and Martin Meyerson at the University of Pennsylvania. Martin acknowledged but never allowed prejudices—whether overt or covert—to be impediments to his drive for excellence.

He opened the doors of American universities to other outsiders. In doing so, he took major risks. After all, who else would have had the audacity to appoint an Iranian-born, non-U.S. citizen to be the founding dean of Penn's Faculty of Arts and Sciences and later, on the eve of the American hostage crisis in Iran, to name him the 23rd provost of the university? I am forever indebted to him for the fact that he took that risk with me and thus launched my academic career.

Of course I am glad that I did not fail him. I am also very thankful that he was a witness when I became a U.S. citizen and even when I was chosen to be, of all things, a Son of Cincinnati, joining the descendents of George Washington's officer corps as an honorary WASP.

Martin was a great American. He was an avid internationalist. He was one of the most genuinely curious people I ever met. Everything interested him: education, history, politics, architecture, art, philosophy. His internationalism was not confined to mere membership in the International Association of Universities but manifested in an insatiable interest in the cultures and societies of many regions, from Europe, Turkey, and Iran to Japan, China Latin America and South Africa. He played a major role in the United Nations development missions in Japan and Indonesia as well as in Macedonia after the 1963 Skopje earthquake.

Martin was a visionary at a time and in a city not hospitable to visionaries. After all, Owen Wister, the famous Philadelphian who wrote *The Virginian*, said, not without a

reason, that in Philadelphia, even moderation should not be excessive. Well, Martin was excessive. He was excessive in his aspirations—for Penn, Philadelphia, and our nation.

Another attribute of Martin's was his *savoir faire*. Actually, there is a Persian word, *adab*, which is perfect to use in connection with Martin because it refers to comportment, discernment, urbanity, taste, and sophistication—all the qualities that he embodied. How many presidents of universities would ask their deans and provosts, when discussing the quality of their faculties, the following questions, among others: How many faculty members have season tickets to symphonies, operas, plays, poetry readings? What books are they reading outside of their academic specialties? What kinds of community service are they involved in? Yes, he thought Penn needed prominent experts and scholars and great teachers, but he also wanted the university to have the necessary intellectual yeast that makes a faculty great.

Martin was a great believer in pomp and circumstances. In that connection, he always rose to the occasion, even during some embarrassing situations. For example, when Martin, Margy, Clare and I, along with Professor Tom Naff, went to Egypt, Martin brought with him an invitation for President Anwar Sadat to come to Penn to receive an honorary degree. We were taken to president's residence in Alexandria only to find that many government ministers, along with reporters and television cameras, were waiting for us. Apparently, someone had mistranslated our communications and thought that instead of extending an invitation to receive an honorary degree, we were there to confer the actual degree itself. But Martin was not flustered—not at all. He presented the letter to President Sadat with all the ceremoniousness that befitted an historic occasion of great symbolism.

Martin was a person of great dignity. He saw dignity as the heart and soul of self-worth. This quality—his dignity—was particularly manifest on two occasions. First, during his and Margy's depthless suffering over the death of their beloved daughter, Laura. I saw his anguish, but during that entire painful period he fulfilled all his obligations, never letting his inner turmoil deter him from his duties. Indeed, he was always a perfect stoic and a man of duty.

The second time was during a formal dinner. On this particular night, Martin received an urgent phone call and I saw his face turn pale. He continued on with the discussion. Knowing that his mother was ill, I knew instinctively that she had died. I approached him, quietly expressed my condolences and asked if we should end the evening. He was deeply moved but he did not want to stop the conversation, neither did he make an announcement. He did not seek public sympathy for private grief.

All in all, Martin was a great leader and a man who tried to excel at everything he did in life. And he lived life fully, richly, deeply. His will to live was exceeded only by his will to give—and he gave all he had, to his family, to Penn, to Philadelphia and to our nation. All of us who knew him are tremendously grateful for having had the privilege of his company, his wisdom, his leadership, his guidance and his friendship.

Let me conclude by paying homage to Margy Meyerson, a cultivated and classy woman; a woman of many accomplishments. Margy made Martin possible. Hence, I want to

express my gratitude—indeed, the gratitude of all of us—to Margy, her two sons, Matthew and Adam. It was my privilege during the past 36 years to see them grow up to be not just good human beings but also men of great accomplishments and intellectual integrity. On this day of thanksgiving I would like to conclude my eulogy with a simple sentence: thank you Martin, for doing so much for so many for so long.