

# Commentary: Woodruff sailed a ship of his own soul, setting a course for others

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I grew to know the late Paul Woodruff as a faculty colleague in the Classics department at the University of Texas from 1990 onward. As a classical philosopher Paul would tell us that knowing is a hard thing to pin down, especially where other human beings are concerned.

I was brought to UT in 1986 to set up a major research program in Bronze Age writing systems. I held then a MacArthur ‘genius award’ that gave me four years to lay the foundations.

One eventful day in 1991 between classes, I was walking up the old wide stairways in venerable Waggener Hall. Paul was walking down. He was then head of UT’s renowned Plan II Honors program. Plan II explores the history of ideas in the arts and sciences. It was founded during the Great Depression to help UT’s best and brightest students develop first and foremost deep

reservoirs of human empathy and sympathy. That way they would never forget others in need and would change the world for the benefit of others and the good of humankind.

Paul was not only director of Plan II. He was its constant champion and quietly zealous proselytizer. He lived and breathed its spirit in his every action. His prior service as a military officer working with South Vietnamese army units gave Paul steadfast patience and resolve when the wheels of bureaucracy were broken, stuck or slow turning. In most cases, like the Viet Minh in defeating first French and then American military powers, Paul would outlast any adversaries and overcome any obstacles, because he believed deeply in the life of the mind, heart and soul and knew that resolute virtue truly was its own reward.

In the stairwell Paul made a quick sneak attack. He snared me by saying, I have heard good things about you. Would you consider teaching a Plan II junior seminar? I asked, What would that entail? He answered, "Essentially teaching a course you have taught nowhere else. You choose the topic." I said—and I still don't know why, "well, I'd like to teach something about how human beings relate to war and violence." Paul said, "Sounds good."

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Later that afternoon, I thought to myself, Why did I say that? I have now spent thirty years thinking, researching, writing, performing, and organizing events and programs bearing on these deeply human and problematical subjects. I have become what Paul was confident I could become.

In 1999 I helped Paul and Prof. Robert Abzug bring in speakers for the Liberal Arts Symposium titled How War Changes Lives. Distinguished experts discussed the oral history of black soldiers in Vietnam, modern war films, Iran Contra, the causes of PTSD in ancient times and nowadays, translating Homer for modern readers. The impact of their talks, discussion, classes and performances is still felt by attendees today, as is Paul's role in designing, founding and directing Undergraduate Studies at UT Austin.

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Paul and his wife Lucia opened their home for play readings. Paul encouraged veterans like Johnny Meyer to develop into the playwrights and writers and actors they are today. He was a model in encouraging students and colleagues to see the world as it is, good and bad, and to take time to figure out by inward exploration and outward observation how to live fully in a world that "has much good, but much less good than ill."

We are told it is hard to sum up a life. In Paul's case it is not so hard. Paul cared about others and in so doing he figured out how to sail the ship of his own soul on forbidding seas and set a course for the ships of all our lives to follow.

*Palaima is the Armstrong Centennial professor of Classics at the University of Texas. He will be inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences on Saturday, September 30.*