

Don. D. Austin

1926-2004

PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE, EMERITUS

B.A., M.A., University of Redlands; Ph.D., English, University of Washington

California State University, Fullerton from 1963 to 1987

Birth: March 8, 1926; Death: April 2, 2004

Early in the summer of 1995, I came upon Don Austin and his wife, Lois, in the Tom Bradley International Terminal at the Los Angeles Airport. I was waiting to board a flight to Europe, and the Austins were preparing to fly to England to take a hiking vacation in the Cotswolds. They had spent several vacations hiking in the United States, but this was their first hiking excursion abroad. I was not surprised to discover that Don was about to spend a few weeks walking in a gorgeous part of England because I was already aware of Don's energy and stamina. For almost two decades the English Department faculty had offices on the seventh floor of the Humanities Building, and I doubt that Don ever took the elevators. Many times each week I would encounter Don bounding up the stairs after he had taught a class on one of the lower floors of the building. Don's physical vigor was matched by the vitality he displayed as a teacher, scholar, and colleague.

Don was born in Lincoln, Nebraska, on March 8, 1926. When he was a teenager, his family moved to California, and Don subsequently attended the University of Redlands, where he earned a B.A. in economics in 1951 and an M.A. in English in 1952. Before he began work on his doctorate, he taught English at San Bernardino High School from 1954 to 1955. Don completed his Ph.D. in English at the University of Washington in 1960. Prior to joining the English Department faculty at CSUF in 1963, Don served for four years as an assistant professor of English at the University of Redlands.

On the first day of every semester Don usually walked into his classes to find every seat filled and a number of students pleading with him to make a space for them. This was not surprising because Don was a superb and engaging teacher. The courses he taught most frequently were nineteenth and twentieth century American literature, Shakespeare, and both freshman and advanced composition. I suspect most of his students would agree with the comment I heard from a student who was not an English major, but took an American literature class from Don in order to satisfy a general education requirement. He said, "there is never a dull moment in that man's class." Don was not known for allowing students to relax intellectually in his classes. He always asked many questions during his lectures, especially about the moral and ethical issues connected with the literature he was teaching. I recall one semester when I had a class scheduled in the same room in which Don had taught the previous hour. Rarely did I arrive for my class and not find Don and some of his students still in an animated discussion about the material they had covered in class that day. Not only was Don a stimulating professor, he was also unfailingly caring and cordial to his students. Many students are intimidated by having to write essays, and English composition classes are often places of stress and anxiety. Don's students repeatedly expressed gratitude for his patience and kindness in helping them to improve their writing.

Don was himself an excellent writer, and his scholarly articles displayed the fluency of his prose and his literary insights. He was interested in writers from England and Ireland as well as from the United States, and his published work focused on a diverse group of people including

William Shakespeare, John Keats, George Bernard Shaw, James Joyce, E. M. Forster, Herman Melville, and Nathaniel West. Don also presented papers at academic and professional conferences and to groups on campus. In the early years of the university, there was a noon lecture series open to students and faculty, and Don's presentations were among the most popular. One of Don's favorite activities at school was to discuss literature with his colleagues, often during conversations at lunch. He frequently would resort to the same Socratic method he used in class by asking a provocative question based on some literary work. I can think of no other colleague who could more easily and effectively prompt a robust debate about Hamlet, Macbeth, or Ahab.

Don was an expert at fostering stimulating and healthy argument both in and out of the classroom, and he knew how to make such discussion educationally beneficial. He was equally committed to establishing an atmosphere of harmony, especially among his faculty colleagues. Early in its history, the English Department faculty wrote a constitution that would ensure the fair and equal treatment of all members in such matters as course rotation, the scheduling of classes, the formation of committees, and the delegation of responsibilities in the governance of the department. Many of the basic democratic principles of the document were the result of Don's contributions, and they allowed the English Department, which was one of the largest on the campus, to deal with numerous practical necessities in an impartial and consistent manner. The energy that Don devoted to establishing a humane culture in the English Department was also apparent in his service to the general university, principally his membership on the International Education Committee and on the Faculty Council (now known as the Faculty Senate).

After Don retired in 1987, I always looked forward to seeing him at English Department holiday parties or at the retirement celebrations for other colleagues. It allowed me once again to enjoy the refreshing company of a man who was always candid, witty, and unfailingly decent. I know that countless students and fellow faculty members share the fondness and admiration I feel for Don Austin.

Submitted by

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