

On Visiting Professor Shimony

Memories of the Philosophy Department

BY STEVEN KARBANK (CAS '79)

Professor Abner Shimony in 1968, his blackboard—as usual—filled with equations

It has been twenty-four years since I graduated from Boston University, and over the years I have followed the careers of a number of my old professors. Some have produced work of great importance and have achieved notoriety and renown. Others disappeared from the academic radar screen to pursue other occupations. From time to time I would read the obituary of one of my professors with sadness and lament: Peter Bertocci, Sigmund Koch, Marx Wartofsky. Sadness for obvious reasons. Lament for having left something undone and unsaid.

About nine or ten years ago I ran into Professor Wartofsky, one of my philosophy professors, on the street in New York City. He had left BU some years earlier to teach at City College. He was as I had remembered him: enormously engaging, ready for laughter, kind spirited, warm hearted, the long black and gray wavy hair combed straight back, the thick five o'clock shadow, the baggy pants and jacket. He was even carrying the same type of worn expandable

briefcase he had carried around in the old days, the kind with the leather and brass clasp that folds over the top. He told me about his work, his new wife and young child. Marx then was in his early sixties. Seeing him was life-affirming. I had been both a student of his and a teaching assistant, and his character left a deep impression on me. He had a streetwise but exceptionally warm, New York, Jewish intelligence. His name fit him well. If his parents had given him any other name, I could well imagine him adopting the pen name Marx Wartofsky, in self-mocking good humor.

When I saw his obituary in the *New York Times* a few years later, I wished I had told him how much I appreciate what he taught me. Not any specific material or subject, but rather his attitude about life: that it is to be lived with energy, engagement, commitment, and a sense of humor.

More and more I felt the urge to contact other professors to express my gratitude and, in some cases, to clear up a few out-

standing issues. I had heard that Professor Erazim Kohak, another of my philosophy professors, had moved back to his native Prague to teach at Charles University, so I e-mailed him. In addition to my primary message, I reminded him that I owe him a chainsaw. I once visited him at his farmhouse in New Hampshire and didn't follow his instructions on how to properly operate his chainsaw when cutting logs for firewood. Somehow I managed to short-out the motor.

He replied to my message a few days later, and part of his response addressed the chainsaw issue. "Alas," he wrote, "since I now live in an apartment in an urban housing project in my native Prague, I have no use for a chainsaw, but much appreciate your kind words." I felt better, though I still feel I owe him a chainsaw.

Becoming reacquainted with Professor Kohak after so many years was engaging and heart-warming, even if it was done in a simple e-mail exchange. There was nothing mawkish or sentimental about it; rather, it

gave me a sense of connectedness, a reminder of having learned from him to think more clearly.

The next professor I contacted is someone I had met on my very first day of classes at Boston University in the fall of 1975. I had enrolled in his class on a lark. It turned out to be a life-changing experience. My reacquaintance with him these many years later confirmed that for me.



I took a standard complement of freshman courses during my first semester in Boston, including Philosophical Inquiry. The course catalog indicated that it was to be taught by Professor Abner Shimony, who had earned a B.A. and M.A. at Yale and Ph.D.s at Yale and Princeton, and who had been a tenured professor at MIT in philosophy and physics. That raised pretty high expectations, but one learns quickly in college that intellect and academic success aren't always paired up with a good nature, optimism, teaching skills, and the ability to inspire. I recall a classics professor of mine at another university who had an impeccable English public school and Oxbridge background but was profoundly close-minded, snobbish and utterly lacking in redeemable human qualities. Not so Professor Shimony.



Professor Marx Wartofsky in 1970



Professor Erazim Kohak in 1991, before he left BU's Philosophy Department to return to his native Prague

From the moment he walked into the lecture hall, it was clear there was something extraordinary about him. First of all, he looked the part of a philosopher/physicist. He wore thick black glasses, one pair for distance and another for reading, one of which he always seemed to misplace. He changed them from moment to moment, at once to read a passage from a book and then to look out into the lecture hall. He wore hearing aids in both ears and would cup his hand behind an ear when a question was asked. He wore black pants, a white shirt, and nondescript dark ties, and he showed a paunch characteristic of one whose primary form of exercise is energetic traverses between episodes of intellectual curiosity.

What was most striking, though, was his smile: irrepressible, ever-present and infectious, almost goofy, but sublimely joyful and genuine. It reflected his joyous (and knowledgeable) appreciation of the universe and of the irony of the human condition. That sounds like hyperbole, but it expresses

the essence of Professor Shimony.

The first day of class he wrote on the blackboard the aims of the course (as I wrote them in my notebook):

- 1) To develop intellectual skills:
 - a. Reading
 - b. Logic
 - c. Analysis of meaning
 - d. Synthesis of global organization
- 2) Introduction to various points of view
- 3) To enhance a sense of wonder about the world

These aims were a fine introduction to philosophy. But could there be a better or simpler approach to *thinking* than this? Or to living? And this was my first day of college!

As I look back, I realize that Professor Shimony met those aims to an astonishing degree. I say this not because I've become a brilliant philosopher, which I haven't, or



Professor Wartofsky in his early years, in 1962

that my thinking has been honed to an exceptional degree, which it hasn't. But rather that Professor Shimony, to use an automotive metaphor, put the spark plugs in the engine. He encouraged and enhanced a sense of wonder about the world.

I was so taken by Professor Shimony and what he taught that two weeks into class, I transferred my enrollment from the School of Management to the College of Liberal Arts (now the College of Arts and Sciences) and declared philosophy as my major. Shortly thereafter I asked Professor Shimony to be my faculty advisor. Fortunately, he agreed.



Though I had been back to Boston many times since graduating from BU in 1979, I had never contacted Professor Shimony. But last fall, having reason to be in Boston, I called BU, obtained his e-mail address (he is Professor Emeritus now, but still stops by the campus occasionally), and sent him a message. I received a prompt reply. It had the Shimony wit: "It was good to hear from you. I shall try to reach you at your mobile phone—the next best thing to telepathy!" He invited me to his home in suburban Boston. I told him I'd rent a car and drive out to see him, but he wouldn't hear of it;

he said he'd pick me up at the trolley station, about a fifteen minute drive from his house. He'd rather I use the money I would have spent on the rental for more beneficial purposes, he said.

In the car on the way to his house he filled me in on the significant events of his life since I last saw him. Despite his many professional accomplishments, he spoke primarily about his family. The death of his beloved first wife, a long-time professor at Wellesley College, was a deep blow to him. Some years after her passing, he met by coincidence his teenage sweetheart and subsequently married her. A few years later she succumbed to cancer. His voice trembled while telling of his losses.

He also spoke about his sons—Ethan, a biochemist whom I was privileged to meet that day, and Jonathan, a painter and illustrator in Paris who illustrated Abner's children's book *Tibaldo and the Hole in the Calendar*, a copy of which I brought along with me for Abner to inscribe to my son.

When we arrived at his house, we sat around the dining room table. The conversation was easy and wide-ranging, moving from Boston University to the state of world affairs, philosophy, physics, personal histories, art, natural history, the art of translation, and many other topics. I was intrigued to hear of his early years growing up in Memphis.

We talked about various BU folks, mostly philosophy professors. Though it was fashionable at BU in the late 70s to disparage the University and feel a (then



Professor Shimony and the author, Steven Karbank, in 1979, Karbank's senior year at BU.

somewhat justifiable) sense of inferiority by virtue of the nearby big name institutions, the Philosophy Department was of very high caliber. The luminaries included not just Shimony, Wartofsky, and Kohak, but Alasdair MacIntyre, Peter Bertocci, John Findlay, Robert Cohen, and Sigmund Koch.

I asked him what was new in physics. When I was a student, I would sit in occasionally on his graduate-level physics courses, intrigued more by Shimony than the rigors of the subject. The physics was way over my head, and I had only the most rudimentary understanding of the mathematics with which he filled the blackboard, but for a few brief moments of each class, I was able to glean insight into—as one of his courses was entitled—the philosophical implications of quantum mechanics.

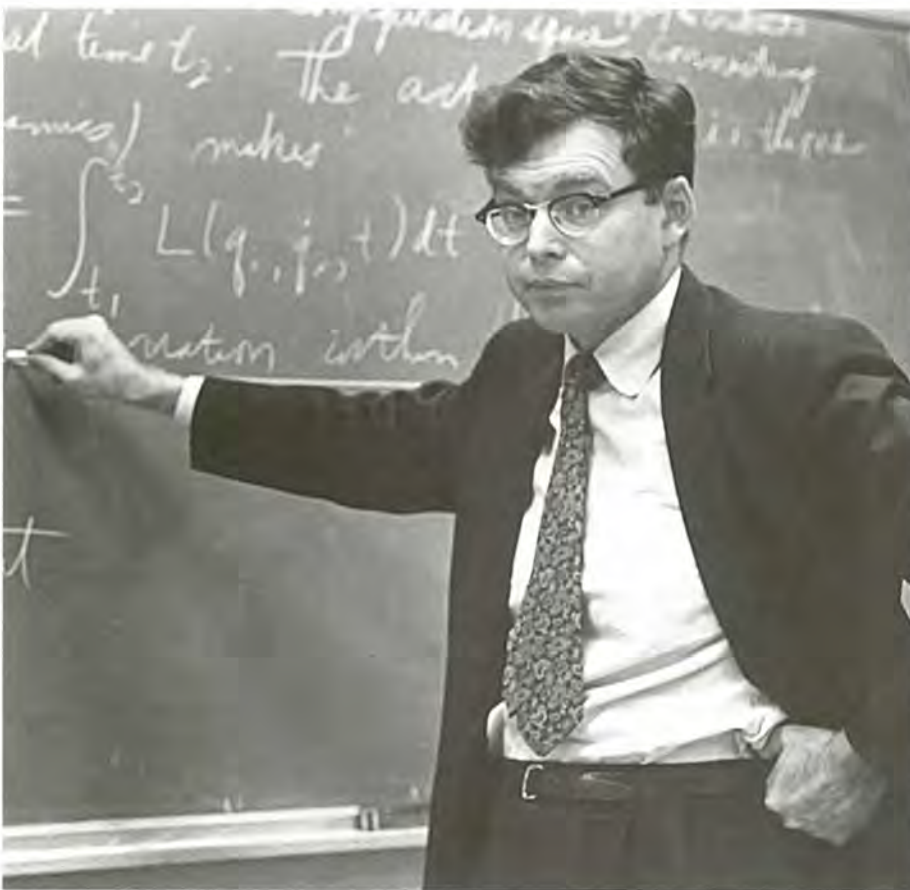
Now, at his dining room table, I listened as he described various advances in detecting and understanding the spin of nuclear particles and other arcane topics. I understood about ten percent of it. I regarded

that as a major accomplishment, one that I credited entirely to Abner.

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About halfway through the evening, Abner and his son served ice cream, cookies, and tea. It struck me as a bit odd for grown men to be sitting around the table talking about the great topics of life while eating ice cream and cookies and drinking tea. As I rode back to Boston on the trolley, I furiously made notes about the evening's conversation. I didn't want to forget anything Abner had said, or the joy I felt at becoming reacquainted with him after so many years. My excitement was as strong as it was on that first day of Philosophy 100. I felt enormously lucky.

Thinking about the ice cream, cookies, and tea, I laughed out loud as I realized what a marvelous reminder it was of Abner's good-humored outlook on life. I can well imagine him summing it up with his ironic wit: "It celebrates the sweetness of life . . . and the need to stay awake while living it." ❖



Sometimes Professor Shimony's expression said it all.

Steven Karbank graduated from Boston University in 1979 with a double major in philosophy and psychology and returned to Kansas City, Missouri, where he has had a successful career in real estate investment.

To read a longer version of this article, please visit www.bu.edu/alumni/cas/magazine/archives/2003/fall/shimony.

The Karbank Challenge

The Karbank Challenge is premised on the view that if the academic study of philosophy is to have real-world impact, it must also have real-world support.

Steven Karbank, the author of the accompanying article, has initiated what has to be one of the most generous challenge gifts in the history of the department: over the next five years, he has committed to provide up to \$100,000 as a challenge gift to encourage others to contribute to the support of the Department of Philosophy.

The terms of the Challenge are as follows: each gift of \$1,000 or more made to the support of the Philosophy Department will count toward the challenge and will be matched on a dollar-for-dollar basis by Mr. Karbank, up to a total of \$100,000. Mr. Karbank especially wishes to encourage philosophical work on environmental issues, and gifts made to this purpose are particularly welcomed, although all gifts of \$1,000 directed to support the department, its programs, and its students will qualify toward the challenge.

For further information about the challenge and giving opportunities associated with it, please contact Eugene Lyman, Director of Development and Alumni Relations, College of Arts and Sciences, 685 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston University, Boston, MA 02215. E-mail glyman@bu.edu, or phone him at 617-353-5829.

You may reach Charles Griswold, chairman of the Philosophy Department, at 745 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston University, Boston, MA 02215, or by e-mail at casphilo@bu.edu.