



The poet Reginald Gibbons was once visiting the Center for Hellenic Studies from Chicago, to do research on Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. While we were sitting together at lunch, the director of the Center, Greg Nagy, walked into the dining hall, noticed us, and exclaimed with inimitable buoyancy, "There are two of my favorite people in the whole world! May I join you?" While Greg was serving himself from the buffet, Reg leaned over, grinning at me like a child, and said, "I don't even care if it's true. He just makes me feel so special!"

There are many ways one could quantify Greg's status as a friend to humanity. He has a vast social network of friends going back--and lasting--for decades, from many different countries and different fields. He has directed dozens of dissertations and edited the works of dozens, if not hundreds, of colleagues. In his time at the Hellenic Center he has overseen fellowships for dozens of researchers at all stages of their careers, far more than at any other time in its sixty-year history. He has made the Center's library and its dining hall **an oasis** to both local and international professors and independent researchers, facilitating both fellowship and collaboration at a level unprecedented by any other institution in the field of classics. As remarkable as these numbers are, Greg's ability to see so many people as special, individual, and human, is for me what makes him a friend to humanity.

- 1) To meet Greg is to become his teacher and thus to be empowered: for a few moments you get to "play at" or practice being as amazing as he is. Greg is naturally curious and, naturally, he knows tons about a lot of subjects, including comparative linguistics, oral poetics, heroism, myth, ritual, film, opera, pop music, comic books, politics, religion, and baseball. Many people in this position either try to impress you and dominate you with their "superior" wisdom or to condescend to you with garrulous

stories and advice. Instead, Greg tries to understand you on your own terms. He tries to figure out where you're coming from, what he can learn from you, and how you and he can connect as colleagues. It would be kind enough if he did this just to encourage others; but often enough he's looking for someone to actually collaborate with, whether an undergraduate or endowed chair. And once he learns about what you are interested in, he never forgets you. I have seen him recall the dissertation topics of researchers going back thirty or forty years. He can quote conversations verbatim and at length going back that far as well. I have seen him recite the same distant conversation across multiple years.

- 2) To meet Greg is to be welcomed into and celebrated in his social circle. Many people who come to the Center for Hellenic Studies are intimidated by it even after several visits. Like unsure rock climbers, they struggle for a foothold in that space, angsty over whether they are smart enough, educated enough, or "cultured" enough for "classics." Even researchers who are otherwise highly esteemed will fumble their words, trying to figure out how to fit in. Part of Greg's friendliness to humanity is that he not only wants to help everyone fit in, he's incredibly creative at finding ways to do this. Countless times I have seen a group of nervous strangers, six or eight of them, sit at a table for lunch, and within ten minutes Greg will have put everyone at ease by inviting everyone to talk and share their interests. He will even take the time to find deeper meaning in initially banal and nervous statements like, "Greek poetry is awesome." Often he will help see connections among *everyone's* interests. If he is feeling particularly inclusive, he will call to someone at another table and insist that they come over to meet "so and so, the expert on whatever." Within his vast social network Greg is always playing the matchmaker or "connecting the dots," as he likes to say. And he is such a good matchmaker because he sees that which is special in everyone.
- 3) Greg can find humanity and humaneness in just about anything. He is not a philosopher in the sense of positing universal truths or speaking of general rules to live by. But he does spot cultural influences or cross-cultural similarities (what he calls "typological comparisons") as well as anyone I

know. Part of this seems to be due to a phenomenal ability to recognize patterns, say, in love songs, from Sappho to the Supremes. I believe this ability is both natural and enhanced by his training in comparative linguistics. But for Greg there is more than pleasure in recognizing patterns. Patterns are a means of understanding how and why humans feel and act the way they do. It's also a way of uncovering how humans *should* act according to their highest ideals. Hence Greg's deep interest in politics and his near-obsession with how people treat each other. Even though Greg will concede that much of ancient Greek culture is not worthy of emulation or admiration in any immediate sense, he is able to spot the lofty vision, the deepest convictions, and the tenderest feelings in a way that connects us all, past and present. One feels special, and hopeful, just to be part of these insights and discoveries.

Greg is a friend to humans in that he is deeply curious about them. He sees them as individuals and makes them feel seen: special, important, included, empowered. This practice of friendship is informed by his equally deep curiosity about human culture and a sympathy for the human struggle. Though not a trained psychotherapist, Greg has a preternatural intuition about human insecurity. While some people with this ability (let's call them "enemies to humanity") look for ways to exploit others, Greg diagnoses these insecurities and alleviates them with medical precision, using a choice compliment or a cultural reference that everyone can relate to. Again, he continually seeks to include rather than exclude (and he seems to judge others by their own willingness to do this). He could easily converse in half a dozen languages, or lard his English with words and phrases to brandish his erudition, as so many do. Yet he carefully moderates such using according to who he's talking to.

I once had dinner with the historian Ernst Badian when he came to Huntsville, Alabama to be the guest lecturer at the Convivium Veris of the Society for Ancient Languages, in what I believe was the spring of 2003. It was just me, Badian, and my former Latin professor, mentor, and dear friend, Richard Gerberding. Through the course of the meal we told Badian about the history of

the Society and all our many customs and traditions. The conversation then turned to the many students, mostly scientists and engineers, who had studied with Dick, become inspired by the ancient world, and--contrary to all expectation--gone on to pursue advanced degrees in its study. I remember Badian remarking in what seemed like half wonder and half regret, "I never had that kind of impact on my students."

Here for me, then, is one of the surest proofs of whether someone is a friend to humanity in the way I am describing Greg Nagy: does the sight, the recollection, or the mere mention of their name elicit a great big smile on the faces of *lots and lots of other humans*, distant in time and place--a smile of pride for all they activated in you, a smile of gratitude for their benefaction, or of affection for their warmth and the bond you shared (I'm not sure how to characterize it)?

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