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A Letter To My Faculty Advisor

Dr. Nordenhaug,

For some time I have planned to write my final article for the *Philosopher's Stone* as a public expression of the gratitude and admiration I have for you. So I tried to write a tribute to you. But in so many ways, my tribute was more about me than you. The voice that groveled its way into my tribute wanted to gain admiration rather than express it. I tried to write honestly about me and you and how profoundly you have influenced me. But the Eric Verhine I wrote about was not the Eric Verhine I was or am, and you were not you. And your influence, how could I begin? When I tried to begin I constructed a narrative that never took place, a story with caricatures of us, a sentimental vignette that corresponded to nothing that ever passed between us. I tried to find words adequate to our relationship. But there are none. I know now why Nietzsche and Emerson approved of the Buddha's advice, "Do not flatter your benefactor." There are perils in such flattery.

But I wanted to tell the students and the faculty and the administration about you. I wanted to tell them how much I have learned from you: how many insights you have shared with me; how many texts you have explained to me; how many problems you have thought through with me. I wanted to tell them about the many times you have welcomed me into your office even though you were tired or busy. About the times when you have been late for committee meetings to sit and talk with me about existentialism. I wanted to tell them about the counsel you have given me and the decisions you haven't made for me.

I wanted to tell them that you are whole. That you love good conversation and that you really, really love good beer. That you laugh, and grin with pride, at your own jokes and theories. That you are realistic about marriage yet still say Olga is the love of your life. That you do carpentry for fun and still dream of becoming a fisherman. That your boys love you. That you dance at festivals. I wanted them to know that you taught me how to avoid becoming a scholar.

And I wanted to tell them that you taught me what it means to be a philosopher. I explained to them, but did so in such a pretentious way that I disgusted myself, that the word "philosophy" simply means "love of wisdom." To love wisdom. Philosophy is not a set of answers, nor is it an endless debate, nor is it a scholastic pastime. Philosophy is a specific kind of love. A philosopher is a lover of wisdom, and you are a philosopher. I know this not because I know you teach philosophy. I know it because of the countless times I've heard the love in your voice for the wisdom of the words you read or say. I wanted to tell them that you taught me to love.

Above all, I wanted to tell them something I've never told you. That one day I watched you talking philosophy with some students. That you sat with your legs crossed and your grin wry and tried to show them that "the answers" were not so simple. That probably there were no answers. And I saw that our answerless predicament did not discourage your search for answers, for wisdom, as it had mine. And at that moment the word 'noble' cast itself aura-like around you, and I knew again what sort of person I wanted to be, and why.

But as you can tell, this tribute would have been all about me.

Eric

