

In Memory  
of  
Dr. Eugene Mihaly  
(1918-2002)

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Bruce I. Petrie

Most notably successful Literary Club papers, more often than not, are either humorous or profound; those which combine the two qualities, are both successful and tenaciously memorable. Eugene Mihaly, who died on June 6, 2002, in California, managed to work his quiet humor into deep subjects in such a way that the humor enhanced the profundity, the profundity enhanced the humor and both entranced this audience.

Thinker, scholar, philosopher, writer, teacher, conversationist, warm friend and, quintessentially, a distinguished Rabbi at the intellectual and institutional Center of Reform Judaism, Gene taught at the Hebrew Union College for more than four decades. Formally, his subjects included Rabbinic Literature, Midrash and Homiletics; informally, they included the telling of stories, the provocative posing of questions, and the generous writing of responsas to difficult questions submitted by Reform Rabbis from around the country.

It is worth a trip to the Clifton Avenue Campus to reflect on memories of Gene as he is captured in a photographic portrait hanging just outside the synagogue in the main building. The serious humor and the humorous seriousness are wonderfully evident in this portrait, which also pictures the familiar Wellington pipe, as characteristic of Gene as the famous cigar was of Churchill. Gene's diminutive stature quickly became irrelevant to his persona once the dark eyes fixed on you, a feature immediately noted by his rabbinical students who, behind his back, referred to him as the "Count", as in Monte Christo.

In his twenty-seven years as a member of our club, from 1969 to 1996, Gene wrote nine papers, with titles ranging from "Passion and Death: Yukio Mishima" read on November 8, 1971, to "Unity Midst Diversity: The Emerging American Identity," read on October 18, 1993. In between there were such titles as "The Schlemiel as American Literary Hero", in 1973, and "Squaring the Circle", in 1980. The latter paper was so intriguing that it inspired the formation of a small, ever-changing group of members, informally named The Squared Circle, to consider papers which were selected as being worthy of further discussion. Permit me to quote excerpts from Gene's "Squaring The Circle", paraphrasing in places to make connections:

"A renowned Western philosopher, while traveling in the Far East, met an outstanding Eastern sage. 'Do you make circles out of squares as we do?' asked the Oriental wise man. 'No,' replied the

Occidental savant, ‘we in the West do not make circles out of squares. We make squares out of circles’ . . . These images suggested a complex syndrome, a glimpse of total reality as experienced in cultural traditions of the East and the West. . .

The goal of the East is to volatilize substance, to overcome earthly, finite, existence which is ephemeral and transitory, to transcend it and to find surcease in one, nirvana . . . to spiritualize matter, symbolically to make squares into circles. While in the West the essential striving is in the very opposite direction. The idea is to materialize spirit, to infuse the grasp with the reach so that the real reflects the ideal and that the ‘one’ is perceived by the ‘many’. . . . to square the circle.”

Those excerpts, however attenuated, may give you a reminder, of Gene’s thinking. If you look between those paragraphs you will find Gene’s explanation of the difference between logical absurdities and paradoxes, in itself a subject worthy of our reflection.

“To Be *And* Not To Be”, read on March 10, 1986, employed the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, and specifically Abraham’s daring negotiation with God, to illustrate how such myths, (if myths they are, as strongly suggested by Gene) “may serve as keys to the deepest recesses of our psyche”. Such myths may not tell us much about the nature of God but they tell us a great deal about the nature of contemporary man. Abraham’s encounter with God was but one of many stories of that genre, which strip Man bare of his innermost, hidden feelings. Man may work up the courage to challenge God, but Man inevitably retreats into humility and submission. For Gene the primary impulse of Man was a “polarity of self assertion and self negation”, that is, a yearning to be *and* not to be, at one and the same time.

In 1984, a paper not by Gene but by another member, entitled “Mihaly’s Motion”, recounted that famous June Outing of the club when Gene turned his celebrated eloquence to moving and arguing the case for admission of women to The Literary Club. Although the paper was altogether fictive, and a surprise to Gene himself, the inclusion to the formidable Mihaly name in the title could not help but create heartburn in those members not yet acquainted with the Club’s practice of giving attention to the admission of women at a pace which can only be called geologic. Having his name appropriated for such an “unthinkable” idea fazed Gene Mihaly not one bit.

Gene Mihaly was a member of whom we can all be proud, not only because of his intellectual prowess but also because of his gentle heart which rejected the idea of stereotypes and welcomed all people of good will. He combined the profound with the humorous. He lent his graceful style to the task of enlightening all of us on subjects far beyond our normal exploration and he led us into intellectual pastures from which we will be drawing sustenance long after Gene’s deeply regretted departure from this room which he honored with his presence.

Respectfully submitted,

Gunter Grupp  
Bruce I. Petrie  
Robert W. Hilton Jr.  
Chairman