



## WOODY VARNER

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*Richard Burke*

Michigan State University—Oakland (“MSUO”), as Oakland University was called for its first four years (1959–63), was a special place. What made it special is not easy to say: the faculty was talented but relatively young and inexperienced, the students were not well prepared for college, there were only three college buildings, the library was pathetic. I think what made it special was that everyone involved was trying to make it special, each in his or her way, and that means **everyone**: not just the faculty and the supporters in the Rochester-Pontiac area. They didn’t all agree about what the new school was, or should try to become; but they did agree that it should be special, and they all worked very hard to achieve this.

The man who made this happen was Durward B. Varner, known as “Woody” by everyone. He did it by knowing everyone—not just their names (and their spouse’s and children’s names), but their interests, too—and by frequently expressing his pride in their work. It was the most extraordinary example of leadership I have ever seen. By the fourth year, I was just one of about 100 faculty; but Woody knew what courses I was teaching, and how much success I was having in them, because he had asked me, and I suspect he had asked the other 99 about theirs too.

Woody had big dreams for MSUO. Far from remaining a small “branch” of MSU, from the beginning he looked forward to the time when we would be a “sister” campus, with

40,000 students drawn from all across the nation and the world. He even had a master plan drawn up, which he showed to anyone who would listen, with four sub-campuses of 10,000 students each, located at the four corners of the Wilson property, and a large library and administrative complex in the center, and a monorail system to be designed by our Engineering students to take people from one area to another. Some of us hoped all this would never happen: we liked it as it was, with about 1,000 students and 100 faculty who knew each other, and thought of themselves as “pioneers.” Today, as we discuss whether to increase to 20,000 students, we are closer to his dream than ours.

Woody used to say he was not a scholar, or even an intellectual, but he loved being around scholars and intellectuals. He interviewed and hired most of the first year faculty himself, simply by asking us to talk about our teaching and research. He could talk about anything with anyone, and he listened, and asked good questions. Maybe he was not a scholar himself, but he was something more: he was a leader of scholars, who made you want to do your best work as part of his team. And you knew he would do his part to enable you to do this.

I remember one incident vividly. Three of my colleagues and I had put together a non-credit course on Communism, on Saturday mornings, in response to a request from a group of area ministers. They wanted an “objective” treatment of Communism, as free as possible from cold-war propaganda. I led off with two weeks on Marx and Engels, with readings from the “Communist Manifesto” and *Das Kapital*. In class discussion I defended their arguments, as I always do when teaching philosophers. Unknown to me, a woman in the class (not one of the ministers) audiotaped the class discussion, and submitted the tape to the (Republican) state Representative for our district, who then approached Woody with this “proof” that he had a Communist on his faculty, and demanded that he do something about it. Woody’s response, as he recounted it to me the next day, was that he had no need to listen to the tape, because his faculty were free to teach

their material as they saw fit, and he had utmost confidence in them. The ministers got wind of it, and spontaneously wrote a group letter to the Representative, saying the course was exactly what they had wanted, and expressing a similar ringing endorsement of the principle of academic freedom. The Representative backed off. To an Assistant Professor without tenure, it was a heart-warming experience.

On the other hand, when a student named Lee Elbinger decided to “express himself” by taking off all his clothes while reading a poem in class, Woody’s reaction was different. This too was reported to our local State Representative, and this time Woody agreed that something must be done: after all, public nudity is illegal. He appointed a faculty committee, which ascertained that Tom Fitzsimmons, the professor, was not responsible since Elbinger had not told him beforehand what he was going to do. (But couldn’t he have stopped him?) As for Elbinger, who was a “Sixties Radical” of the Abbie Hoffman type, whatever the aesthetic merits of his performance may have been, morally it was the equivalent of giving the finger to the Establishment, and the Establishment had the right to fight back. So Elbinger, who was due to graduate a few weeks later, was suspended for six months, after which he duly graduated. The whole incident seemed funny to most of us at the time, but Woody was not amused.

Woody was surprised, I think, by the early faculty’s opposition to intercollegiate sports, the usual way a university gets publicity in the mass media. He decided to promote the performing arts instead as perhaps more consonant with the image the new school was trying to project, and as usual his plan was ambitious. He hired John Fernald, a distinguished British stage director, to create the Meadow Brook Theater on the campus. The Meadow Brook Music Festival, a summer program of classical music training and concerts, featured such luminaries as Isaac Stern, Robert Shaw, and James Levine among its faculty. Unfortunately, he overestimated the aesthetic taste of Oakland County, and after he left, these institutions gradually reverted to the American norm.

These are just a few memories of one faculty member about Woody Varner. Each person who was here in those years has stories he or she could tell. But I think they would all have something in common: he was a great leader for the new school, and we loved him. Well done, Woody: rest in peace.