



IN MEMORIAM

Jon Gjerde
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UC Berkeley
1953 – 2008

Jon Gjerde's father, a first generation Norwegian American, died of a heart attack in his fifties, as had his father and several other male relatives. A tall, handsome man with a straight back, broad shoulders, and rigid bearing, Jon exercised regularly, dieted occasionally, rode his bike to campus and back to Albany (about 20 minutes each way), and often wondered out loud whether he would be able to "beat the odds." He died on October 26, 2008, at the age of 55, having stepped off his Nordic Track machine.

His other fate, that of birth and upbringing rather than death, Jon never tried to escape. Born on February 25, 1953, in Waterloo, Iowa, raised in Cedar Falls, educated at the University of Northern Iowa (B.A., 1975, also in Cedar Falls), trained as a historian at the University of Minnesota (Ph.D., 1982), and apprenticed as a teacher at Minnesota and Wisconsin, Jon left the Midwest for a postdoctoral fellowship at the California Institute of Technology in 1983 and arrived at Berkeley in 1985, making it his home and, as a dean, his cause. In his heart and his demeanor, however, he never stopped being a Midwesterner and never left the land "...where all the women are strong, all the men are good- looking, and all the children are above average" (although publicly he endorsed the first claim only).

Jon was unaffectedly self- effacing but utterly secure in his sense of dignity and belonging; uncomfortable as a public speaker but popular as a teacher (with a perfect ratemyprofessors.com rating and "passionate" as his most commonly cited attribute); shy about his tremendous intelligence but stubborn about people, things, and beliefs he was attached to; respectful of seniority and tradition but impishly irreverent about pomp and circumstance. Jon's sense of duty was matched by his sense of humor and humility: he was an extremely effective chair of the Department of History and a rising dean of social sciences, but he never stopped wondering why it had happened to him, and he never stopped loosening his tie when leaving California Hall (grinning sheepishly if someone happened to notice).

Jon's work reflected, and reflected on, his life's experiences and commitments. His first book, *From Peasants to Farmers: The Migration from Balestrand, Norway to the Upper Middle West* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985) is remarkable for being evenly focused on both sides of the Atlantic and equally proficient at careful statistical analysis and an empathetic reconstruction of the way people worked, courted, worshipped, and died. It is a study of an epic transformation — from the fjords to the plains, from communes to communities, and from peasants to farmers — and of an unrelenting effort at preserving continuity — tribal, cultural, and religious. *From Peasants to Farmers* was awarded the Theodore Saloutos Memorial Book Award of the Immigration History Society and characterized by the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* as "one of the finest treatments available of the movement of people from rural Europe to rural America."

Jon's next book, *The Minds of the West: The Ethnocultural Evolution of the Rural Middle West, 1830-1917* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), took the story of rural migrants to the Midwest farther in time, space, and conceptual ambition. It traces the encounter of two "minds," two ways of being, and two types of transplanted family farms: the "Yankee," which came from New England and Mid-Atlantic states, and the "European," brought over from Germany, Ireland, and Scandinavia in the 1830s. The first was founded on the celebration of companionate marriage, the expectation of the children's permanent departure from home, and a commitment to political and confessional individualism; the second, on the extended coresidential patriarchal family, a rigid age-based division of labor, and an enduring desire for communal and confessional cohesion. Through an extraordinarily creative analysis of private documents, parish registers, fictional accounts, and public struggles over education, prohibition, women's roles, and citizenship, Jon tells the story of the gradual ascendancy of the Yankee model at the cost of a wider recognition of "complementary identities" and communal pluralism. It is a book of tremendous intellectual and emotional power, a story of the remarkable flexibility of democratic institutions and the profound melancholy of those, mostly women, for whom the promise of civic engagement and greater conjugal love meant the loss of contact with growing grandchildren. *The Minds of the West* received several prizes and had conference panels devoted to it; perhaps more important, it reminds those of us more familiar with the urban immigration from eastern and southern Europe, Latin America, and East Asia just how recent "middle America" is and how painfully and inconclusively it came into being.

The book Jon was writing when his father's fate caught up with him is about another crucial part of America's, and his family's, makeup: the nineteenth century dialog between Protestantism and Catholicism: between a nation that thought of itself as both Protestant and free and a faith that was both catholic and American. "The Protestant Conundrum" is about the slow weakening of the belief that Protestantism is the exclusive source of American liberty and democracy; "The Catholic Conundrum" is about an attempt to combine church authority with political liberalism; and "The Protestant-Catholic Conversation" is about America's first nationwide encounter — intellectual, institutional, and often violent— with the implication of one of its principal founding doctrines. It is a fitting, if unplanned, culmination of a life's work; a national story that leaves the Midwest for America without leaving behind the questions first asked by peasant migrants from Balestrand.

Jon's work will be a lasting monument to his humanity. It is remarkable not so much because he could both crunch numbers and interpret a diary, feel at home in both Europe and America, or move effortlessly from the family farm to high politics and religious disputes, but because of his gift for curiosity without indelicacy, compassion without moralism, passion without sentimentality, and intellectualism without pretension. He saw a world of meaning in the little things people do and say, and wrote about those things simply, honestly, and profoundly.

But Jon's greatest passion was his family. One of America's foremost experts on the history of the nuclear household, the cult of spousal affection, and the clichés of middle-class domesticity delighted unreservedly and unapologetically in the company of his wife Ruth and daughters Christine and Kari, grilling meat on the back porch (with the neon "Albany Bowl" sign showing through the apricot trees they had planted), watching basketball on TV, camping out, remodeling the kitchen, or simply being together, with no need for words. Ever suspicious of displays of emotion and shy about intimacy, Jon was wholly unable to conceal his love for Ruth and "the girls" and his happiness as a husband and father. His spirit will always be there to guard them — and to instruct and comfort the rest of us.

Yuri

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