

Richard Nostbakken appreciated brief and spontaneous. I plan on being neither. If “brevity is the soul of wit” then I plan on being the stupidest guy here today. I refuse to short shrift 43 years of service.

If Bill Murray, Soren Kierkegaard, Joni Mitchell, John Cleese Pablo Picasso, David Letterman and Clint Eastwood had a love child...what would you call him? Well...a biological impossibility for starters. Or you could call him Richard Nostbakken, AKA Rick...or Bostynakken, AKA the Nostt...or Ricardo Montalban, AKA please spell your last name...can you please spell that again sir...that’s not very funny sir.

Richard Nostbakken detested public honors, predictable formalities, overt displays of affection, attempts to express the inexpressible in a few short minutes of pedantic prose. Fortunately for me, eulogies are **none** of those things. What is the antonym of the word Rick? Eulogy. Sorry Rick BUT, for once, you have to stay in one spot and listen to what you so unfailingly didn’t want or need to hear when you were with us. So turn up those hearing aids and just accept you have to listen now to how much you will be missed.

It is a humbling and daunting privilege to be amongst you today and offer a few words on behalf of the Luther College employees, students, and graduates. Yes, they will be words of deep sorrow and intense grief, but more so I hope they will bear witness to and celebrate the story of this remarkable man. I’m painfully aware of the irony that Rick would genuinely laugh at the apparent silliness of even talking about his worthiness and his well-lived life. But in these situations, truth is healing.

These then are the words, memories and outpourings of gratitude of Rick Nostbakken’s second family....Luther College. I am especially indebted to Clint Uhrich, Steve Haddad and Erik Norbraten, Rick’s faithful friends and longstanding colleagues who contributed to this remembrance.

I want you to know if Rick were here physically, this is about the time when he’d walk out...if he had even sat down in the first place. He’d pace at the back, head out the door, go down to the kitchen, get a small soup bowl, fill it with bacon or sausage and then roam the halls looking for some problem to troubleshoot.

Rick Nostbakken had two love affairs in his life. The first was his family. His love for all of you manifested itself in his daily life at Luther. I remember distinctly the day he first found out he was going to be a grandpa. He may have been an understated Norwegian in all other regards, but on that day he was full-blooded Italian. He was positively sappy: It was embarrassing. The twinkle in his eye, the heart bursting out of his chest neutralized all his other Nostbakkian codes. He was one proud papa. But others will speak of family this morning.

Rick’s second love affair was with Luther College, its call to the liberal arts and its call to faithfully live out the gospel. Beginning in 1971, he became on many levels virtually indistinguishable from the school. Indeed, one could rarely think of one

without the other. Rick has defined and been defined by Luther College. A new wing would go up...he'd grow a ponytail.

After this long, exceptional career as an Art (and English/History) teacher, director of musicals, IB coordinator, and eclectic presence of reason at Luther College, Rick Nostbakken formally retired in 2001.

No he didn't. In fact, he returned to Luther the following fall, and ever since offered modestly, generously, and patiently his acutely perceptive insights into what characterizes--and should continue to characterize--Luther College. Rick's dedication to the school was grounded in his intellectual restlessness, in his artistry and boundless creativity, in his commitment to faith and service, in his uncanny sense of what is good and right, and, in his broad, discerning perspective. Indeed, he was a well-read philosopher, historian and amateur theologian.

Luther College is what it is today in good part because it has been tended by a man who never sought thanks, or recognition, or even acknowledgement for all that he so capably did behind the scenes, under the library, under the stage, and in the offices and every corner of the school.

In the wake of his premature and difficult passing the truth of these statements was repeatedly demonstrated in the tributes so freely offered by his grieving colleagues:

One says, "he and Ann were so hospitable in opening their home to others. How many Luther staff parties did they host? How generous were they with food and drink and music and interesting conversation. And around the school, no one was more inconspicuously generous than Rick. He bought a keurig coffee maker for both administrative offices and a milk-frother when he discovered a colleague's love of lattes because he was a generous, caring person who wanted to make others happy.

Another teacher quipped: How can a man be so omnipresent and so hard to find all at the same time? The running joke was if you were looking for Rick, just stand still.

A good colleague called him Mr. Fix IT. He could have a thousand machines and whirring boxes all plugged into one outlet and still have everything working effectively simply because you asked for his help. He built the staffroom wall, helped lay the courtyard bricks, and brought in many of our IT upgrades, just to name a few.

Rick once told a close colleague he couldn't swim. No big announcement normally, right? Too bad they were in a little sailboat a mile off the coast of Mexico when he offered that critical information.

Another close friend states, Rick was authentically himself no matter the context, no matter to whom he was speaking. One of the traits that made him special is that he spoke to students as he spoke to adults. He always presumed their worth and intelligence, even when calling them the lowest form of scum.

Here is a tribute from another faculty member. Having produced musicals with Rick for a gazillion years (hmmm, I wonder who this anonymous speaker is?) I have always appreciated his wonderful artistry. Who can ever forget the "elephant's eye" hidden in his backdrop painting of the cornfields for the show "Oklahoma". Rick had an amazing sense for directing and pacing the show.

Yet another relates, "We were studying Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Fridays were game time. Students would state an Act, Scene and Line. From memory Mr. Nostbakken had two chances to quote the line accurately. If he was right we had to do book work, but if he was wrong he had to do Clint Eastwood impressions (because we all thought he looked like Dirty Harry). He was rarely wrong but a couple times we did get to hear him call us "punks" ...which we were.

One of his closest colleagues commented Rick's intelligent oftentimes uncanny ability to see things, situations, and problems from a different, a larger perspective was consistently remarkable. His views were expressed with wit and understatement, and were always directed by principle, not self-interest.

Another faculty member offered, "What a delicious sense of humour, what a witty raconteur, what an unrepentant practical joker, like when he chained Frau Kuiper's coffee cup to the table in the staffroom."

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this one from a newer faculty member who immediately picked up on Rick's natural rapport with the students. "I quickly sensed that Rick was a champion of the students, but without seeking their friendship or their approval, and without breaking professional ranks."

As this previous faculty comment hints, students were especially important to Rick...as he was to them. They respected and responded to him as attested to by the heartfelt tributes that have flooded the social media since his passing.

One says, "There is nothing more to say. Nostty was the coolest ever because he didn't notice he was cool and didn't try to be cool."

Another comes from a blog tribute to Rick that many of you may have already read: "I think it's strange to acknowledge teachers having lives outside of a classroom because their impact on your own life outside a classroom is immeasurable. It's as if your kindergarten teacher exists only to teach you counting and empathy, your third grade teacher to enforce a love of reading, your eighth grade teacher to teach you a love of writing, and your art teacher to show you how

much better it is, even as a desperate-to-be-popular teenager, to be an outsider looking in at the world, and recognizing all of its inherent beauty and absurdity.”

Another alum stated, “The Nostt didn’t play favourites. He was fair because he mocked us all equally.”

Then written only a day before he passed and written without knowledge of Rick’s dire health: “You inspired me with your words and actions. What I love most is that you didn’t know it. And you didn’t remember me...this too, was an important and humbling life lesson for me. But I want you to know that you reached an unremarkable student. That you mattered. That I have succeeded, in large part, because of you. Most importantly, I want to thank you for being the very best teacher I ever had – at any level. It made all the difference in my life, and I am just one of the faces that make up your great legacy.

And finally, the humourous. One of the tiniest and frailest international students to ever attend Luther was a young man named Tadeu Chan. Tadeu would shuffle from class to class with his slippers on and his tea mug that was bigger than he in hand. Most often, Tadeu would sit at the front and stare blankly at the teacher, and almost never speak. But he **loved** Rick and would try to follow him through the halls, the penguin following in the wake of the giraffe. One day in class he timidly raised his hand and said, “Mr. Nostbakken, you look like Jesus.” Then Tadeu, who rarely laughed, laughed and laughed. Few teachers inspire such unconditional trust and joy in students. Rick, responded with his usual understated humour: “Jesus said some ok stuff.”

Of course, Rick would be most uncomfortable hearing all this, so lest we appear to be deifying him, we also celebrate the fact that he was human with foibles and idiosyncrasies.

For example, he could be obstinate...mule like I heard one of his siblings say. A biblical donkey I heard another say.

He would often speak to me of his occasional Nordic melancholy, and the blackness that would temporarily descend on him.

His intelligence could sometimes be expressed in intimidating and withering ways and yet you never truly felt it was personal; you still wanted him to like you. And no matter what was said, he never stopped speaking to you or doing things for you.

He’d tell his closest friends at school he smoked more than he wanted to, that he worried too much about the things at Luther he couldn’t control.

He also was the master of selective and strategically timed deafness. There was a staff meeting?? Sorry, didn’t hear you.

Rick also could be such an enigma, such a study in contrasts.

We just heard an example from a student. That is, he often changed the lives of students whose names he couldn't even remember.

He could sing to the entire school in chapel that grade 9's were the lowest form of scum and yet the experience only seemed to intensify the mutual love and admiration between teacher and student, and galvanize the community.

He was a drama enthusiast with a flare for avoiding drama.

He had a mind like a steel trap, but then would show up to teach on days when there wasn't any school...in fact four times since I've been principal...and then proceed to tell everyone about his mix up and laugh himself silly at the irony.

He went from Art teacher to IT specialist.

He embraced complexity and ambiguity yet took great delight in the simple.

He was simultaneously a dreamer and visionary, but projected both in self-effacing and understated ways.

And here is the clincher....the moment I started to worry most about him as a man...he traded in his Motorcycle for a Winnebago. That almost ended our friendship.

While these may seem to the casual observer as contradictions, they instead speak to the breadth of Rick's talents and interests.

√ He played guitar and sang in places ranging from the open spaces of Aneroid, to the coffee houses of Prince George, to the gymnasium at Luther College.

√ He was a nationally recognized and sought after artist. He and good friend Erik Norbraten had one of their designs put on a stamp.

√ He was a cook best known for his mean Swedish Meatballs. (We all know they really were Norwegian meatballs that the damn Swedes stole.)

√ He and Ann annually tended full gardens.

√ He loved the frequent Nostbakken reunions, relishing in family and song and conversation.

√ He appreciated Doonsbury and Dilbert comics because they often provided précises of Luther and the human condition.

√ He was a boxing and soccer aficionado, a darts player (in fact the only lefthander on our Jedi darts team). We played what you might call quality darts in a Christian context as we learned to face frequent losses with humility and grace. The very first time I played with the darts team, one of my darts hit a wire on the board and dropped to the floor. Rick came over and quietly said with a stoical face, “Don’t aim for the wires.”

√ We ran marathons together, or rather we started marathons at the same time as Rick was typically miles ahead of me. He was the coyote and I was the rhino. He’d effortlessly and elegantly lope along like a gazelle, and I’d huff and puff behind him all my jowls, stomachs and cheeks slapping against each other.

√ He enjoyed Lutefisk, quality cheeses and meats, Grand Marnier, Bushwacker beer, a good wine, movies like *Babette’s Feast*, *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, and musical artists like Eric Clapton, violinists like Heifitz and Kreisler, and had this weird affinity for Paul Anka. Somehow “Having My Baby” just doesn’t fit with his Prince George coffee house persona.

Even though he refused to speak in clichés, he did have his pet phrases:

√ I was underwhelmed.

√ Attendance? I don’t even know who you are!

√ And then when he thought some public performance was especially sublime or well done, he would deadpan, 6 out of 10, 6 out of 10 my friend.

√ Or Gertrude Stein’s “There’s no there there.”

√ To the office staff, “Did you try the on button?”

√ Coming into my office at 8:00 in the morning and saying, “I think I’ve been all I can be today.”

√ Sometimes a wall just wants to be a wall.

√ And perhaps his most famous Luther line after a guest speaker came to one of our staff meetings: “I was finished before he was.”

And such is true now. Rick would have tuned me out long ago. So I want to close by telling you about the Rick I know, the friend, the mentor, the older brother I never had, the guy I could say anything to and ask anything of.

The Rick I know was able to apply his surgical critical reflections to himself, as demonstrated during one of my last conversations with him. He said, “I used to ridicule maudlin and mushy emotional outpourings. Today maudlin is good.”

The Rick I knew was a person of moral integrity, spiritual depth, economy of expression, wit, unfettered imagination and intellectual acuity.

The Rick I knew made us all more accountable as thinkers, teachers and human beings.

The Rick I knew was able to openly weep as he told me after his diagnosis that it wasn't dying or pain or the uncertainties of mortality that were uppermost in his mind. Rather he said, "My deepest sorrow--beyond leaving family behind--is that I won't be able to return to Luther ever again. I didn't fully realize until now what that community has meant to me. It has been my life."

The Rick I knew was a good man, who, though shyer than you might realize, had a genuine love for humanity.

The Rick I knew had the perfect balance of spiritual maturity, physical fortitude and highly refined reasoning abilities to face what he did the last few months with courage and dignity. He refused to wallow in the self-pity of why me or it isn't fair, in fact saying to me near the end, "There are no issues of fairness...who can say who deserves what?"

The Rick I knew dwelt in the subtext of language, in the pristine negative spaces of his art, in musical silences, and in the misery of humour.

Good friend Clint Uhrich echoes this idea at one point in his poetic tribute to Rick:

"Rick lived in the spaces between objects that seem to be empty but are not empty, and that's where he made meaning. He caught the spaces between things and lived in the spaces between objects and forms where truth lies...He was often mysterious to us because we are too ordinary; we see things as we think they are, not beyond them as the great man, the artist sees them, sees into the spaces between them. Rick now is where he has always been, in the spaces between things, where God is."

Ann, Kris, Jonathon, Soren and family, may your deep grief be tempered by the knowledge that your father was a well-loved man who profoundly impacted the lives of literally thousands of people. We will gratefully nurture the kind of Luther Rick championed and so patiently, so generously and so lovingly gardened. His footprints are everywhere here.

So thanks be to God almighty for this remarkable life, for the gift of Richard Jonathan Nostbakken amongst us. NOW Rick, my brother, I'm finally finished. "Good night sweet prince and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!" And by the way, 6.1 out of 10...my friend.