



Robert Watts Thornburg

October 10, 1927 - December 29, 2013

Robert Watts Thornburg, Dean Emeritus of Boston University, passed away at his winter home in Estero, Florida, on December 29th. Robert was born on October 10, 1927, in Chicago. He graduated from DePauw University with graduate study at Garrett Theological Seminary at Northwestern University and at Union Seminary at Columbia University and received honorary Doctorate Degrees from DePauw University and Illinois Wesleyan University. He joined his father and his twin brother as an ordained United Methodist (UMC) Minister, serving parish churches in Chicago, Northbrook and Peoria, Illinois, before becoming the Associate General Secretary of the UMC Board of Higher Education and Ministry. While in Chicago, the Chicago Chamber of Commerce named him one of their “Ten Outstanding Young Men.” During the 1960s and ‘70s he was an active leader in human and civil rights, chairing the Human Rights Commission in Peoria, Illinois.

From 1978 until his retirement in 2001, Robert was Dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University, with responsibility for the religious activities at the University, as well as serving on the faculty of the School of Theology. For 23 years he was the “voice” of Marsh Chapel on Sunday morning on WBUR. During the 1980s he became a nationally recognized expert on destructive religious cults through writings, speeches and work with cult members and their families. His love of sports made him a major fan of the BU Basketball team, traveling with them to

virtually every game. The University honored him with his induction into Phi Beta Kappa and the Scarlet Key award. During his 50-year career he received many honors and awards, but he was most proud of the “Thornburg 1” jersey given to him by the BU Basketball team. Throughout his life he served as a trustee of numerous other charitable, religious and educational organizations, often in leadership roles.

Bob was known for his passion for his work and his love of people – always looking at the bright side of life and the good in everyone. As John Silber, the BU President said, “The problem with you, Thornburg, is that you’re a congenital optimist.” His greatest love was for his family, including gatherings in their Boston, Berkshires, and New Hampshire homes along with great reunion trips for the children and grandchildren – he often called them “his investment in memories.” When Bob’s mobility became more limited, he enjoyed regular Facebook communication with his grandchildren and a wide circle of “friends” including many former Boston University students. Along the Boston waterfront he was always recognized in his wheelchair on his daily “walks” with his dogs.

He is survived by his second wife of 35 years, Ann, his twin brother Richard (Peabody, MA) and his sister Mary Cooper (Rochester, NY); his children, Beth Thornburg (Ashland City, TN), Rob Thornburg (Allentown, PA), Judy Zimmerman (Franklin, TN), Anne Mann (Eugene, OR); 8 grandchildren and 3 great grandchildren; his first wife Carol Thornburg (Nashville, TN); and his faithful canine companions, Queen and Princess Bean.

A private service for the family was held in Florida. A memorial service will be held on February 15th at 1 p.m. at Marsh Chapel at Boston University (735 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston). The family requests that in lieu of flowers memorial contributions can be made to the Animal Rescue League of Boston or a charity of the donor’s choice. Condolences may be expressed online at w

www.shikanyfuneralhome.com.

Tribute Wall



“ *Robert Watts Thornburg*

October 09, 2023 at 03:40 AM



“ *I am so sad to (quite belatedly) hear of Bob's passing into eternal life. Bob became like a second father to me at BU from 1978-82, and a lifelong friend. I am so grateful to have known both him and Ann -- something I am confident that hundreds of other Marsh Chapel alumni who may not have found this page could say as well. Ann -- deepest condolences. Steven Horst (BU 82)*

Steven Horst - July 26, 2014 at 08:05 AM



“ *Robert Watts Thornburg
"Journeyman Preacher"
Mentor
Colleague
Friend.
You are missed.*

*Dear Ann,
My deepest sympathies to you and the family.*

*Rev. Victoria Hart Gaskell
Elder, New England Conference
The United Methodist Church*

V. Gaskell - February 14, 2014 at 09:19 PM

 Chris
Mitchell

“ Dear Ann,

What a shock to learn of Bob's death. What an amazing man! I learned so much from him during my time at BU School of Theology, including hanging out in your kitchen solving the problems of the world, going out to lunch with him, and working for him at the Chapel. You were so patient and understanding to a kitchen full of grad students huddled around the table, especially after coming home from a long day of "real work," as he described it. He taught me how to deal with adversity, controversy, and diversity. One of my favorite lessons while working at the chapel was to keep Marsh Plaza and the chapel steps policed for cigarette butts--Pres. Silber hated to see them and would quickly reach down with this good arm, sweep them up, and hand them to Bob, or whomever else was accompanying him around the chapel (read: scared grad student like me). And he helped me learn to put up with other, somewhat rude and demanding university officials, including the executives from WBUR when they visited the chapel. He probably saved me from myself so many times.

His gentle way of teaching and reaching students at the school, and also families coming to the Chapel with their struggles, was memorable. Thanks for sharing him with so many of us. He truly made a difference in lives everywhere.

Sending loving hugs and comforting prayers your way.

*Chris Mitchell, BU STH '85 SPH '88
chris.cdmitchell@gmail.com*

Chris Mitchell - February 05, 2014 at 11:51 AM

JW

“ Dear Ann--

When I met my now-husband Fred, I felt like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz--like the world had just changed from black and white to color. It was clear to me from meeting you and Bob and from knowing how generously you both championed your values that you also shared a wonderful public and private life together.

I'm sorry not to have had a chance to get to know Bob longer or better. We enjoyed talking about ministry, and BU and you and your family. I know you have a terrific support system, but please let me and Vivien know if there's anything we can do. A walk along the HarborWalk when you get back to Boston?

*Fondly,
Julie Wormser*

Julie Wormser - January 30, 2014 at 11:20 AM

EM

“ Dear Ann:

I tried to send you a letter to India Row, but the Post Office returned it, with a notice the forwarding time had expired.

I was so sorry to learn of the death of your husband.

On behalf of everyone who knew you through Goddard House, I'd like you to know you're in our thoughts and our hearts.

Liza Molodovsky

Elizabeth Molodovsky - January 23, 2014 at 03:23 PM

CB

“ I was saddened to hear of Bob's passing. We will all miss him at HT and his daily walks with his beloved dogs. We will remember that twinkle in his eyes and his gentle but strong greeting. The mutual love and affection that Ann and Bob shared will serve as an example for all of us.
Christine Bassett

Christine Bassett - January 08, 2014 at 02:46 PM

RR

“ I am so sorry. He was a good friend to me, especially after I felt betrayed by the church.

Rev Nancy Richards - January 08, 2014 at 07:09 AM

NJ

“ Harbor Towers residents will miss seeing him and the dogs....sorry for your lioss.

Nancy Johnson - January 07, 2014 at 03:47 PM

DW

“ Ann,
How saddened and shocked I was to be scrolling the death notices in the Boston Globe today (looking for services for a friend who passed) and to see Bob's name. I have thought of him so often - and of you. My heart is broken to think that I will never again have the opportunity to be greeted by that warm and welcoming smile nor to be treated to the company of that eternally gracious man. You know how much Bob meant to both Jerry and to me. Once we decided to finally tie the knot, there was no question who would officiate. Some of my fondest and most everlasting memories of my wedding day are of your husband. I was blessed to know him and to be a guest in your wonderful campus home so many times. It was a place where so many of us felt welcomed by your and Bob's hospitality and kindness.

I will forever be grateful to have known, and will always miss, this elegant and beloved man. My thoughts and prayers are with you. I send my deepest condolences. We were all so lucky to have been part of his joyous life. I will surely see you on February 15th.
Diane Wall

Diane Wall - January 07, 2014 at 07:33 AM

SY

“ *Dean Thornburg was a beacon of light during my days at Boston University and I was so happy to have connected with him through Facebook once again. Every time I hear a particular moving hymn or message I think of him and all the many times I experienced a similar moment during services at Marsh Chapel. A special thanks to Ann for your hospitality during my summer stay in your home and a hug to all the grandchildren and great grandchildren. i feel blessed to be one of his "investments" during his ministry at Boston University. "his eye is on the sparrow...and i know he watches me..."*
Susan Yi-Millette

Susan Yi-Millette - January 07, 2014 at 07:06 AM

DK

Rev. Thornburg was my first pastor in Peoria IL. I was so saddened to hear of his death, and send my deepest sympathy to your family. He had such a deep heart for the Lord, and for people. I was a brand new member, and was later married in that church. Rev. Bob made a great impact upon my spiritual life with his inspiration and joy. He modeled his faith for us well. I will not forget him.

Diane Kennedy - January 12, 2014 at 07:08 PM