REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR ROBERT C. SOLOMON

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for Robert C. Solomon, professor, philosophy, has filed with the secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

Sue Alexander Greninger, Secretary
The General Faculty

IN MEMORIAM
ROBERT C. SOLOMON

Robert C. Solomon, Quincy Lee Centennial Professor of philosophy and business, died on January 2, 2007, in Zurich, Switzerland, while traveling to Rome with his beloved wife, Kathleen Higgins.

Solomon was born September 14, 1942, in Detroit, Michigan. He attended the University of Pennsylvania (B.A., 1963) and then went to the University of Michigan to study medicine. While at Michigan, however, he found his vocation, switching to philosophy and earning his Ph.D. (1967).

Before coming to The University of Texas at Austin in 1972, Solomon taught at Princeton University, the University of California, Los Angeles, and the University of Pittsburgh. He was also visiting professor at the University of California, Riverside and, regularly, at the University of Auckland.

At the philosophy department’s memorial service for Solomon, on January 20, 2007—attended by over 200 people from as far away as Ohio, Massachusetts, Florida, and Toronto, Canada—his longtime friend and colleague Nicholas Asher evoked Bob well:

Bob was a jumble of Rabelaisian appetites packaged in a small frame. He had wide ranging intellectual interests within philosophy and without—from analytical philosophy of the emotions to the Continental classics Hegel, Nietzsche, Sartre, and Heidegger.

He passionately believed in and practiced a pluralistic philosophy, one that mixed both popularizing and academic styles as well as authors and subjects from many fields and approaches to philosophy. Not only philosophy but also University politics and issues of the marketplace excited him. He was a prolific writer and a fluid one. He was full of ideas and had the energy to tackle them too.

But Bob had a passion for life in its many forms, not just the intellectual. His passions for people and dogs were strong and capacious. And he loved to travel, he loved to talk, he loved to eat and he loved a good bottle of cabernet sauvignon or a well-made martini.

Like so many other things in his life, Bob pursued teaching with fervor. He taught passionately at all levels: to graduate students, many of whom have gone on to successful careers in the profession, to beginning students in Freshman seminars, to Plan II students, to students in one of his favorite courses—Existentialism, to business executives to whom he argued that there was something beyond the bottom line.

Bob was always at full throttle, teaching, writing, going to conferences, giving ‘gigs’ as he called them. He died doing those things that he loved. He was gifted and grateful for those talents that made his life the work that we all admire. He was also a good friend, loyal and generous. If his physical heart was lousy, his emotional heart was as strong and as big as they come.

Another longtime friend, LBJ Library director and poet Betty Sue Flowers, spoke for many when she said, “He died too young, but I bet he packed many lifetimes into the time he had.”
Long one of the University’s crown jewels, Solomon was a University Distinguished Teaching Professor and the recipient of many other teaching awards, including the Standard Oil Outstanding Teaching Award, the President’s Associates Teaching Award (twice), and the Chad Oliver Plan II Teaching Award. He was also awarded the College of Liberal Arts’ Pro Bene Meritas award.

His numerous scholarly contributions ranged from work on the emotions; to work on Hegel; Nietzsche, and Sartre; and on to work in business ethics. He wrote cutting-edge academic monographs as well as popular books, he edited scholarly collections as well as textbooks, and his work was translated often and into many languages. He served as president of the International Society for Research on the Emotions from 2000-04 and had been named president of the Society for Business Ethics. He appeared in Richard Linklater’s film Waking Life, in which he gives animated expression to existentialist philosophy, and he is the teacher of a number of popular courses offered by The Teaching Company. Bob’s contributions to the discipline of philosophy and beyond are significant and voluminous. He leaves us with a rich body of work.

It is a fitting testament to Solomon’s special qualities that, ultimately, some of his own writing serves as an especially apt text with which to remember him. In one of his last books, Spirituality for the Skeptic (New York: OUP, 2002), Bob wrote:

Gratitude, I want to suggest, is not only the best answer to the tragedies of life. It is the best approach to life itself. This is not to say, as I keep insisting, an excuse for quietism or resignation. It is no reason to see ourselves simply as passive recipients and not as active participants full of responsibilities. On the contrary, as Kant and Nietzsche among many others insisted, being born with talents and having opportunities imposes a heavy duty on us, to exercise those talents and make good use of those opportunities. It is also odd and unfortunate that we take the blessings of life for granted -- or insist that we deserve them -- but then take special offense at the bad things in life, as if we could not possibly deserve those. The proper recognition of tragedy and the tragic sense of life is not shaking one’s fist at the gods or the universe “in scorn and defiance” but rather, as Kierkegaard writes in a religious context, “going down on one’s knees” and giving thanks. Whether or not there is a God or there are gods to be thanked, however, seems not the issue to me. It is the importance and the significance of being thankful, to whomever or whatever, for life itself.

The Department of Philosophy, the rest of the College of Liberal Arts, and indeed The University of Texas at Austin embraces Bob’s spirit as expressed in his own words. Rather than shaking our fist at tragedy, we give thanks for life, for Bob’s life, an active life that made great use of talent and opportunity, to the benefit of all of us.

The memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors David Sosa (chair), Nicholas Asher, and James Pennebaker.

Distributed to the dean of the College of Liberal Arts, the executive vice president and provost, and the president on June 22, 2009. This resolution is posted under "Memorials" at: http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/.