

Reminiscences of Jonathan Daniels

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A Classmate of Jonathan Daniels at
The Virginia Military Institute

VMI is not the kind of school one would think that Jon would choose. It seems to be or at least to represent many things that Jon was not. Although VMI has produced many outstanding men, some of whom are nationally known, it is a military school with all that that implies. It's daily routine, or perhaps one should say, regime is strict and spartan and oftentimes unpleasant. Although it's academic reputation is probably underrated, the first-time visitor would not perceive from its bare walls and Gothic towers the impression that VMI was a citadel of learning, a retreat for the intellectual. One can picture Jon Daniels at a school like Harvard or Oxford or Swarthmore or many others of that kind. Personally, I believe that it tells something about Jon's personality that he chose VMI, although even upon the reflection of several years, I'm not exactly sure what.

Perhaps in order to give some coherence to these thoughts of mine about Jon, it would be best to go back to the beginning when I first knew him. We both, along with about three hundred other men, came to VMI in the Fall of 1957. My acquaintanceship with Jon arose from the fact that both of us were English Majors. I cannot recall exactly when I first began to be aware of Jon Daniels as a person; that is to say, when I first began to know him. I can remember becoming aware of his presence in classes. He did not stand out in any particular way, but as soon as you heard him speak or looked at him a little more closely, you got the impression that he was slightly out of place. I think it was perhaps his face and his voice that gave that impression. His face was at one and the same time more mature and more naive than those of his peers. His

voice was modulated, not sharp, rough and raspy, like that of so many of us trying to assume a military bearing. Noticing his face and his voice led one to notice his carriage, and again he seemed singularly out of place. One could get, from looking at Jon Daniels, a slight impression of effeminacy, and many of us did, I confess. And, as everyone knows, effeminacy at a men's school is almost bound to bear the brunt of some joke and ridicule. And perhaps it is at this point that one begins to notice some other things about Jon Daniels. In spite of his appearance one was not tempted to tease him about his effeminate characteristics. His ideas and his words somehow discouraged that. Of course, his vocabulary soon became a legend, and all of us who were his colleagues in the English curriculum soon became aware of his penetrating mind and his sharp impatience with hypocrisy and pose. I do not think it would be fair to say that I ever became close friends with Jon Daniels, although in a curious sort of way there was a very strong bond of communication between us which somehow did not seem to need close and frequent personal association to survive. Jon and I seemed to be tuned in on the same wave-length, so to speak. We occasionally went out to eat together or went to the movies, a frequent and probably standard form of entertainment in Lexington, and I can remember that the substance of our conversations usually was something more than trivial banter. Each of our conversations seemed to pick up without interruption from the place where we had left off before. Many ideas which we encountered in our studies were of intense interest to both Jon and me, and I think we shared the same kind of enthusiasm in discussing them and trying to find out where they would lead us.

I suppose it is superfluous to say that all of us in the English curriculum--all of us at VMI, as a matter of fact, in that class, including Jon and myself--were undergoing formative changes in our personalities strongly tied up with a kind of search for personal identity. But even though that reminiscence is obvious, I think it has some relevance for trying to assess Jon's personalities during that period of his life. I say "personalities" in the plural intentionally

because Jon, again like all of us, seemed to have many sides. It was obvious to everyone that he was a deeply religious person by training and belief, but it also became obvious to those of us who knew him fairly well during the subsequent three years of our cadetship there that his beliefs and his attitudes were undergoing a profound change, of exactly what nature we could not be sure. I can remember at this space of years that he seemed to suffer some disillusion in the later part of his cadetship. An amateur psychologist analysing what was happening to him at this time might say that the value structure which he had assembled in the small New Hampshire town from which he came underwent quite an attack from the new ideas and rougher realities of life in a men's college. I do not mean to say or imply that Jon had the standard experiences of college boys with sex and alcohol because his vision, his perceptiveness, were much too broad for him to need these superficial experiences in order to mature in his personality. He could see much further beyond those things than we could, and it seemed to me that his mind went much farther beyond the then current manifestations of our individual searches for identity than did any of the rest of us who were among his circle of acquaintances. He seemed to perceive the larger aspects of what a mission in life and personality were all about, but not, let it be added, without some confusion. Apparently this confusion was not resolved completely in his mind until his later "reconversion" when he was in seminary at Harvard. But, of course, I know about that situation only by hearsay.

I think that perhaps it would be generally accurate to describe Jon's unique facility in his search for identity as an ability which most of us who were his friends did not have to stand outside himself and assess his personality fairly objectively at the same time that there were particular physical manifestations of his attitudes which he could not control without reflection. Perhaps some concrete example will serve to illustrate. Jon was as impatient

with hypocrisy in himself and cruelty and other all-to-human failings as he was in others. I remember once when Colonel Dillard, who was at that time the chairman of the English Department, announced in one of our classes that a \$100.00 cash prize would be given to the member of the Fourth Class--that is freshmen--English Curriculum who had the highest grade average at the end of the year. I had made no secret of the fact that I thought myself to be the superior person in the Curriculum, although it was certainly obvious to everyone and to me too in my more lucid moments that Jon Daniels and another classmate, Barry Smith, and several other persons also were individuals of exceptional ability. I think it is safe to say that I was probably rather smug, even arrogant, about my academic abilities. I had let it be known that I had placed second in the Freshmen Placement Test in English among our entire class which numbered something over 300. I did not discover until later in the year that it was Jon or possibly Barry Smith, I'm not sure which, who had placed first. At any rate, on the day the announcement about the cash award was made, I was sitting in the back of the room on a table looking very very smug indeed. After the announcement was made and some of our classmates had turned around to stare at me in envy as the probable winner of the award, Jon looked around and snapped, "Oh, Braithwaite, don't look so smug." I was too arrogant to be much taken aback particularly since Jon in this remark, as in any other criticism of another person I heard him utter, spoke with not a tone or trace of malice in his voice. Somehow he was able to make observations of this kind about the failings in personality of other people without condemning them by his look or by his tone of voice. As quick as Jon was to condemn my smugness in this instance, I remember that he was just as quick to condemn cruelty and arrogance in himself. At the moment no specific instance comes to mind, but I can well imagine Jon in a moment of forgetfulness making a cruel or unkind remark and catching himself very quickly, chastising himself in his mind, and one could see this going on watching his face--chastising himself for what he

had done and immediately apologising or otherwise trying to make amends. This suggests another of the characteristics of this man which would be immediately impressive to someone beginning to know him. And that is his extraordinary sensitiveness, his sensitivity to other people, to their feelings, to their attitudes, to their human failings.

Early in our cadetship, I remember, his "goodness," and I use that word intentionally, often seemed to manifest itself on the verge of piousness because of his religious background. But as he matured the pious trappings of his character go away, and his real strength revealed itself. He was the kind of person who would and did lend you his cherished Bach B Minor Mass to hear on a Sunday afternoon, the only time of the week when you normally would have an unbroken two-or three-hour period in which to hear it in its entirety. I can remember borrowing a record-player from another classmate and the B Minor Mass from Jon on a number of Sunday afternoons, and I can remember that he always seemed so glad for the privilege of lending the music.

I won the \$100.00 cash award at the end of our Fourth Class year, but Jon became the Valedictorian of the class, and I think that is a measure of his real stature and of the distance between us for I admired him greatly. A Valedictorian at VMI is chosen not by the academic faculty on the basis of a high grade average, although this is a factor which is considered, but is elected by his classmates. Traditionally a man is chosen who has distinguished himself academically, but more is demanded of the individual who will speak the final remarks on the four-year stay of a particular class at the Institute. I believe it is a mark of how much we, his classmates, have recognized the strength of Jon Daniels' character that we chose him to speak for us at our graduation.

After we were graduated I lost track of Jon although, upon reflecting about it, I think that I always assumed that I would see him again. We were interested in many of the same things, and both were headed more or less for an academic

kind of career. And I suppose the thought was always in the back of my mind that our paths would cross again some day. I made no effort to keep in touch with him, and I have no letters or correspondence from him. But even now I have the feeling, because of that curious kind of relationship we had, a communication that was effective without much personal association, that if we were to meet again we would after a few moments of gossip pick up more or less where our last conversation left off--talking about some idea, some concept that was of interest to both of us.

Sometime while I was in law school I heard that Jon had had a nervous breakdown and had relinquished the post of class agent or perhaps more precisely, that being unable to fulfill his duties they had been taken over by someone else, our classmate, Tom Fleger. I confess I was not much surprised at hearing this, assuming that it were true, for I knew that Jon's penetrating mind might have caused him to contemplate things which would subject that same mind to a great deal of stress.

The next thing I heard of Jon was on a Saturday morning in August when I read in the morning paper here in Chicago that a certain Jonathan Daniels of New Hampshire had been killed in Alabama on the preceding day. It struck me as too much of a coincidence that the dead man should be someone other than the Jon Daniels I knew, and I became convinced of that fact as I read on in the story and discovered that the man had been participating in Civil Rights Activities. I don't recall that Jon and I ever talked about the negro problem, or perhaps it is more precise to say, the white problem, but I can recall very specifically that when I found out that it was in fact my friend Jon Daniels who was in Alabama in connection with the Civil Rights cause, I was not at all surprised. It was the kind of thing that he would have felt he had to do; for Jon, I think, participating in the cause of Civil Rights probably was much like going back to apologize or make amends to someone whom he had hurt through a

cruel or unkind remark. It was simply a reflex action. It was as natural for Jon to reach out to humanity as it is for most men to eat and drink.

I remember thinking when I found out about his murder, that's just a goddamn dirty trick. I remember thinking, Why, if someone had to be taken from the Class of 1961 at VMI, did they take Jon Daniels? Because there are so many men that the world could have more easily afforded to lose than he. And those thoughts have led me in the intervening months to think about the purpose of it all, and I haven't really come to any answer. I suppose that it is expected that we would wonder where he might have gone if he had lived. Certainly he would have finished seminary and been ordained. And his great love for and sensitivity to people would have led him into a ministry, but a ministering in a more than merely liturgical, white collar and black suit sense. For Jon's great strength was that he would have made a ministry for himself; and perhaps, I think, upon reflection, his strength was at the same time his greatest weakness for his great sensitivity and his penetrating insight on humanity allowed him to see many things which most of us did not see about the kinds of people we ourselves are, our petty hypocrisies and our little sins that nag and rag at the edges of our identity as people, that always make us a little less than what we want to be or perhaps in some cases much less than we want to be. Jon could see these things and could see the struggles going on in the souls and minds of other people, and because of being able to see these things he was able to suffer with and for other people with whom he gained empathy.

Because I do not have the strength that Jon Daniels had--and I don't think I ever shall--I can't help but wonder about Jon this: Would he have been able to withstand the pressures of knowing so much about what is bad in people. That is, I think, his weakness. But as a final note I suppose the obvious should be said, and that is that his knowledge of what was bad in people was

only one side of the coin. If we can wonder whether he would have been able to live with this knowledge, we can say that what would have allowed him to do so would have been his knowledge, his belief, his hope of what was good in them.