

Kalman Silvert as Mentor

by DONALD C. BROSS | University of Colorado, Anschutz Medical Campus
Donald.Bross@childrenscolorado.org

Mentor, whether actually Athena in disguise or merely mortal, could not know how Telemachus would turn out. Like Mentor, Kal Silvert deeply cared about his students, about our world, and about humanity. Kal entered my life during my second spring at Dartmouth in 1962. During that previous fall, Lou (Louis Wolf Goodman) and I were becoming friends as we discussed events in Latin America, agreed that we would like to know more about the Latin world so close to us in many ways, and yet hard to truly know from Hanover, New Hampshire. News reports from the entire region seemed superficial and dissatisfying, as if we were being presented only cartoons of people and nations.

I came to Dartmouth from Denver having studied Spanish in public high school for four years and having traveled two summers before, to Saltillo, Mexico, to study Spanish at the Universidad Interamericana. My host family's interest in me was neither superficial nor intrusive. They warmly welcomed me into their midst, a "host family," but one that seemed to delight in sharing their food, music, and laughter, loaning me proper clothing for the Saturday evening walk on the plaza, and doing everything possible to make feel at home. Despite my personal experience in Mexico, it was a time when many Americans looked south fearfully. Castro had brought revolution and a share of the "cold war" next door, 90 miles from the United States. The Bay of Pigs was interpreted as symbolic of how the Americans of the north were failing in our efforts to understand and respond appropriately to the meaning of events throughout Latin America. Our ignorance of even our closest international neighbors played out against the background of the Sputnik surprise, the downing of the U2, and numerous regional conflicts usually

related to how nation states would govern themselves. These were usually viewed as surrogate conflicts between the Communist world and the United States and its allies.

Lou Goodman and I became friends while taking Spanish classes encouraged by a favorite Spanish professor, Bob Russell. Before Kal Silvert arrived in Hanover, we had heard of the new recruit to the political science faculty—that he was a respected regional expert who had lived for years in several countries in Latin America, that he spoke Spanish fluently, and that he was considered a great "find" for the college. Frank Safford, a historian of Latin America working on his Harvard PhD, had also just been recruited. The news of these recruitments excited us, because it seemed that there was recognition at the college of the importance of the region. Lou and I set out to make Latin America our destination for our junior year abroad instead of Spain.

In our earliest exchange, Kal was wonderfully open and encouraging. I don't know what happened behind the scenes, but at least these three professors and the administration of Dartmouth took our request seriously and together set up the conditions that would satisfy all of them that they should take the risk of sending us south without the established parameters and institutional history of the Dartmouth study abroad program in Europe. I suspect but can't know that Kal's extensive experience in Central and Latin America was crucial to endorsing our time in Peru.

My Dartmouth education was being paid by a Naval ROTC scholarship, and it was necessary for more than one reason to receive a leave of absence from that program to go to Peru. By chance I met ophthalmologist Javier Servat, a cousin of Jaime Cisneros, the noted professor of Spanish language and literature at the

Catholic University in Lima. Javier and I met at the airport in Barranquilla, Colombia, during our stopover on the flight to Lima. Javier invited me on a trip to northern Peru, particularly to Trujillo, where he hoped to establish an eye clinic. He wanted to provide medical care for a population that "didn't even have eye drops." He spoke intensely and alternately in rapid Spanish and English, having been a faculty member in Knoxville, Tennessee, for two years and then at Yale for two years. I shared some of the intensity of Javier's return to Peru after four years' absence. Javier was the son of a great landowner, but he and his three brothers and four sisters all became physicians or married physicians to help their country. He told me he was one of fewer than ten Latin American doctors who had returned from the United States after receiving advance training through a U.S. Agency for International Development program. I couldn't have had a better gift than to travel with a very insightful physician who tutored me on the health and well-being of the people we observed from a doctor's perspective, as he was giving me a larger sense of his country. Foreshadowing my academic career in a distant future, travel with Javier also meant that I experienced Lima as a capital city much differently than if I had stayed in Lima at the beginning. Ten days before we landed in Lima the Peruvian Army drove a tank through the gates of the national palace and took over the government. Later I would read that the Peruvian military thought that one of the features setting military servicemen and officers apart from the rest of society was their assignment to locations all over Peru. All of this context might be excessive, but it also sets the stage for the real beginning of Kal's powerful influence on my life.

I did not have any courses with Kal before we left, and therefore felt I barely knew

him. The only advice I remember him giving me was to stay off balconies during any street demonstrations. He also told me how he obtained the scar on his cheek—when he was seeking cover under a car during riots in Buenos Aires. This made his advice seem practical instead of paternalistic. Still, I really didn't know Kal when I left for Peru. He was, after all, a vastly experienced and renowned professor. As I traveled north with Javier and returned, I thought of research projects for my political science credits. Returning to Lima, I wrote a letter in Spanish to Kal listing several possible topics and asking for his advice. My Spanish was at best a work in progress and my handwriting has never been good. I had written a professor I had only just met and asked for his advice. The days before the formal program would begin were passing quickly, Lou and Fernando DeNiccochea had not yet arrived, and Hanover and the United States seemed far away. I felt like I was on my own moon shot. Left to my own devices, I was immersed in the culture and language, beginning to dream in Spanish; all around me were interesting as well as challenging people and questions. But I was without a clear sense of direction as to any project that would encapsulate my reasons and effort in being in Latin America. In a surprisingly short time I received a letter from Kal.

“Estimado Donald, Me alegre que estas enchufado” began his letter. On a single page, written on airmail onionskin, what Kal did not write me is memorable. He did not tell me what to do. In clear yet succinct fashion he described how I could undertake any of several studies. He provided a brilliantly concise tutorial in different methodologies and deftly sketched the pros and cons of each study. In the process he was rehearsing for me how such decisions might be weighed and made. The only

sentence he wrote in Spanish was the first sentence. He acknowledged my effort by his use of slang and the compliment, and then wrote everything else crucially important in English. As a result of his kind and concise letter, I felt enormously supported, organized, and anchored by a sense of self-efficacy that I recognize most clearly looking backward. Kal did not say that he was treating me as a colleague. He treated me as if I already was his colleague. He was honest and direct. His words allowed me to infer what my best chances were to complete a useful project.

As a result of the intersection between my initial experiences and Kal's remarkable instruction, I conducted a content analysis of the writings of the Peruvian military about themselves. I was attempting to understand how the officers rationalized their repeated military interventions in the government. I used only public sources and did not try to interview any officers. I had been placed by the Experiment in International Living in the home of a retired general of the national police. I kept open notes in my room, but never told my host about the study and asked virtually nothing about his career. I did observe his daily routine, went with him to the Club Militar, also went once to watch a traditional religious procession, and attended with him a soccer game between Peru and a rival Latin American country. Once I heard him wryly tell his family how his pocket had been picked on the tram coming home. This was followed by a grudgingly admiring joke about an international police conference held once in Lima, attended by the leading police and intelligence agencies of the world—and that all of the attendees had their pockets picked before they got out of the airport! He knew I was a midshipman on leave, but neither of us discussed anything about political or military affairs. I could have

lived in a hotel or stayed in the pension where I first lived and obtained the same public-access materials that I used in my research, because all my references were in the national library and bookshops, those selling school books along with the general bookstores of Lima. My own sense of ethical responsibility was that I could use what anyone in the public could see, but that it would be a breach of trust to use associations or friendships, introductions, or even my military background—which I did not discuss with anyone—to gain access to information. It is possible that this self-definition and adherence to a code of research ethics (even though not thoroughly articulated even in my own mind at that time) would not have protected me from accusations of spying in another age or place.

What did I learn from these open sources? There were news magazines, journals, and books written by military men from all of the branches of the Armed Forces, and a great many of them were available in the national library. The military officers of the country wrote commentaries in the journals that articulated or were intended to reconfirm their foundational beliefs, including a belief that they were the only true patriots in the country. Only military men spent their lives on the frontiers of the jungle, the mountains, and the deserts, isolated from civilization and often isolated from their families for long periods. Only members of the military routinely spent a life of sacrifice that included the chance of dying in a war for the *patria*. In one memorable sentence, the “effeminate businessman in his fat chair” with his primary goal of money was compared unfavorably to every member of the Armed Forces who was prepared and could be called upon to sacrifice his very life for the good of others. Important sources were the booklets for Instrucción Premilitar, the

required course for all males in secondary school.¹ The first book was illustrated with drawings and photographs of historical Peruvian military heroes and colored images of Peruvian national flags, and ended with instructions about how to wear a uniform, stand at attention, and march. By the fifth year, students were being introduced to subjects that included topography, fields of fire, calculating estimated times of march over varying terrain, and taking cover. Every male Peruvian high school student was considered part of the military and thus part of national defense. I still have the booklets for these five years of instruction in my library.

I also learned that the Peruvian military had established CAEM, or Centro de Altos Estudios Militares. Reports written about CAEM indicated that economists, political scientists, and other individuals with advanced academic education were running seminars on national development and other topics related to the Peru's well-being and defense. From the descriptions of activities there, it seemed to me that at least some military officers had determined to begin to examine their own role in the life of the nation through the eyes of other, nonmilitary but still competent and patriotic individuals. Learning about this activity, over time I realized that theirs was a dynamic military culture and that there was evidence that, true to their stated patriotism, there were at least some individuals struggling with their definition of themselves. Institutions are composed of and formed by individuals, and both can change. As we look at the world today, these same issues continue to form the foundation for struggles being endured by many emerging economies and societies.

As we began our language and literature tutoring at the Universidad Católica, the

three Dartmouth students there were all living with families. Late in September or early October, I learned about a retired military officer who was writing a history of the Peruvian military. If my memory is correct, I was asking at a book store about histories of the Peruvian military when the owner told me that he knew of someone who was writing on that very topic. Very soon, Víctor Villanueva found me and introduced himself. It turned out that Mayobre Víctor Villanueva had been part of a failed *golpe* in Callao in 1948. Villanueva had become interested in understanding the culture of his own service. We spoke on several occasions, and in November he presented me with his just published *El militarismo en Perú*, autographed "Para Donal Bross, estudiante y estudioso de nuestro problema político. Cordialmente, Villanueva, Lima, Nov. 1962."² This unexpected and treasured book not only revealed a history that spoke for itself regarding the military in Peru, but it provided my first encounter with what Donald T. Campbell and Julian Stanley later referred to as "multitrait, multimethod" research in the social sciences. The book contains a chart which is the history of Peruvian coups d'état along with the charted history of the percentage of the national budget dedicated to the military. From 1912 to 1962, when the percentage of the national budget devoted to the military reached below 22 percent, the longevity of any then current civilian regime became, at best, precarious.

The year and a half of my life at Dartmouth after Peru was a time of intellectual challenge and happiness. Lou and I followed a modified Spanish major that essentially endorsed an emphasis on courses in language, literature, and political and social science related to Central and South America culture, politics, and economy. At the heart of my social science

identity is Kal. In courses he taught we were exposed to Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba through their early book comparing national development in four nations, as well as David McClelland with one illustration of how powerfully social psychology links individual and culture, and Daniel Lerner's *The Passing of Traditional Society*, with valuable insights that help me understand the world today. The work of Karl Mannheim, a sociologist who grasped the intricacies of ideology and its potential for good and bad, was in the background. Interactions in Kal's classes were often the most growth-producing part of my education. A discussion on population growth, with a background of Malthusian tradition and Harrison Brown's *Challenge of Man's Future*, led to Kal's question: "Is it possible that some human problems require a specific human genius to solve?" How many geniuses of a particular or peculiar genius are needed to solve our most difficult problems? What is the size of human population needed to provide a genius sufficient to answer the most difficult challenge human beings will face in the future? Without some sense of this answer, how could we justify without other reasons having a certain population limit? The idea that any grand theory or causal "explanation" of large-scale or national human development, outside of middle-range theory, would work to guide humanity reliably was repeatedly questioned.

On rare occasions an invitation would be extended for a few students to come by for dinner with Kal and his wife, Frieda. At some point during that year, and my recollection is that he was only speaking with a very few of us, Kal disclosed that he had been part of an American effort in North Africa and Spain during World War II to gather intelligence. It was clear he would not entertain any requests for "war

stories.” This background, however, informs his account, at another time, of doing research for *A Study in Government: Guatemala*.³ At some point, my impression is strong that it was during the 1950s and the McCarthy era, Kal was approached by representatives of the U.S. government for his field notes. Kal informed them that he would have to give them his notes the next day when he had sufficient time to gather them and properly prepare them for delivery. When the representatives returned the next day he delivered a box, or boxes, of ashes. At some point during my year and a half with him, Kal said that the Rand Corporation had asked for the paper I wrote for him in Peru, “Institutional Attitudes of the Peruvian Military.” I thought about it. It wasn’t an accident that Kal had told me various stories, nor an accident that Kal repeatedly seemed to trust me and trust my judgment. We shared an interest and experience in difficult questions of violence, social change, institutions, and individual human beings. At other points, he illustrated his belief in right and wrong by vignettes of encounters in Latin America. An individual in Argentina who was intellectually astute, broadly educated, and seemingly interested in the betterment of humanity was also a committed Communist. At some point, Kal had “tested the waters” with him and asked questions about what this man would do to further his beliefs. Would he murder this person or that person? The answer was always yes. Finally, Kal asked the man if he would kill Kal if it were necessary. The answer was yes and quite evidently Kal no longer trusted nor was revealing to this individual. In contrast, he delighted in describing a very different encounter in Argentina with Professor Wilson of the Dartmouth political science faculty. Referring to the syndicalist nature of the Argentina of that era, and of how certain individuals behaved within that culture,

Professor Wilson spontaneously exclaimed to Kal (possibly astonishing himself with his own candor), “They’re Fascists!” Wilson inherently desired to be objective, but he also had the courage to recognize that which others might ignore, and this combination along with Wilson’s general abilities permanently endeared him to Kal. These stories were my earliest intellectual introduction to a counterpoint to the principle that loyalty to tribe, clan, or party can corrupt civilization and democracy by undermining the recognition of merit, rewarding cronyism, and supporting racial, ethnic, and religious discrimination. Sometimes the individual is everything. In the summer of 1963 I was sent by the U.S. Navy to Colombia in lieu of original orders to a destroyer based in the Philippines. It was part of the Kennedy-created People to People Program. Kal told me to bring back any books I saw that he and the college should have. Among others, I brought back *La violencia en Colombia* by Padre Guzmán.

I graduated, to serve five years of active duty. When I received orders to a Swift Boat in Vietnam my experience in Latin America cautioned me and prepared me differently from many. I sought out Kal on my way to the new assignment. He said he knew of other officers who had gone to Canada. I said that I did not see how I could have any credibility in challenging the war if I was unwilling to personally witness the war. Vietnam was a difficult time, even though neither my crew nor I was wounded. I felt less sure about our policy there the longer I was in Vietnam. With my service extended from only a half year to an extra year and a half in order to serve as an instructor for river patrol boat crews, I committed myself to train them as well as I could but to also be mindful of the dilemmas they would encounter. My task was made easier by my extraordinary

commanding officer, LCDR Roy Boehm, who had been the first enlisted SEAL when those units were constituted. On my own time, out of uniform, I would sometimes quietly canvas for Eugene McCarthy. As I was leaving the Navy, I went to see Kal. We talked about my impressions, and I asked him how one could choose between social science, law, journalism, or the foreign service. I had the good fortune to be able to ask several well-positioned men, some of them quite famous, the same question. Only Kal understood that I was asking him not to sell me on his career or one like it, which he did, but rather to tell me as much as he could about what he knew about the trade-offs involved with each pathway. In all of the time I knew Kal, he never looked askance at any decision I made, but he sensitized me repeatedly to the importance of every decision.

In the spring of 1976, a number of personally momentous events occurred. Our only son was born healthy to two very happy, somewhat elderly, doting parents in March. In May, I began working for C. Henry Kempe, MD, the physician responsible for identifying and naming Battered Child Syndrome, and since then I’ve remained with great satisfaction on the faculty of the Kempe Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect. And on June 15, 1976, Kal Silvert died unexpectedly in New York City of a heart attack. It was the best and worst of times, for no other death except that of my wife has been so difficult.

In 1989 I presented a paper in Rio de Janeiro at a Congress of the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect titled “Children’s Rights and National Development: Five Models.” It was my personal acknowledgement of Kal’s influence and an expression of my

conviction that the work on violence to children relates to the success or failure of people and nations. I have taught in Colombia, Peru, Mexico, and Chile on diagnosis and treatment of child abuse and neglect, law as an intervention variable in managing family violence, and why societies struggle to recognize and respond adequately to what C. Henry Kempe once described as “cancer of the soul.” I think that Kal’s profound ethical and intellectual competencies, and his refusal to accept any one disciplinary or intellectual school of thought as definitive of what we need in order to understand ourselves and those around us, has helped me at every stage of my life since then. Kal tasked me to learn enough so that I could have a career involving many different tools. These have included medical sociology, social psychology, public health law, and now pediatric law, ethics, and policy.

I would not exchange my life for any other odyssey. Great men and women give us ways to live that should be, because we knew them, richer in meaning, experience, and joy. Because we know about them, better yet knew them, or best of all had them teach and work with us, good mentors give us a better future and values that echo over generations. Kal Silvert remains a profound influence on my work and life, and I am told by my students that they have learned of values they associate with him through me.

Donald C. Bross, J.D., Ph.D., is Professor of Pediatrics (Family Law) and Associate Director for Pediatric Law, Policy and Ethics at the Kempe Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect, University of Colorado, Anschutz Medical Campus.

Notes

- ¹ *Manual de instrucción premilitar*, 5 vols. (Lima: Ministerio de Guerra, 1962).
- ² Víctor Villanueva, *El militarismo en el Perú* (Lima: Empresa Grafica T. Scheuch, 1962).
- ³ Kalman H. Silvert, *A Study in Government: Guatemala* (New Orleans: Tulane University, Middle American Research Institute, 1954). ■