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## The Slouch, the Stare, the Stutter

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## The Slouch, the Stare, the Stutter

The many gifts of William F. Buckley Jr.

I only spoke with William F. Buckley Jr. on four occasions, but each encounter left a lasting impression. Moreover, he was always gracious to answer my letters. For three decades his writing and public life have been a large presence in my mind. I regret never telling him how much he meant to me. There was something I always wanted to thank him for. If I had the chance now, this is the letter I would write.

Dear Mr. Buckley,

It was from the lips of my mother that I first heard your name. I suspect that's true for many of us who grew up in the '60s and '70s, when dinnertime conversation introduced us to some utterance of yours. In my case, it was during the Goldwater campaign, and Mom delighted in one of your verbal jousts. While I don't recall the passage, I remember the look on her face and thinking: Mom *likes* this man and his words. For a child, that was a vivid image: the mother delighting in the mother tongue. Thank you for this early memory of the importance of words.

A decade later, when I was in college and finally asking serious questions about politics, a friend got me hooked on *National Review*. Poring over each new issue, I discovered writing as funny as Woody Allen movies, as informative as most 50-minute lectures, and more persuasive than the articles in other opinion journals. In truth, I was receiving an informal education parallel with — and in some respects superior to — the one I had formally matriculated in. You were an arresting voice in a higher-education wilderness. In retrospect I see how wholly quixotic your mission was. Against the liberal orthodoxy that dominated American intellectual life, you provided a gathering place — a cultural common — for the disparate voices of Russell Kirk, Robert Nisbet, Friedrich Hayek, Richard Weaver, Milton Friedman, and yourself — challenging the rising generation to reason rightly about the first principles of our political economy. Thank you for giving my generation such memorable instruction in republican freedom and virtue.

Shortly after becoming addicted to *National Review*, I began watching *Firing Line*. Your persona on TV — featuring the slouch, the stare, and the stutter — evoke a chuckle to this day. More significantly, you won the debates; consistently you reasoned better than your interlocutors. I could imagine you as a Roman in a toga — a Cicero excoriating Mark Antony or Catiline for failing the republic. While these performances went far to making me self-consciously conservative, they also showed me how critical it is to take the argument into the public arena. And to do it with style. Thank you for showing us how to fight the good fight.

At some point during my undergraduate years, perhaps when you were hosting Malcolm Muggeridge or Mortimer Adler or Mother Teresa on *Firing Line*, I realized the full logic of your mission. Your mission was not just political; it was civilizational. I found myself wanting to understand every historical and literary allusion you unquivered. Your seemingly throwaway references to Shakespeare prompted me to go and read entire plays. An observation you made about St. Augustine inspired me to read his *Confessions*. Then one day it occurred to me: Behind your civilizational mission was a compelling force, a faith that I did not yet know well. In due season I would. You, as much as any man in our cultural common, nudged this Protestant toward the Catholic Church. Your frequent references to the Church made me curious about all things Catholic — about Evelyn Waugh, John Cardinal Newman, St. Thomas Aquinas, Pope John Paul II, Christopher Dawson — the whole amazing intellectual, moral, and spiritual patrimony of Holy Mother Church. The upshot: While in grad school in Ann Arbor, I discovered I was really seeking Rome. In 1990, during the Easter Vigil Mass, I was received into the Catholic Church. The faith has informed my own sense of mission ever since.

When I had the chance to review *Nearer My God* for Russell and Annette Kirk's *University Bookman* some years back, your words made me think: I have come home. Thank you, above all else, for such a powerful example of the *vita activa* — a life dedicated to truth, goodness, and beauty.

*Requiescat in pace.*

— *Gleaves Whitney is director of the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies at Grand Valley State University.*