

Reflections on Sid Bolkosky

Ron Stockton

Context: My colleague Sid Bolkosky, who had arrived at UM-Dearborn the year before I did, had been a career-long colleague and friend. We worked together in different ways, and produced a Joint Memoir: *Colleagues in Conversation*. Sid was diagnosed with terminal cancer, which produced an outpouring of emotion on campus. I was asked twice to say something about his life. The first occasion was when the Dean wanted something to post on his blog. The second was when we had a Farewell event in his honor. My words speak for themselves.

Comments on Sid's Planned Retirement

December 14, 2011

The first time I met Sid Bolkosky, back in 1973, he was with Lori, his wife, Miriam, his little girl, and Gabe, his newborn son. In a sense that was a perfect introduction since Sid's family is the central force in his life. His scholarship and his classes and his community are important, but his family is first. Anyone hoping to understand him has to understand that.

Sid was hired to teach intellectual history. He got interested in the Holocaust later. Actually, he was tricked into the Holocaust. He was asked to attend a meeting to discuss a possible project to interview Holocaust survivors. The television series *Holocaust* had



just achieved blockbuster status. For people like me, it was a great series, but for those who had experienced that age, it was a dumbed-down Hollywood version of reality. There were hundreds of aging survivors in the area, and some wanted their stories preserved. When Sid got to the meeting, expecting to be on a committee, he realized

there was no committee. He and the person who had invited him were the only people there. “I’ll bring them to you, and you interview them,” the man said. Sid agreed.

Developing a whole new area of expertise is a major undertaking, almost like a new doctorate, but Sid plunged in. Soon he was teaching a course on the Holocaust and interviewing survivors. Teaching the course was something he could handle but there was a dimension to the interviews that he had not anticipated. The famous Polish official, Jan Karski, had once been smuggled into the Warsaw ghetto to see for himself what was actually happening. He was stunned. As the official in charge of the situation in Warsaw, he had volumes of data on his desk. He knew the facts, but, as he said later, “I knew, but I did not *know*.” That second dimension of “knowing” was what Sid encountered. We can only absorb a limited amount of human anguish before it starts to affect us. Sid was affected, but in the end he personally interviewed over 200 of the 300 individuals in the project. UM-D’s Voice-Vision Archive is the result, a permanent world-class record that would not exist if Sid had not devoted three decades of his life to the project. Most of the good things in the world happen because someone says, “This is important, and if no one else will do it, I will do it, even if I don’t get paid for it.” Sid is one of those people.

Sid’s other contribution is the Honors program. Many hundreds of students have gone through this, plunging into the great classics of literature and philosophy and history. In a sense, Sid was uniquely qualified to create this because of his approach to education and learning. Let me cite an example. In one class, Sid had his students study Egyptian hieroglyphs. Today, in an age of *relevant* education, such an esoteric subject would be out of favor, to say the least. Hieroglyphics had nothing to do with the lives of our students, even back in the 1970s, but Sid thought studying something so different would be a good educational experience. His vindication came when one of his students was at the Detroit Institute of Arts and noticed that the Curator had mistranslated one of the hieroglyphic passages on display. There aren’t many professors who can claim that.

I have one last comment. It might embarrass Sid so I am not going to ask his permission. It has to do with Muslim students. We live in a difficult age when the world sometimes throws barriers between students and professors. I cannot tell you how many times I have had Muslim students say how much they learned from him, and how much

they admire him. Many take his Holocaust class. One covered female was an intern for the Voice-Vision archive. Sid has shown that it is possible to transcend those barriers.

Sid once told me that he wanted his gravestone to say “Mensch.” That’s Yiddish. It means a decent human being, someone who is generous and caring.

Indeed.

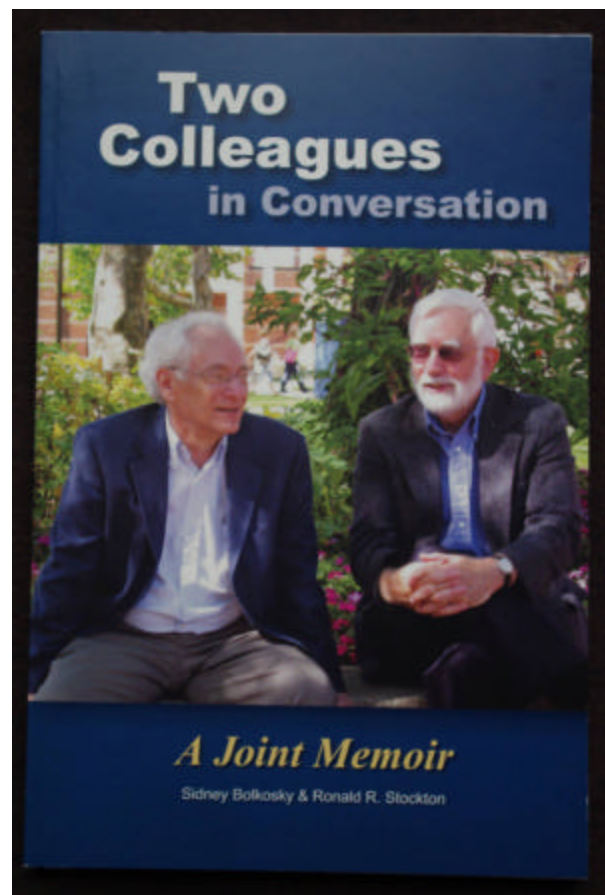
Comments at Sid Bolkosky’s Retirement Reception

February 9, 2012

I have been asked to talk about this book. It is called *Two Colleagues in Conversation: A Joint Memoir*. The introduction tells how it came about, but let me give you the 60 second version. My son lives in Tucson and every time I go to visit him, I go to

Bookman’s Used Book Store. Bookman’s has tens of thousands of books. It is a professor’s version of paradise. In 2008 I saw a book by Francois Mitterand and Elie Wiesel. When Mitterand was leaving the Presidency of France, he invited Wiesel to come for a series of conversations. They talked about their childhoods, families, and lives, plus religion, literature, France, and war. As I read that, I thought, Sid and I could do this. I am not Francois Mitterand and he is not Elie Wiesel but we could do this.

When I got home I told him about the idea and he loved it. I outlined a series of conversations with questions and discussion topics and we started. We just turned on the tape recorder and sat down for eight meetings of about ten hours in total. This was rich conversation.



Sid and I have very different backgrounds and yet we found that we had a lot in common. We both had serious illnesses as children; we both had complex mothers; we both fell in love early. It was an easy series of dialogues, and fun.

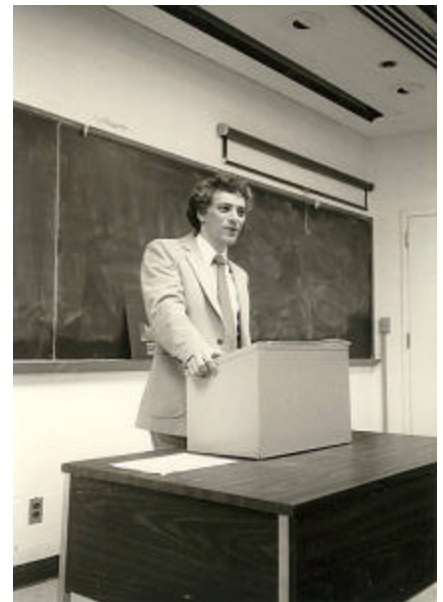
When you write a book you should always have your audience in mind. We had three audiences when we did this project.

The first audience was people such as yourselves, our friends and colleagues. Each individual has a personal history that others don't see. We wanted to let you get beyond the surface. If you spend a couple of hours with this book you will see things you could not have guessed. For those who are interested, if you haven't read it, it is available in better bookstores everywhere, specifically the UM-D bookstore. And Sid and I are here to sign it.

The second audience was the historic record. We viewed this book as a snapshot of academic life in our age. We said in the book that we are dinosaurs, remnants of an older type of academic. We can only imagine what future readers will say:

They marked papers back in those days! They actually met with students and delivered lectures and sat around tables and led discussions about books! They actually thought that ideas and character and values counted. How quaint. How inefficient. Hadn't they learned how to educate students by implanting Stem Cell Ether Knowledge Content Chips? (By the way, I have a prediction: Some of those chips will malfunction and students will still ask, "Will this be on the exam?")

We put a copy of this book into the campus archive because this is not just about us. It is also an institutional history. There is a long chapter in there about UM-Dearborn. When Sid and I came to this campus in the early 1970s it was a collection of temporary buildings that we called modules. We had a vision of something good, something of quality. We are proud of what we achieved. UM-D just celebrated its 50th anniversary. In time it will celebrate its 100th anniversary. Maybe someone will be looking to do a story and will find this book. We hope so.



But we also had a third audience. Sid was ahead of me in almost everything else, but in one way I was ahead of him. It has to do with grandkids and in some ways, this is our *real* audience. In 2008 I had four grandkids and he had none. Since then, Miriam and Ben got busy and produced two amazing little boys, Sam and Ethan.

Our dream—which we never put into words—was that someday those grandkids will say to *their* kids, “you need to read this. Your great grandfather was an interesting person and you will never really understand yourself if you don’t see where you came from.” That would make both of us really happy.

I think it’s time to read a short excerpt from the book. It’s from the last chapter. Chapter eight is the shortest chapter. It has a title but it’s really just two old codgers reflecting on the meaning of life and what is really important. One of the things we talked about is that we both married amazing women who have stuck with us. I met Jane in college but Sid met Lori in kindergarten and by high school they were fast friends. Now, before you jump to conclusions, they were not an “item.” They were just friends. But what is love if not friendship?

There are two short parts I want to read to you. The first was when Sid had a life-threatening health crisis his senior year. He tells what happened and about waking up in the hospital room.

I started to hemorrhage. I checked into the Emergency Room and my spleen was enlarged eight times. Nobody quite knew what that was. Was it an ulcer? Finally they took out my spleen and rerouted my arteries. I had hepatitis because of all the blood transfusions. Then exactly a year later the surgery procedure failed. Nobody in Rochester knew what to do. There was a young guy from the Strong Memorial Hospital at the University of Rochester, who was like 32. He said to my mother, who was hysterical, “I think I can help.” I remember him taking me in February to the other hospital He stopped the bleeding. He came in the next morning and he said, ‘I’m going to take you into surgery.’ I said, “I don’t want to have any more surgery, I’m not bleeding anymore.” He said, “It’s up to you, you’re 18.” I had turned 18 that day. He said, “It’s completely your decision. I think if you leave the hospital you’ll die in 48 hours.” So I said, “Fine, let me think about this.” So I was in surgery for 10 hours and it was the

fourth such operation they had ever done and two of the first three had died. But this guy was a genius...He saved my life. There was no question about it. I remember waking up and looking out the hospital window—I had a private room—and seeing the Sears sign covered in snow. That’s the first thing I saw, and then I looked over and there was Lori. I was in the hospital about six months and she was there just about every day.

The second passage is at their high school graduation ceremony.

(Lori and Miriam: Cue the tear ducts. This is the happy part).

Sid and Lori had been making plans to go off to college, to *different* colleges.

The predictable trajectory was that they would do what they planned to do, go in opposite directions. They would promise to stay in touch, but would inevitably meet other people and get married. They would see each other next at their Tenth High School Reunion, wonder why they had ever parted, but then go home to spend their empty lives producing mediocre children and waiting for Facebook to be invented so they could secretly stay in touch. There is a teaching in the Jewish tradition that a soul fragments at birth and gets born into male and female parts. If you can find the other half of yourself you will be happy. Otherwise...well you’re on your own.

Here is the story:

People used to think when Lori and I were in high school that we were brother and sister. We used to do our Latin homework together. The night we graduated, we had just completed our high school commencement ceremony. I was looking for her and she was looking for me and one of us turned around the other one was there. So we gave each other a big hug and she started to cry. She was leaving for New York, and that was the moment I think we both knew...



This book is the most personally rewarding project I have ever done in my career. How often does anyone get to sit down with a valued colleague and have ten hours of focused, serious discussion? I have never heard of it.

I am really honored that my name is linked through this memoir to that of Sid Bolkosky, perhaps the single most distinguished faculty member in the history of the university.

Congratulations, Sid, on your career, and your family, and your friends, and your students, and all the good things that have been bestowed on you. And thank you for all the good things you have bestowed on the rest of us.

