To Sooner football fans, he was the calm before the contest, but that was just a small part of this man's story.

Remembering J. Clayton Feaver

I knew Clayton Feaver before he knew me. As a graduate student in psychology in the mid-'50s, I spent a lot of time in Gittinger Hall, where Clayton taught his advanced philosophy courses. He had been at the University of Oklahoma for only three years then, but already he was becoming one of the most popular teachers on campus.

On many occasions, I stood in the hall outside his classroom to listen to him lecturing. I was fascinated by what he had to say—but even more by his attitude, his affable manner of interacting with his students and the lively way he moved about the room as graceful as a dancer. Often I stayed there a long time (trying to see and not be seen), too involved to go about my business, too caught up in that luminous scene of a master at work.

So, long before I actually met him, Clayton had become for me the model of the master teacher. Today, after 40 years, he remains for me just that: the master teacher.

It is probable that no other professor in the history of the University of Oklahoma touched the lives of so many students. Semester after semester, he taught his philosophy of religion and ethics course in those large sections of 300 students—more or less. He was uniquely gifted for that demanding and sometimes frustrating role.

The first story I heard about his teaching antics in that large class was that, from time to time, Clayton would bounce a golf ball off the floor while he lectured. When he observed a student nodding off to sleep, he would drop the golf ball into his pocket, withdraw a pingpong ball that he would hurl across the room at the napping student, while shouting, “Hey, wake up!” If wonderful teaching did not keep some of his students awake, stark fear did.

He knew the value of humor, expressive movement and getting close to students. He was never simply a presence at a podium; he was an energy source moving through the large auditorium classroom, engaging

BY J. R. Morris

“The inimitable J. Clayton Feaver once illustrated ‘infinity’ to his philosophy class by starting a chalk line on the blackboard, continuing it completely around the room, out the door, down the hall and out the building, he himself disappearing for the rest of the day.”

—Sooner Magazine
Summer 1987
first one student then another. His efforts never were directed toward the discovery of pat answers but rather toward the opening of closed minds to the complex questions of religion, morality and ethics. Thousands of former students over three decades never will forget their experiences in his presence and—for many—the great impact he had on their personal lives.

In the decade of the '60s, Clayton and Itaught together in weekend seminars on several occasions; some of my fondest memories come from that extraordinary experience. He believed in the power of positive reinforcement, so he always made his colleague feel brighter and wiser than was ever the case. He found witty and benign ways to make suggestions or to help to shape an inchoate thought into some measure of respectability. And he was simply fun to be with—with his great humor, warmth and openness.

He could move from being playful to being profoundly serious with such ease and clarity that I was forever beguiled by his artistry. He could express an enormously complex thought in simple and unadorned language, and he could light up the faces of his listeners with surprise and sudden insight. At the same time, he was the wizard of the perplexing question or the cryptic phrase, leaving his listener to wonder long afterward what it was he really meant by that.

In that same decade, Clayton and I served together on the executive committee of the Southwest Center for Human Relations Studies. He had been one of the prime movers in getting that center started, and he emerged as one of the most visible and courageous campus leaders on behalf of human rights and desegregation efforts. In the turbulent days of student unrest and the anti-war movement, he stood tall as one who was trusted by everyone.

There were few critical issues of that time on which he was not consulted or in some way involved. I
Demand for Feaver's classes necessitated sections of 300 or more in large auditoriums, the perfect venue for this master teacher who knew the value of humor, expressive movement and getting close to students.

remember the day after the students were killed at Kent State, when thousands of our students rallied on the North Oval. There was Clayton on a make-shift stage in front of the massed students, giving a calming voice to the distress, pain, anger and frustration of that stormy day.

His unending concern was human welfare and the human condition. “Never be afraid of involvement,” he once said. To paraphrase another of his statements: There is no authentic existence without profound involvement, without mutual participation and sharing, which is to say, without community. He was a faithful practitioner of the values he preached and an extraordinary citizen of the University community. He was open to change, never grew stale and was constantly renewing himself with fresh ideas and new learning.

He was named David Ross Boyd Professor in 1959, based on the excellence of his teaching and counseling students. One of the characteristics that made Clayton so effective in counseling was his unconditional regard for others. He placed no conditions on the worth of another, and his natural warmth and acceptance always came through. Over the years countless students sought his help, and he was always willing to help when he could; he often escorted students to the Counseling Center (where I worked in the '50s) when he thought it advisable.

Late in his career he became the director of the Scholar Leadership Enrichment Program, continuing after his retirement in 1981 for six more years. (Retirement may have been the only thing at which he ever failed.) His leadership of the SLEP program—the dazzling array of leaders, scholars and creative personalities he brought to the campus—was one of his most significant contributions to the University and to the state, a fitting capstone to his remarkable career. Of course, he never stopped teaching—even in his last year he taught a course with his son, John, at the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma in Chickasha.

In 1973, he started giving the prayer before OU football games and continued to do so through the last home game of the 1994 season. His prayers—always free of sectarian language—were simple but eloquent affirmation of what he believed: the necessity of play, the value of sportsmanship, the appeal of common decency, the virtue of community and the power of personal reflection. Stated a hundred different ways on a hundred different Saturday afternoons, his prayers were all reflections of the man we knew—this good and wise teacher, loving husband and father, revered friend and mentor, beloved colleague. He found great joy in life, expressed good will for all, and—for more than 40 years in the University community—he enriched the lives of all of us who knew him.

Though he lived long, he died too young.