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Shoreview, MN 55126
July 5, 2002

Coursen Siblings
via Steve Coursen
1114 Fieldcrest Drive
Austin, TX 78704

Dear Coursens:

Somehow we seem more lonely this time. I guess our other couple friends still have one member alive. Well, I can assure you Lee and Bob have been fully occupying my mind since the lovely service, and now exploring every cranny of our association.

I'm sorry I didn't have this ready to hand to you at Bob's service. It might have been fun to read it together to react to things about the workplace you probably knew little about. Some years ago, I noted in our church that the adult sons and daughters knew very little about their parents' non-home life. One woman said at her father's memorial service, "I'm glad you all showed what my father had done. He was always just 'Daddy' to me."

Then I realized that nowhere was there any journaling of our programs for the birthing of products such as the 100-precinct sample. Our own sons and daughters are beginning to ask about some of the things I did. The StarTrib's account of your father's life was just thwacked by Wally Conhaim, but it gave me the final bleat to the need for telling more about what Bob Coursen did.

So here is the result of a mixed motivation. If your eyes glaze over, just leaf through the professional record to the personal touches. There will be no pop-quiz tomorrow morning.

Our kids give us great pleasure in their work and play, and their coworkers or opponents compliments of being good at their work and being nice people. Given your stellar parentage, I trust you get similar notice.

Barbara and I are happy to have been around Lee and Bob for a good long time. And the friendship that blossomed between the rocks we were splitting is precious.

Sincerely,

Charles Backstrom

A TRIBUTE TO MY FRIEND ROBERT COURSEN

By Charles Backstrom
June 29, 2002

PERSONAS

Here was one of the finest human beings I have met. And surely the gentlest.

Bob Coursen never found it necessary nor possible to treat anyone other than as a fellow child of God. Because we are, and he saw it.

In a high-pressure operation like a newsroom or an election research tank, the requirements are so demanding that custom builds up shouting, anger, and blame assignment. People write books and movies about it. But Bob's desk was a quite place. At first, I walked past it several times on my way to see someone else, and even was introduced to him several times before I would greet him. I think he never reshaped the culture, but everybody knew he may be in it but was never of it.

Then he was in charge of the election-night project. The newspaper building became a more pleasant place to be. There was always the welcome, the asking after personal and family matters, and there was always jokes and fun. The work was satisfying because it was always important, and always well done. But the fun is extra. Each year I would panic at some point – something was behind (the first year I worked on the 100-precinct sample I didn't have the program debugged until 4:00 p.m. on Election Day). Bob was always equanimous, the same cool control, working on the machinery and confident that it would work.

The last year we did the 100-precinct project, when I came in late afternoon to start the long night, the programmer had not got around to even looking to see if the program was delivering what we needed (it wasn't). Later, that programmer told me I didn't need all the data I had asked for. I have never been angrier in all my whole life. The paper had decided to save money by having the corporate research department do the election data processing, rather than the news managers. But corporate research never has to meet a daily news deadline. That's the only thing that sets reporters apart from ordinary mortals. And it does change you to work under that guillotine. The corporate people showed their independence, in my view, by denying what we needed and not working on our project until they got their other work done. Being in the news department, Bob could not command the data processor to do anything. I left the room dejected. But soon our data reports began to print. I do not know how he worked the magic.

Bob always had the same facial expression and voice inflection the whole evening. Nobody ever got him to act or speak in a way he didn't choose. It would be nice to be able to say he finally was able to get the whole establishment to act in this way, but I don't think even he could pull that off. At least everybody knew how he acted, and respected him for it.

INSTITUTION BUILDER

Bob was conscious that he was creating something new over the years he worked on the Minnesota Poll.

Another person actually started the Minnesota Poll about 1948. Bob Coursen became its Director about 1964. It was among the very first newspaper-sponsored polls, and it earned the top-quality ranking. I saw the Minnesota Poll as a part of Minnesota's political system, even though not an actual part of government or political parties. It reported on attitudes toward disputed issues, and thus had an effect on policy. One example was gun control. Ward club street wisdom said a candidate should never promise to stiffen gun control, as he was certain to be beat. The Minnesota Poll showed a large majority for gun control, a candidate for state attorney general endorsed it and won – and enacted stiffer gun control. The Poll made the difference.

But the height of the Poll's impact was in reporting on candidates for high office, pairing them in pre-election tests. Everyone held their breath until the story came out. One party chair said he was glad the Minnesota Poll existed, because then he could be honest. Before the Poll was there, he would have to say his candidates were doing well, even if he felt they were losing. After the Poll was launched, he could give his true assessment because in a few days the contrary evidence would expose the bragging manager's predictions as false.

Given this level of esteem, the Minnesota Poll was deflated in 1978 when it stumbled. The Minnesota Poll predicted a DFL victory, which in fact turned out to be a disastrous defeat. To explain what had happened, there was an examination of poll methods by a blue-ribbon committee, and the newspaper suspended operating the Poll. Later the Minnesota Poll was reinstated, but it never had the same prestige or impact on policy.

My own view is that the Minnesota Poll got a bad rap. In the first place, predicting election outcomes is the hardest thing for any poll to do. The question asks: If the election were being held today, how would you vote? Of course, the election is not being held now, and the campaigning continues, so results may differ. Another serious problem is deciding whom to count as likely voters. Many registered voters simply don't vote – 40 percent even in high-turnout Minnesota. That means you have to throw away almost half of your results. Which half? And sampling error is not as critical on support for issues as for voting. If a poll shows 53-47 percent against women's choice on abortion, the actual figure of, say, 56-44 or 50-50 isn't that much different. If the figures measure candidate support, on the other hand, sampling error could allow a different winner. The blue-ribbon committee found that there were too many Democrats in the sample. They said the poll managers should have weighted them down, but the reading public rejects "cooking the data." As an aside, no one would suggest such reweighting today on political party – parties have far less affiliation. Parties are not nearly as important in people's lives, and a substantial number of poll respondents will say they are a Republican in a pre-election poll, and then ten days later in a follow-up poll say they are a Democrat. And many more than actually did say they voted for the winning candidate.

This realistic discussion of the hazards of polling cannot be explained to the public, who are not charitable about pollsters who fail to predict elections. If there is no independent media poll in a state, the public must rely on insiders in the campaigns to drop hints that favor their candidates.

CREATIVE ARTIST

Bob Coursen never ceased trying to nurture public opinion.

Bob would face the work he was doing with a constant attention to how it could be done better. Or how to meet a new need with a new approach. One attempt of Bob Coursen was to respond to a fundamental criticism of the survey research method that underlay the Minnesota Poll (and every poll). As public opinion polls become more common in every area of life, some observers criticize “government by opinion poll.”

The criticism is made that the way the poll works is to stop people in their private activities of life for a moment – earlier at the door, and now by the telephone. Without a pause there are posed with questions about the candidates or a public policy choice. The questions themselves are designed to be simple. There is no time for the person to think. The respondent answers and the pollster moves on to another respondent.

This is immensely superficial, like “Do you think the USA was right in invading Afghanistan looking for terrorists?” But in reality that issue is an immensely complicated situation even among experts in global and regional religious, cultural, and economic affairs. The average poll respondent couldn’t handle that much information so gives an answer that he or she hopes will make them look good, but is not well thought out. The idea of having a forum in some communities to which poll respondents would be invited for time of listening to experts and discussion with each other before making a recommendation on one major issue. It was many years later, but ultimately the *StarTribune* had tried the format of community forums to report in significant new depth what people think about public policy in the manner and context that will be entitled to more attention by policy makers.

Another small example of a creative idea is the Minnesota Poll Advisory Board annual meeting this was a group of perhaps twenty locally prominent Minnesotans such as a medical doctor, president of small town industries, county or city newspaper publisher, farmer, teacher, truck driver. Together they were expected to have their hands on or ears to the ground to sense what people were feeling or reaction to public policy.

They weren’t expected to have anything to do with methods of public opinion sampling (but might be teachable enough to return home with a new understanding and in depth). The challenge was to make the meeting seem like a worthwhile experience.

Bob gave a different idea than a talking head. And he asked me to do it. We gave them a one-page questionnaire, perhaps ten or twelve items. We handed them out after dinner, and asked them to check off their answers. True / False.

We made the questions as provocative as we could. We loaded them with conventional wisdom that doesn't hold up under careful survey research. Then I went through the questions one by one, saying what current public opinion research showed. At least half of the group would be "wrong" on any item. They took me on as a hostile force. Never doing this is what makes "Minnesota Nice" an undesirable trait, not the helpful and friendly stereotype the phrase now summons. It was coined to mean that no Minnesotan ever discusses public affairs with their neighbors because it may result in an argument. Well, the Minnesota Poll Advisory group got rid of that inhibition in that session.

Another major creative effort was designing a way to report on the Minnesota political party caucuses. No one had ever seriously attempted to conduct a scientific sample of effort and effect of the caucuses. There are 4,000 precincts in Minnesota, with both of the two parties then in existence that means 8,000 precinct caucuses in Minnesota. We started with the hundred precincts we had drawn for analyzing the previous election. We recruited an observer to go over each party's caucus. For the first time in Minnesota, we could report how many never even met (25%). We saw what groups had organized their membership to go (teachers the most) and then what happened concerning electing delegates to the party conventions. We even had a rating for having a raucous caucus.

THE CONSULTANT'S PRODUCT

I was officially listed as a consultant for the *StarTribune* (*Tribune* in those days) on election matters. What we did was to build a computerized model of the state.

We found we could, using vote for the governor in the previous election, get 100 precincts that in total averaged within one-tenth percentage point of the whole state. We let the computer select the precincts according to our rules, so that we had no personal bias in coverage. Then we investigated the community where the respondent lived – its ethnic and nationality background, its relative affluence.

On election night we sent someone to each of the precincts and had them phone in the tabulated results. We then projected these to the whole state in time for the morning paper's printing. Election night was a vast human and digital interaction. Poll employees went to the precinct or vote tabulation center. They called in results, which were keyboarded into the computer and the program started. Scores of calculations were made – most of them discarded when they didn't show a trend. But those that showed anything about the result – how heavy the turnout, the split between candidates, the shift in support since the previous governor election were passed immediately to the reporters. This is what the analysis effort did: If the Republican candidate this year was running 5 points ahead of last year in our sample, and last year that candidate got 47% in the actual full state's returns, we declared him the winner. Luckily the whole effort was never wrong in projecting the result. That difference is critical to understand what we were doing: The Minnesota Poll predicted the winner based on how respondents said they would vote before they actually voted. The election night 100-precinct model operated only on votes already cast, and projected the winner based on changes in the precincts from a sample that kept early-reporting precincts from biasing the results as the news services do. It was a stunning

advance in election analysis, and the Coursen/Backstrom team allowed themselves a breath and smiles for everyone.

The national TV networks began doing the same thing for projecting national candidates for President and statewide U.S. Senate campaigns in critical states, but we had ours operating before they did. The national networks also conducted survey research at the polling place. Thus they would have results sometimes decisive enough to project one candidate would carry the state. They denied doing it, but usually could not restrain themselves from publishing early projections. They could be accused of influencing the election, since early victory celebrations could influence late voters not to bother to go, possibly affecting the result. The *Tribune* never did this.

The crew we assembled to do the work was talented and eager. We worked well together. I would come once a week and review the status and usefulness of the data we were collecting. I checked on the programming – all the manipulations we would need on election night, since there would be no way then to try to find trends in the data. Next week I'd be back, and make the next work assignments.

Bob Coursen had to keep track of the organization and make sure the work got done and the data were correct. For all of us, this project was extra work. I was carrying my regular load of teaching and advising. Bob had all the ongoing work of the Minnesota Poll. The whole process sounds calm and organized in preparation, but there were some near catastrophes. Once we barely averted a fatal accident, leaving in the old practice data from the last election instead of working with the new data.

I cannot speak to the reason the *Tribune* didn't do the 100-precinct model any more. It was of course fantastically expensive. A good intellectual reason to cash in their chips was that aggregate data by precinct could not address a new situation in voting – the so-called gender gap. In the past women voted pretty much like men – that is, within one household there would seldom be a split. The assumption was that most women probably thought like their husbands, or felt domineered on election matters. But women were more against the Vietnam War than men. And women were more economically liberal as sharper Republican/Democrat issue voting appeared in the U.S. House and Senate on welfare, health, and other safety net programs. Well, by its nature an aggregate data model will not say anything about women's gap, for one reason: men and women like to live nearby each other. Married couples, and a nigg new census category – unmarried couples – like to share the same rooms. So there are no precincts that are largely one sex. Rarely such can be found – a men's dorm, or in a rotten borough in St. Paul before reapportionment contained only one building, a nunnery. No men. Only survey research could identify these gapers. Fatal blow to aggregate data.

ASSESSING THE CONSULTANT

Bob Coursen didn't hire me. Some other staffers had got the idea for the sample, and somehow were led to me, probably because I had a huge collection of data covering Minnesota's recent

elections. And both the papers and I had access to computers to handle the huge data file that is available.

But that didn't mean that Bob couldn't join in the creation and perfection of this new giant. Bob in his usual nice way never made a direct complaint about my work. But he got his point across. It was in the nature of a compliment. Bob would introduce me to someone else – an editor, reporter, janitor – Bob would say to him or her, “Charles is a complete source on everything we need to know about elections in Minnesota. We put the results before him, and it triggers a stream of insights useful to reports needing to be made in the study. This works as long as we have him trapped in our office with the data in front of him. But once he leaves here he never thinks about the project at all.” When Bob needed my attention he found it difficult to catch me. But finally Bob thought of a way. Our oldest son Paul assisted me in election night analysis. He says he began work keypunching into IBM cards my huge data file about one week after toilet training. I thought it was a little later, say age 13. On the model election night, I had him ready with hand calculator to make any special analyses that occurred to me when obviously we couldn't stop the computer and amend the operating program for a new calculation. Anyway, Paul got to know Bob.

On pre-election day Paul got a letter from Bob:

Dear Paul:

Thank you again for your assistance on our election model last year. I'm sure you are having a good year at school. I heard you were out for debate, and doing well. That is a real challenge, which will serve you well.

Sincerely, Bob Coursen.

PS: Do you ever see your Dad around? Would you please ask him to call me back about a matter I have pending? And if you see a computer-printed table on the vote for Secretary of State for 1952 that your father had annotated, just mail it back to me in the envelope provided. Thanks much. BC

TAKING ON THE WORLD

In the midst of our meetings to plan election analysis, I woke one morning in fright. It was in the depth of the Cold War, which presented so many opportunities for planned or accidental use of atomic weapons. I said to Bob at our next meeting, “How can we go about our daily affairs when the world is ready to explode? I think we should each do something about it.”

In a few days, Bob and Lee contacted us. They and Wally and Roger Conhaim agreed that we should do something more. So we scheduled a series of dinners in each other's homes followed by a working session. Each of us prepared something for the group. In my case, it was how the political system can be made to respond to public pressure. Bob did the same for media, and Roger the economic system.

We studied these study points and planned a little concerted effort. Our objective was to become more sophisticated about the systems that are operative. Then we might make some personal decisions about trying to change the direction of policy in a more productive way.

We talked of actuating religious communities. Someone learned about exchanging students in Russian and American homes.

We have no way of knowing if our new knowledge increased our effective communication with our acquaintances in other groups, but that seems to be the most likely result. I think we left it to each person whether they wanted to do any activity, and didn't ask anybody to report about it. So we can't trace our possible impacts on public policy. But we all knew we had a more realistic understanding of the difficulty institutional paths to war and peace. So we felt a little better for the attention we undertook.

And look around you! The cold war retreated in the face of global warming. So who can say that us six people weren't contributors to the change in opinion demanded more emphasis on peace.

FRIENDS

The best part of the social meetings was we got to know the spouses. And something about the kids as they were introduced running through the rooms those evenings.

We heard something of how the other families played their parenting roles. Like hoe Lee had kept their son Steve alive after an accident through a sheer act of will. So we are all better people.

I marvel at how this business association got translated into deep personal care and friendship. The Backstrom's lives are different because we knew the Coursens.

And we know how spouses met. My memory (although aging faster than the rest of my bod) about the Coursens could not be mistaken. Besides, the closest participants are not available just now to challenge my picture. The point is that despite the obvious conclusion about how Lee and Bob's great personal, intellectual, ethical, and spiritual characteristics must be what drew them together, we found out it was a little more elemental feeling.

Bob was in the Navy, and was assigned to the specialized training program where the services billeted the servicemen at colleges (who had virtually no male students, everyone having been called up). Bob was assigned to, was it Buffalo? – some place in New York State. Lee was the chief poobah in intersorority there. She thought it would be friendly to have a party and invite the Navy. Perhaps it was Christmas and some of the boys would miss their home Christmas for the first time. After the party, the committee was cleaning up, and Lee called out, "Did anyone happen to get the name of the cutest sailor?" "Yeah," someone said, "It was Bob something." Lee apparently followed up on that clue.

As I began to think about the point now, Bob was still cute last time I saw him, and all of these other traits we have been discussing were just cake under the icing.