

Memorial Minute
Lawrence Milton Bott
February 18, 1924 – August 7, 2011

Larry Bott's membership in Friends Meeting of Washington was approved on March 11, 1990, as a transfer from Langley Hill Friends Meeting. In 2002, Larry moved to Altamonte Springs, Florida for what were said to be health reasons. Larry died on August 7, 2011. He is survived by his wife, Shu-Ying Chen, and his three children, Ross Alan Bott, Steven Eric Bott, and Alethea May Bott Blanton.

Larry Bott held a degree from Stanford University and a doctorate from Howard University. He specialized in organizational development, working for the federal government regulation of civilian aviation. He was a World War II veteran (serving, we believe, in the Navy) and shared stories of shipboard life with a few friends, at least once expressing the wish that his ashes might be scattered into the sea from a ship like the one on which he served. A man of extraordinary skills, friends variously described him as a brilliant cook, a skilled gardener, an architect, an electrician, a carpenter, and always as a student of the human condition.

During his time at Friends Meeting of Washington, Larry served as Alternate Clerk of Ministry & Worship Committee, a member of Personnel Committee, a teacher in First Day School, an instructor in our Inquirers' Classes, organizer of an important retreat held in 1990, and on a development sub-committee of Finance & Property Committee. Members of Ministry & Worship Committee recall in particular meetings held in the tea house he had built in a wooded area behind his Vienna, Virginia home, highlighted by dinners he cooked and served on china, with silver implements and cloth napkins. For Inquirers Classes, Larry was a master of the Socratic Method; those attending realized that they were there to learn, not simply to receive pre-digested doctrine neatly packaged into a printed brochure.

Despite his committee service, he wrote to the presiding clerk in 1992, expressing his unease at the usual manner that Friends deal with issues—that is, by assigning problems to committees. Instead, Larry urged that Friends needed to ask searching questions about the physical, personal, psychological, and spiritual conditions that have historically sustained Quaker involvement in secular life.

His personal kindness was legendary. During the 1990s, he became a companion to Molly Tully's husband, Andrew Tully, whose brilliant career was eroded in the end by severe Alzheimer's disease. Once a week, Larry would sit with Andy, freeing Molly to get out of the house. That experience led Molly, with Larry's assistance, to form Friends Club, a group for men with Alzheimer's that met for many years at Friends Meeting of Washington before moving to Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church in Bethesda. That group at various times included Sargent Shriver and the husband of Sandra Day O'Connor.

Similarly, Larry's capacity for intense friendship was unparalleled. Ask those of us who were lucky enough to be a part of a small group – even a group of two – with him, and they will report his intensity, his depth of caring, his capacity to take on tasks or burdens for a friend. His greatest gift was a willingness to share candidly his own struggles and joys. He never made a secret of his belief that he fell short of his own expectations. Friends worried that his high standards for himself led him to a dark view of his own success as a human being.

Larry always looked to the work of Henry Burton Sharman as his most important spiritual guide. Sharman informed Larry's generous and open understanding of traditional Christianity.

Larry referred to the Meeting for Worship that historically met at 10:00 a.m. in Quaker House Living Room as “my primary spiritual community.” Indeed, it is in connection with that Meeting for Worship, established “with a special welcome to gays, lesbians, transgenders, and others,” that Larry Bott made his deepest impact.

Some may forget how deeply homophobic a city Washington, DC was in those years. Federal jobs were closed to openly gay men and women; police routinely raided gay clubs, having alerted television stations in advance so that desperately frightened men, their hands cuffed behind their backs to prevent being able to shield their identity from broadcast on the 6 o’clock news, were led off to face loss of jobs, friends, and family support. Yet sexual minorities shared the need felt by the majority for a spiritual home. Even there, virtually all faiths rejected them, labeling them as damaged or as sinners. Even Quakers, who were accepting in principle—reflecting our belief that there was that of God in everyone—dealt with gays and lesbians somewhat in the fashion of a prim aunt, saying in effect, “Can’t we talk about something more pleasant?”

Faced with near universal rejection, LBGTQ Friends began meeting at Washington’s small, down-at-the-heels, out-of-the-way Gay Community Center in the 1400 block of Church Street, NW. Larry Bott became a regular attendee, friendly though reserved about sharing anything of his personal life or circumstances. In time, the group decided to move to Friends Meeting of Washington, which, after an extended, sometimes painful process of discernment, agreed to welcome them. Sadly, Larry felt he dared not follow them, fearing exposure if he were to worship with a group known to include gays. Happily, over time, he felt more comfortable and returned to worship at Quaker House Living Room. Once out, he was in! Larry could be counted on to put his considerable skills and intellect in service of activities of the group – whether it was the AIDS Quilt’s visits, the AIDS Coffee House, talking with frightened, sad young people, Larry was there.

A close friend who watched and cared for Larry Bott had this to say of him:

Larry was a keenly sensitive man whose willingness to struggle personally gave him deep insights to bring to bear on behalf of the wider Meeting. Larry’s capacity to feel, nearly immobilized by emotions and his occasional stubborn streak, would be outmatched by his deep compassion time after time. More often than not appearing in a faded denim jacket, Larry would “show up and do,” helping community appear in the midst of confusion; here and there his efforts would move a small mountain or two. As he freed himself from being a Washington bureaucrat, Larry put to work the skills and values he had used with success in his previous life—listening with an open mind, expressing serious opinions in measured terms, and suggesting innovative solutions. These did not circumscribe his ability to make fun of himself, nor did it impede his willingness to seek advice from others. Larry was able to look back at his life as the apparently straight man who appeared to have it all and not be overly impressed with himself. More veiled was his struggle with depression, accentuated by his sense of having let his wife and family down by not being able to be the person he believed that they expected. Sometimes members of the Meeting were able to knit Larry into community in a way that helped him balance his seeming disharmonies.

To know Larry Bott was to be admitted to a charmed circle where one observed a man of extraordinarily talents, compassion, and intellect who too often allowed self-doubts to rob himself of the satisfaction that he so richly deserved.