

REMARKS AT MEMORIAL SERVICE FOR ARTHUR P. BECKER

November 21, 1978

First Unitarian Church

Shortly after I came to Milwaukee in 1956 to be the minister of this church I met a quiet and pleasant man whom I was to meet here on many Sunday mornings through the twenty two years that have passed since then. He came to church frequently, through some periods regularly, usually alone, stayed for a short time after the service, and he and I nearly always greeted each other, shook hands, exchanged a sentence or two, and, I think, took pleasure in our meetings. This was Arthur Becker, and I did not know for many years what distinction he had won and continued to earn in his field of study and teaching, nor did I know that he was subject through all his professional life to frightening and painful attacks of asthma. He was a quiet man who wanted his work to speak for him and who hid the difficult ordeals of his affliction.

He was the son of immigrant parents who came to this country separately in their early years, and it was his mother, I am told, who pointed him toward college and university study, and who, on week ends, sent him with his brother to read at the library rather than to play outdoors. Even so he was a music major before he began serious graduate study in economics, and his instruments were the piano and clarinet. When after marriage and several years of teaching in other colleges he returned to Milwaukee in 1948, first to the University Extension and then to the old State Teachers' College and the merged university, it was perhaps in search of his roots, but, doubtless also because his parents were aging, and he wished to be near them.

It is an interesting fact that before returning to Milwaukee, he had written to friends here advocating the university merger which was not consummated until some years later. As head of his department before and after merger he took a major role in its development. His special interest was in the relation of taxes to land values, an interest derived and much refined from the Henry George school of economic thought, and in this special field he was a leading national authority. In a considerable list of responsibilities and recognitions that came to him it is worth mentioning here that he was a founder of the National Committee on Taxation, Resources, and Economic Development, which was a gathering of brilliant names and minds. His list of books and published monographs is a long one. He was not interested in research for its own sake, but sought for its practical applications. As a department head he was encouraging to younger colleagues. One of these whose office has been next to Dr. Becker's for five years was impressed by his willingness to give much time to students outside of class. I am reliably informed that he worked in a magnificently cluttered office, piled with books and articles he felt he must read, and might for he read constantly, and also might not, since no one can read everything. He was a clipper who clipped and stored vast amounts of printed material. His professional integrity was beyond question, and his loyalty to the university was unwavering.

Of course he was a personal as well as a professional man. His wife speaks of him as "a man of great courage in major things," who was most supportive of her in her own not untroubled life, and a steadying influence in the crises large or small of his children's lives. He was a sentimental father. He loved to travel, and took his sons on long and short camping trips. He was a fixer of things at home. One of his sons

Remarks at Memorial Service for Arthur P. Becker, page 2

says simply that he was a good father, that he was always in a good mood when they were together, that he was stable and optimistic. "Who's Who in America" quotes him about his career. He wrote, "My scholarly efforts as an economist have been guided by what I regard as socially important rather than popular. This is not the usual road to success." He might have omitted the second sentence. If there is a note of rueful doubt there, we can certainly allow it and accept it. He wished to contribute on a large scale to his field, and it can only appear to those colleagues who knew him well that he did.

Memory is as important to us who live as immediate experience is. In the flux of immediate things and events it is often hard to see clearly and with certainty. But in memory, if we remember all, the outlines of a life often come to a fresh distinctness, and love is refined from the torrents of feeling that flow in actual life, and grief and loneliness receded at length before the lasting realities of human belonging that survive loss. To Arthur Becker's family, and, indeed, to all his friends and co-workers, I commend the perspectives of memory, and the blessing that may come with them.

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Minister