A Death
On Monday, June 12, 2006, our dear colleague and friend Larry D. Terry, while attending a meeting of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools in Atlanta, suddenly entered what was apparently a state of anaphylactic shock. It may have been set off by an allergen found in a newly prescribed medication. Respiratory arrest followed. After five days of unconsciousness, with his family at his side, Larry died at Emory University Hospital. He was 52 at the time and in the prime of his life.

A Life
Larry Darnell Terry was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, to Helen and Verba Terry. His father, known to all as “Flash,” was a famed blues guitarist who traveled widely to perform. He preceded Larry in death by about two years, as did Larry’s stepfather, Mitchell Williams. His mother, Helen Williams, continues to reside in Tulsa. He is also survived by four siblings: an older brother, Walter (Gene) Terry of Carrollton, Texas, and three younger sisters—Brenda Bridges of Dallas, Sheila Harbert of Tulsa, and La Ronda Buggs of Tulsa. Larry had four children: Larry D. Terry II, who is currently completing a doctorate in public administration at the University of Texas at Dallas; a daughter Feliz, who resides in Plano, Texas; and sons Jacob and Gavin, both of whom reside in Shaker Heights, Ohio.

Larry attended Booker T. Washington High School in Tulsa, where he was a star defensive end on the football team. He attended college at Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri, majoring in political science and also playing football. Two years later, at the University of Missouri–Columbia, he received a master’s degree in community development. While earning this degree, he had his first taste of bureaucracy, working as a planner in the state of Missouri’s Division of Youth Services in Jefferson City.

In retrospect, Larry’s life and career were altered forever in 1978, when he happened to run into Gary Wamsley in the Houston airport following a criminal justice planning workshop they had both attended. Virginia Tech’s new Center for Public Administration and Policy (CPAP) had just been formed, and Larry was urged to apply to its doctoral program. The following year, despite weak GRE scores that the faculty decided to ignore, he was admitted and came to campus.

Larry remained in Blacksburg for the next 12 years. At CPAP, he was a solid though not an exceptional student (receiving a B+ and four A– grades from me, according to my old records). At the same time, he was immensely popular among his fellow students, engaging them in endless friendly arguments about the intellectual and cultural issues of the day. His progress as a student was not particularly fast, partly because he needed to work to feed his family. He made frequent trips to Washington, D.C., to do consulting or training for the Cooperative Extension Service, the city of Alexandria’s Office of Youth Services, and the Communications Workers of America. His other jobs were hardly professional: My office roommate, Dr. Albert Sturm, was in the practice of hiring Larry to wash his car now and then for a good fee, even though Al’s Buick was never very dirty.

In 1983, Larry’s financial situation bettered when he was appointed assistant professor in the College of Business and Economics at Radford University, located a few miles from Blacksburg. His teaching experience there made him realize that he was a natural in the classroom. He had a habit of giving undergraduates unusual learning experiences, such as tracing the institutional history of their university from the time it was the State Normal School for Women. In 1989, Radford promoted him to associate professor with tenure, and he remained in that position until 1991.

After Larry completed his doctoral course work and was ready to launch a dissertation, I was flattered...
when he asked me to be his director. One day, while discussing possible topics on leadership, I casually mentioned that a continuously ignored theme was how administrators must be good maintainers and well as builders. He seized on that meager comment like a bulldog and proceeded to write a first-rate dissertation titled "A Theory of Administrative Conservatorship." Before the ink was dry on the committee's sign-off page, Larry was revising the manuscript and putting out feelers to publishers. Eventually, it was published by Sage as Leadership of Public Bureaucracies: The Administrator as Conservator (Terry 1995a). A second edition was issued by M. E. Sharpe a few years later (Terry 2003), by which time it had become a classic in the field.

In 1992, Larry and his family moved to Cleveland so that he could assume a position as a tenured associate professor at Cleveland State University's Maxine Goodman Levin College of Urban Affairs. He quickly became a popular teacher there and one of the college's (and the field's) most productive scholars. Within four years, he had become a full professor, and in four more, he was directing all of the college's graduate and professional development programs. In 2000, a year before he left Cleveland State, he was named interim associate dean and chair.

By this time, Larry had been appointed editor-in-chief of the Public Administration Review. He served in this position for one full term of five years, from 2000 to 2005. Throwing himself into this new challenge with great energy, Larry began by touring the country to meet with faculty and students in the field to learn what they expected from the journal. He negotiated a contract with Blackwell Publishing of Boston to handle the journal's production and distribution, and he successfully sought outside funding. As a result, PAR took a number of unprecedented steps, such as hiring an in-house copyeditor, increasing the number of pages per issue from 96 to 160, placing archived issues online, and publishing special issues (the most recent, published in 2002, was dedicated to exploring the public administration aspects of September 11). Earnings from the journal rose to record heights. The board of editors was transformed from a passive set of individual reviewers to a corporate body that was actively involved in the journal's life. A rapid-response system was adopted to shorten the manuscript review process, reducing turnaround time from 45 to 33 days (Terry 2005a). When it came time to hand the reins over to another team, Larry designed a systematic two-year transition that allowed for the retention of the institutional gains that had been made under his leadership.

In 2001, Larry relocated from Cleveland State to the University of Texas at Dallas, taking the PAR editorship with him. He had originally visited the Richardson campus to be considered for a tenured full professorship in public administration. During a routine interview with Provost Hobson Wildenthal, however, Larry made such a positive impression as a potential higher education administrator that steps were immediately taken to hire him not only as a professor but also as associate provost. Hobson and Larry became close colleagues, and for the rest of Larry's life, the two met each Saturday over a meal (Larry had had a similar relationship with David Roselle, past provost at Virginia Tech). In 2003, he took on broader leadership responsibilities as executive vice provost for academic affairs, and in 2005, he assumed the portfolio of vice president for business affairs, placing him in charge of the operational side of the 14,000-student university.

A Heart

In trying to characterize Larry's complex personality, one descriptor comes to mind: heart. He possessed an overabundance of what is suggested by this colloquial term. Moreover, two separate dimensions of this quality seemed to be present in him, side by side: stout-heartedness and warm-heartedness.

Larry did not succeed from any head start he was given. He was born of African American parents in the black community of North Tulsa, a city that had endured serious race riots during the 1920s. He was born at home, not in a hospital. His substantial birth weight of 10 pounds was determined on a fruiterer's scale. While Larry was growing up, his father Flash would drive city buses to supplement the family's income, but on some days, there was not enough food on the table for five children. At Christmas, there was not always enough money for presents. The attainment of a college education or professional training seemed unthinkable.

Yet remarkably, Larry developed a sufficiently stout heart that he was not held back by anything. Somehow, he decided that obstacles could also be launching pads. We cannot know for sure, but his father probably taught him that with hard work, talent, flair, and ease with people, he could go far. Likewise, his less flamboyant stepfather was a role model for applying dependable, indefatigable effort to every undertaking. In high school, Larry learned that he could succeed as athlete, a starting point for building self-confidence. Yet at the same time, he realized that what he really craved in life was not fame or riches but learning. When it came time to consider college, Larry turned down scholarship offers from several prestigious universities because they made a point of assuring him that easy classes would be arranged by the athletic department. By contrast, less well-known Lincoln University promised him not only a nice scholarship but also solid academic coursework. At Lincoln, he had the opportunity to gain leadership experience as
a prominent member of its chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi, a national black fraternity.

What I call Larry’s “warm heart” certainly advanced his career, but it was not a tool of ambition. His warmth was natural and absolutely genuine. This quality was recognized in countless words and deeds. He helped fellow students with their work. He shared ideas with fellow scholars. He reached out to unproven diamonds in the rough, as he once was—for example, during his recruitment “tea sessions” at Cleveland State and a three-day emerging scholars symposium at the University of Texas at Dallas.

Another manifestation of Larry’s heart was the way he transformed the employment culture on the Richardson campus from one of alienation to a state of high morale and dedication. This was done by firing abusive supervisors, promoting caring ones, holding employee luncheons and award ceremonies, and above all, learning everyone’s name, which he called out as he toured campus. If someone came to him with a money problem, he would take a page from Al Sturm’s book and find a way to correct it. Once, when sitting with a friend at a restaurant, he noticed out the window a homeless person pawing through garbage bins for food. Larry immediately called the waiter, ordered an extra meal, and took it outside to the astonished man.

A Mind
What do Larry’s publications tell us about the mind of our subject? Two of his articles dealt with the subject of race. In an early one, he discussed the problem of evaluating a minority leadership institute on which he had worked with the Communications Workers of America (McKean and Terry 1988). A later article, a quantitative study conducted with three others at Cleveland State, analyzed changes in the status of minorities in the federal workforce (Murray et al. 1994). Neither piece had an activist tone. Larry was not the typical liberal professor. To the contrary, he was quite conservative politically. As a student at Virginia Tech, he laughingly referred to himself as the only black Republican in academe. African Americans need the economic privileges that Republicans seek, he would say. He also disliked narrow thinking about racial justice. I recall that during one meeting with students at Cleveland State, most of whom were African American, the immigrant Indian shopkeepers along Euclid Avenue were angrily being denounced as prejudiced. Larry commented, “I am troubled by the racism you have seen in these stores. I am also troubled by the blanket statements against another minority that I have heard.”

No doubt the clearest theme in his published works was an insistence that the central normative lodestone for public administration must be the preservation of the core values that are inherent in the public institutions of administration. The leaders of these agencies have a responsibility to protect the institutional integrity of their administrative organizations by conserving and enhancing these values so that they form a complete and integral whole. In pursuit of this end, the administrative conservator thoughtfully balances leadership with consideration for the interests of the public and the constitutional values of the regime. Although this position was not incompatible with Larry’s political conservatism, it urged constructive change on behalf of the conservator ideal.

This position was most obviously reflected in Leadership of Public Bureaucracies, but much of Larry’s large output of scholarly articles amplified, in one way or another, this thesis. In fact, such publications began to appear even before the book was in print. In one, Larry introduced the basic outlines of his position and contrasted it with the entrepreneurial role of the leader favored by others (Terry 1990). Another showed how the thinking of Philip Selznick and Chester Barnard had formed the foundation of his argument (Terry 1993a).

A point that Larry repeatedly made to advocate his conservator model was the displacement of concepts problem, an idea advanced by Donald Schön. According to this point of view, when theorists borrow concepts from one context and insert them into another, it is easy to displace meaning, either by carrying forward the baggage of the old idea or by imposing unanticipated external content on the new one. In a 1994 piece, Larry assailed none other than his mentor, Gary Wamsley, for falling into this trap in articulating his agential leadership notion (Terry 1994). In an article published the following year—in my judgment, the most finely argued piece of his career—he assailed the mechanistic–organismic dichotomy in organization theory as undermining out appreciation of how the conservator appropriately transcends both categories (Terry 1995c). In yet another imaginative statement along this line, Larry criticized the use of theatrical metaphors—such as villain, hero and victim—to describe public administrators. The conservator, he insisted, is not evil, macho, or helpless (Terry 1997).

Larry’s deep interest in public law is also evident in the literature. At various points, he advocated giving more attention to what he calls the constitutional school in public administration, citing John Rohr as the major figure. He delved provocatively into this area in collaboration with his Cleveland State colleague Michael Spicer. One of their projects was to reject the interpretation of the U.S. Constitution through “empathetic understanding” of the founders and replace it with the force of inherent logic. For example, they used the checked-power theme
underlying the Constitution to legitimate public administrators as a necessary counter to elected officials (Spicer and Terry 1993). Other scholars were invited to respond to this provocative idea, and the fiery counterattacks by Rohr and others no doubt delighted Larry.

In another all-out attack on cherished thinking in the field, Larry and Michael rejected all three of the methods that administrators are told to use to interpret statutes— that is, consulting the literal text, probing legislative intentions, and applying present-day values. Instead, they proposed emulating common law reasoning, whereby the rationales of past decisions are weighed but also subject to replacement by new rationales. This approach keeps administrators from acting arbitrarily yet also encourages them to interpret new statutes in light of current circumstances (Spicer and Terry 1996). Larry’s thinking in this area was probably set off by a feeling that his old client, the Cooperative Extension Service, had overreached its authority in extending its domain to urban problems (Terry 1995b). When he died, his last words on this subject had not yet been spoken. For years, preoccupied with university administration and journal editing, Larry had been working on a book manuscript tentatively titled Administrative Interpretation of Law: How Public Administrators Create Meaning. Consideration is being given to its posthumous publication.

In a final group of articles that Larry wrote to advance his conservator position, he railed against the field’s orthodoxies related to the New Public Management and its implications for public administration. Although Larry always took pains to maintain good personal and political relationships with scholars of this school, he scathingly denounced “liberation management” as endorsing a freewheeling, noninstitutional public entrepreneur and “market-oriented management strategies” as substituting competition for cooperation and downplaying the importance of agency institutional culture. As usual, Larry imparted these works with a lively mixture of strident, combative argument and happy willingness to engage in civil debate (Terry 1993b, 1998, 1999, 2005b, 2007).

A Fame

Larry’s father was elected to the Oklahoma Music Hall of Fame for his contributions to jazz. If a public administration hall of fame existed, his son would no doubt be installed in it. Why? I propose three reasons: an original and stimulating concept of administrative conservatorship; a distinguished record of applying this concept to real institutions; and a model demonstration of how to engage in discourse so as to keep our field vital.

Thank you for this legacy, Larry. We salute you.

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References


