

COLE C. CAMPBELL: AN APPRECIATION

By Tony Wharton

PEOPLE WHO HAD OCCASION to visit the spaces where Cole Campbell worked found themselves on the open range of Cole's intellect.

The signal feature of that landscape was books—piles of books on every imaginable subject, stacked not so tidily, on every surface. Each book bristled with slips of paper, bookmarks, sticky notes. While Cole read many books cover to cover, he hunted through countless others for insights, connections, hidden lights that reflected off another surface he hadn't seen, hadn't suspected. This rendered Cole's writing rich with layers of context and meaning as he drew upon a wide range of associations. In the articles and essays in this volume, Cole draws on Saul Bellow, Susan Sontag, Jedediah Purdy, Neil Postman, Taylor Branch, Toni Morrison, and Zen Buddhism, to name a very few influences.

I was fortunate to work with Cole for several years, first when he became editor of the *Virginian-Pilot* in Norfolk, Virginia. Technically, I worked *for* Cole, but it often didn't feel that way. Cole enlisted you to travel alongside him in an ongoing enterprise to see what you both could learn.

We might as well get out of the way now why you're reading these introductory notes, and why I'm writing them rather than Cole himself.

Cole's explorations were cut short in midwinter 2007. Driving to work in Reno, Nevada, he hit a patch of ice and skidded off the road. He was killed instantly.

His daughter, Claire, writes in a memorial essay:

Work was always a central, energizing force in Dad's life; I don't think he saw it as "work" so much as an essential and rewarding entanglement with the world. . . . As I'm sure you all came to know firsthand, Dad always welcomed a challenge—not out of a former debater's desire to prove himself, but out of a deep conviction that what mattered was finding the best and most enlightened solution.

"Cole saw journalism's future, and I hate that he won't be lighting our way to the new world," said John Robinson, editor of the Greensboro *News and Record*, at Cole's memorial service.

But I'm more interested today in talking about the Cole we all knew: his infectious humor, his over-the-top generosity; his flamboyant showmanship; his distinct ability to irritate the fool out of us. Ben Bowers once told me that when he wrote his memoirs, he was going to devote an entire chapter to Cole. I wouldn't frame it that way. To me, the Cole influence is more like a river that runs through it.

Cole was born in 1953 in Roanoke, Virginia, and was raised in Pulas-ki, a little town in the Appalachians. His father, John Robley Campbell, had been a lawyer, but became an Episcopal minister not long after Cole was born. His mother, Susie Clarke Campbell, was a psychology profes-sor for 25 years. Teachers and writers peppered both sides of his lineage. Cole grew up, then, in a family that placed a high value both on learning and on service.

He was a middle child, with all the restless ambition that implies, and a Scot by heritage, so there was a healthy dose of stubbornness, too. At

the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, he became a fierce, nationally recognized debater and wrote a book on competitive debate still cited in the field. All these qualities would become apparent in Cole's professional career, particularly when he engaged his whole mind and soul in what came to be known as "public journalism," a movement designed to reconnect journalism with democratic practices.

For Cole, who never stopped asking "why?," looking at the norms and values of journalism and asking whether they served a democratic purpose was inevitable. It was not so for many journalists. Although Cole rarely showed frustration, and would patiently explain his thinking to a skeptic time after time, I know it baffled him that many reporters and editors flatly refused to even entertain the questions he and others raised.

I learned so much from Cole in the years we worked together. I learned how thrilling experiments could be, when they succeeded and when they failed, even on the front pages of a widely read newspaper. I learned, too, what a powerful hold norms and routines have on professionals, and how those norms could be both satisfying and constrictive in the face of change.

Through persuasion, reasoning, and sly finesse, Cole persevered in his campaign against many of those norms through leadership positions at two newspapers and countless articles, speeches, and appearances on panels considering journalism and democracy. After he left the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* in 2000, during stints at the Poynter Institute and the Kettering Foundation—when he began introducing himself as a "recovering journalist"—Cole began to look even more closely at the underpinnings of democracy, exploring the significance of community and citizenship in politics.

And even as he observed journalism from the outside, the field began changing ever more rapidly. The forces of connection, community formation, and self-publishing spawned by the Internet began to remake

the landscape of journalism, as it did for business, politics, and most other fields. Suddenly, newspapers, which had scorned the notion of letting citizens into the newsroom, began frantically seeking new ways to connect with them. Most of these efforts were motivated more by survival instincts than by a reasoned consideration of journalism's place in a democracy, but they often arrived at the same place. As Donica Mensing and David Ryfe said in an assessment of Cole's impact:

My, how times have changed. Just a decade later, Cole's great idea seems downright prescient. In the 1990s, journalists deeply resisted the notion of engaging their audiences in new ways. Today, "the people formerly known as the audience," to borrow a phrase from Dan Gilmor, often *are* the journalists.

Cole's career, however, moved fully into education. In 2004, he became dean of the Donald W. Reynolds School of Journalism at the University of Nevada, Reno, where he swiftly began integrating all he had learned about journalism, community, and democracy in a curriculum that would leave his imprint on the upcoming generation of journalists.

"We are undertaking an experiment in reconceiving journalism as a social practice, as a mediating institution in the generation of public knowledge," Cole wrote in an article for the Winter 2007 *Kettering Review* (which was published as a memorial issue to him). The Reynolds School, under his guidance, launched Our Tahoe, a project aimed at focusing both journalists' and citizens' attention on the issue of wildfire in the Tahoe basin. "All this experimentation is grounded on a detailed examination of current journalistic practice, and imagines new journalistic practices that better reflect what it takes for democracy to go well."

It was one of many, many experiments he had planned for the journalism school, ultimately for all of journalism.

Yet I would fail in my task if I let you think that journalism, democracy, and education constituted the whole of Cole's life and thought.

There's certainly enough there to occupy most people's lives. Not Cole's. At the time of his death he was writing a screenplay about college football, an intentionally subversive dictionary for journalists, and a book that would articulate his "unified theory," if you will, of journalism, community, and the need for social action. He wrote poetry, and love letters to his wife, Catherine. He took all the time he could spare from his work to spend with his infant son, Clarke. And he was constantly spinning out ideas—for books, for commercial ventures, for new creative endeavors.

E. Culpepper "Cully" Clark, dean of Grady College at the University of Georgia and a close friend of Cole's, said:

Everything about Cole was a bit larger than life. His height, his stride, his eyes magnified by thick glasses, his whole physical presence was a vessel for that voice, a voice that could act, enfold, mesmerize, entertain, a voice so singular that there could be only one Cole. . . . More than anything else, he wanted to engage: engage your ideas, your interests, and yes, your passions.

That creative output is a double-edged sword, of course, for someone seeking to represent Cole in a setting such as this. There is so much material to choose from—yet so much remains achingly unfinished. Many of the projects he had underway were not in a form that could be published yet. A fragment of the dictionary is reprinted here, as well as all that he had written of the new book. I hope you come away from this volume inspired, as I am, by a man who poured such energy, passion, and critical thinking into everything he touched.



Tony Wharton is a journalist with 30 years' experience in newspapers and freelance writing. He spent 12 years at the Virginian-Pilot in Norfolk, Virginia, where he was part of Cole Campbell's team of public journalists. As an associate of the Kettering Foundation, he has edited several publications on journalism, government, and public dialogue. He lives with his family in Richmond, Virginia.