

A Walk with a Giant

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On the eve of the 16th anniversary of Russell Kirk's death (April 29) we traveled with six Koch Foundation student scholars from Northwood University and a Hoover Institution summer fellow from Pepperdine University to Kirk's ancestral home and research library in Mecosta, just west of Mount Pleasant.

The students met Kirk's wife Annette and we talked for hours about Dr. Kirk's life and contributions to the world. Kirk was a humble, good and decent man, whose modest physical stature belied his status as a conservative thinker; he was an intellectual giant. Kirk's doctoral dissertation, written while he was studying at St. Andrew's University in Scotland, served as the foundation for his best-selling classic, *The Conservative Mind*.

When this book was published in 1953, *The Chicago Tribune* described Kirk's work as "brilliant in its conception" and "brilliant in its ability to relate man to his landscape." *The New York Times* said "Mr. Kirk's account of the ideas, decisions and beliefs that have produced these (American) virtues merits the responsible attention of all informed persons who are not rattled by unpopular labels."

Many agreed with Kirk and the American Conservative movement took root. Many disagreed with his principles yet respected the man. His ideas resonated with many because they spoke to a person's heart and mind on the issues of the day. Kirk was admired by and influential to leaders from Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher to Barry Goldwater and former Michigan Gov. John Engler. He counted Nobel laureates Milton Friedman and Friedrich von Hayek among his friends and was buried in a simple grave next to a man who was homeless and destitute before he met and was befriended by Russell and Annette Kirk. Dr. Kirk was a man of letters and a man of the people, a rare breed today.

In an article entitled "Ten Conservative Principles" Kirk summarized the tenets made popular in *The Conservative Mind* that would be prudent to revisit given today's turbulent times. They are:

1. There exists an enduring order. Order is made for man, and man is made for it; human nature is a constant, and moral truths are permanent.
2. Conservatives believe that humans should adhere to custom, convention, and continuity. Clearly stated, respect tradition.
3. Conservatives believe in the principle of prescription. Modern people are dwarfs and stand on the shoulders of giants and are able to see farther than their ancestors only because of the great stature of those who preceded us.
4. Conservatives are guided by the principle of prudence. People should act only after sufficient reflection having weighed all possible consequences.
5. Conservatives pay attention to the principle of variety. All humans are equal in the eyes of God and in a just court; but all humans are not equal, nor can the ever be, in economic or other human endeavors.
6. Conservatives are chastened by their principle of imperfectability. No perfect social order can or will exist here on Earth. The best we can hope for is an ordered, just and free society driven by prudent reform.
7. Conservatives believe that freedom and property are closely linked. Great civilizations are built on the foundations of personal freedom and individual property rights.
8. Conservatives uphold voluntary community and oppose involuntary collectivism. Government should be limited to the protection of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness while its citizens remain charitable to those among them in need.
9. Conservatives call for prudent restraints on power and human passion. Humans are a mixture of good and evil and must be constrained by a constitution and prudent political checks and balances. A healthy tension must exist between the claims of authority and the claims of liberty in a just society.
10. Conservatives understand that permanence and change must be recognized and reconciled in a vigorous society. The rational person favors reasoned and temperate progress as opposed to those who believe everything new is necessarily superior to the old.

It is unfortunate that many today feel Russell Kirk's ideas are antiquated or even naïve. He championed the values and traditions that made this country great, and if his is a voice from the past, it is a past we would do well to honor and remember. In our increasingly complex and troubled America, Kirk calls us back to our better selves as Americans. We suggest everyone read Kirk, one of his books or a few of his essays. From both sides of the aisle in Washington DC to the state legislature of California; from the firms on Wall Street to the farmers' markets off Main Street, everyone would benefit from the sound counsel of this giant from Mecosta who literally shaped the world we live in today. It worked for us and seven bright young scholars ... not a bad start.

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