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A Tribute to Andrew W. McThenia, Jr.

Samuel W. Calhoun

Washington and Lee University School of Law, calhouns@wlu.edu

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Samuel W. Calhoun*

Over twenty years of friendship cannot be encapsulated in a brief essay. I will not even try. What I can do is relate one episode that captures the core of what knowing Uncas has meant to me.

In May 1989, Uncas asked me and another colleague to accompany him to the coalfields of southwest Virginia, which were then embroiled in a strike against the Pittston Coal Company. The strike had begun in April, after months of unsuccessful negotiations following the expiration of a union contract. Uncas informed us that his reason for going was to participate in peaceful civil disobedience against Pittston. He expected to be arrested. He invited us to join him in being arrested, if we were willing, but in any event he would appreciate our presence.

As I had no notion of submitting to arrest myself, I went solely with the idea of encouraging Uncas in his act of conscience. Instead, it was I who was the primary beneficiary – from observing a committed Christian living out his faith in challenging circumstances.

The most obvious point was Uncas's willingness to risk the consequences of arrest (and he was arrested) to obey God's call that he join with the miners in their struggle against Pittston, which, among other things, had cut off health insurance for 1500 retired or disabled miners and their widows. But beyond his sacrificial commitment to justice, Uncas's depth of faith was demonstrated by what he said at a prayer gathering the morning of his anticipated arrest. He confessed his struggle with pride, with the temptation to dwell on his own significance as a leader of that particular group of church activists. One minister told Uncas not to worry, that no one expected him to be perfect, that he should forget about it and focus instead on forthcoming events. Fortunately, Uncas believed differently. He understood that as important as Christians' faith-motivated actions are, what matters more is the state of our hearts before God. Uncas, striving to follow God by standing with the oppressed, also strove for inner purity by asking God's help to follow Jesus's example of selfless servanthood.

One can well imagine that such a colleague has been a profound influence. It is not that we have always agreed on the demands of our common faith in particular situations. Far from it. But Uncas has always been someone who challenges me to heed God's call on my own life, as to both my conduct and the attitudes of my heart. One can hope for nothing greater in a friend.

* Professor of Law, Washington and Lee University School of Law.