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The Teacher

THE TEACHER

TRENTON H. NORRIS*

A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.

Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907).

Funerals, they say, are for the living. And so it is with tributes. Peter's logical side—the Vulcan lineage he jokingly claimed—would have acknowledged that. His human side—the part so strongly in evidence—would have found it both sad and somehow amusing.

How strange to introduce a law review issue with tributes to a contemporary. These pages should be reserved for the archetypal Paper Chase professor, the white-haired judge who should have retired long ago, the former dean no current student ever met. A year after his death, the multitude who were touched by Peter—friends, colleagues, students, editors of this journal—still miss him more each day. His life-loving laughter still echoes.

But tributes, like funerals, are an opportunity for discourse—and we all know how Peter *loved* discourse! He especially enjoyed discourse about what is important to us, what is admirable in a life, what is memorable and worthy of our labors and aspirations. Indeed, Peter's life provides such great material for this genre that one barely knows where to begin, or—like his long-running e-mail threads—whether it will end!

But upon reflection, I think it begins and ends with this: Peter was a teacher. A great teacher, gifted beyond belief, with a talent for discerning the truth, for laying bare the falsehood, for demonstrating and communicating and persuading—and for truly teaching. Good teachers convey knowledge. Great teachers unveil wisdom. Peter was

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a great teacher—in every aspect of his life.

At Peter's funeral, his brother told a story that, as Peter had so characteristically requested, brought the house down. Its essential elements had a grade-school Peter not only rescuing his brother from his Catholic school's most stern nun but at the same time correcting her blackboard algebra in front of the class. One imagines that, in the history of St. Cecilia's Roman Catholic School for Boys and Girls, such heroism remains unrivaled. The lessons learned that day did not involve quadratic equations.

And although Peter—from a young age—was clearly at ease in front of the blackboard, that was not his only teaching milieu. Indeed, he spent a precious few years of his life teaching in a classroom. But as anyone who spent a few moments in Peter's presence will attest, the world was his classroom.

Peter was always teaching. Whether speaking at a rally, writing an e-mail to a friend, or engaged in dinner conversation, he always had a point. And whatever that point might be—whether he was arguing against investment in companies that supported the apartheid regime, or arguing for the rights of gay and lesbian people, or even explaining why Madonna is empirically a greater artist than Cher—Peter presented his point with power, with skill, with humor, with logic, with emotion, but most all, with love. If, as the Rubaiyat teaches, work is love made visible, then for Peter, *teaching* was love made visible.

And like all great teachers, Peter had a flair for drama. One imagines Peter using the Socratic method from the age of seven, not because he was such a precocious child—although even as an adult he displayed the most charming and annoying traits of a prodigy—but because he had such a feel for suspense, for the dramatic denouement, for the power of stepwise progression to truth unveiled. Some people have an ear for music; Peter had an ear for teaching.

Most significantly, Peter taught by challenging us. He was a fearless iconoclast, eager to point out not only that the Emperor had no clothes, but also that millions of people have no clothes, or food, or shelter as a result of the Emperor's policies. Even in the most bourgeois of settings—imagine a black-tie wedding in the toniest part of town—Peter would not refrain from reminding us of our privilege, not in a preaching way, but with humor and a light heart. Peter knew that people don't always like to be challenged, but they eventually appreciate it.

Peter of course taught by drawing on great teachers before him: Plato, Gandhi, Christ, Mandela, Milk. He was an erudite classicist,

but no pedant. I once pressed him into speaking at a Model United Nations program, where his audience consisted of more than a thousand high school students from the wealthiest suburbs. He started with his famous opener: "As an openly gay man . . ." and then proceeded to recount the revolutionary teachings of South African freedom fighter Albie Sachs. After the standing ovation, he was mobbed with groupies, including a teen named Cassandra. Completely off topic, and classically in character, Peter told her the myth of Cassandra—which she had never before heard—but which she undoubtedly remembers to this day.

And we all know that Peter taught with humor. His style was often self-deprecating, sometimes silly, always playful. He once introduced me and my partner—an advertising executive—to his first-year section as an example of his ability to be friends even with those who had followed more mercenary paths. One of his greatest moments was his address at Harvard's 1992 commencement, in which he used humor—"Talking about arrogance at Harvard is like talking about Catholicism at the Vatican"—to make a point that has stayed with all those graduates to this day: even our worst vices can be put to good use. Peter also often joked about his love of attention, and he was endearingly self-conscious that teaching granted him a captive audience. Of course, it was just like Peter to analyze (and minimize) his greatest talent!

But Peter's signature method was to teach by parable. He could make the most mundane and human activities into acts of heroism. He would regularly embarrass me by portraying simple things—like being out on my resume, turning down a job offer, holding a ceremony to celebrate my relationship—as the acts of some modern-day Rosa Parks! But he did this to make a point.

That point—and the overriding point for Peter—was that our everyday acts are imbued both with values and with value. What we do matters, and it is worth more thought than we give it. Peter made this point by celebrating everyday acts of courage, of honor, of honesty, and of love. His life, of course, was so full of such acts that they could only be chronicled in a much larger tome.

Yes, the world was Peter's classroom. And thirty-nine years—though a long class—is much too short a life. The bell rang last July, despite our prayers and wishes, despite the struggle Peter fought, with his partner and his family by his side, leaving us—all Peter's students—not rushing for the doors, but instead applauding with gusto, appreciative in a way that we know will only grow with time, yet pensive and sorrowful, knowing deeply, viscerally, with religious-like

faith, that we and the world are much the better for having had Peter as our teacher.

Let our lives be his tribute.