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Peter Cicchino's Farewell Message to Washington College of Law Students

PETER CICCHINO'S FAREWELL MESSAGE TO WASHINGTON COLLEGE OF LAW STUDENTS

PETER M. CICCHINO

RECORDED JUNE 9, 2000*

I had originally planned to say that if you're seeing this video it means that I have died, but it sounded too much like the beginning of a Mission Impossible film. So I'm going to opt for a different beginning.

When I began teaching at the Washington College of Law I knew that I had a terminal diagnosis. And the doctors predicted about two years and it looks like they were right. But I have come to love the students, the teaching, the people who work here, the administrators, the walls themselves, so much that I felt that I couldn't end things without saying some kind of proper good-bye.

And I don't know if this will be a proper good-bye but it is a good-bye of sorts.

And it really consists of two things. One is a series of thank yous and the other is a little bit of advice.

First the thank yous. I'm not going to mention any names because I would have to name everyone from the security guards who greet me in the morning and sometimes help me with the elevator to the cafeteria staff, to of course my colleagues, administrators, executive assistants, secretaries, students. Everyone has just been so incredibly kind to me. And that's not a small thing. It seems like, let me say, it may be easy to be kind to a person who's dying, but I think it's important for institutions to embody the goals that they espouse. And my experience here, at WCL, at the *great* Washington College of

* Professor Cicchino recorded this message at his home on June 9, 2000. He passed away on July 8, 2000. This message was screened at a memorial service for Professor Cicchino at WCL on August 30, 2000.

Law has been that in every interaction people have just shown me such love and compassion. Simple things like saying how are you, or saying hello in the morning, or asking if someone could carry something, without being sentimental about it, have just been suffused with love. And I wanted to say thank you for that.

Especially to my students, who have been the joy of my life here. These have genuinely been two of the happiest years of my life. I know that sounds a little crazy, but they really have been. Though surely the friendship, the collegueship, the scholarship—all of that—has been a large part of it, teaching has been the biggest part of it. Now my students, I hope, think the same. Every class has been an adventure. An adventure getting to know people. An adventure making myself known. An adventure communicating knowledge, I hope, and a little insight. And most of all an adventure in critical thinking, in looking beyond the surfaces. Particularly the surfaces that the institutions—the people with power in our society—present to us and looking beyond them to see how they affect poor people, gay and lesbian people, people of color, women, all the marginalized people who are so often forgotten or ignored.

And that sort of leads to the little piece of advice I have after expressing just the profound debt I have to everyone at WCL and the happiness that they have brought me. And it's about being happy. I'll say three things about being happy. I don't know if they are true, but at least I bring the perspective of someone who is near the end of what I would say is a very, very happy life. A life characterized by the single overwhelming realization that I have been loved so much more than I loved, that I have just been the object of so much affection and support. And realized what kind of world we would have if other people enjoyed the same kind of affection and support. And it's this: First, you have to define happiness for yourself. Now it's sort of a Buddhist insight. There is an old joke that the Buddha for his birthday is given a large box and when he opens it, it's empty. And he says, 'Just what I wanted: Nothing.'

Now, I don't know if I'd go that far because some things we want are good things. We want a decent living and a certain amount of money or material well-being, family, romance, a wife or a spouse, children, friends. These are all very important. But somewhere down the line you have to decide for yourself what will make you happy. Will it be what the world says makes you happy—status, power, vast wealth—or will it be something different?

But here is a clue about this. If you go with what the world tells you will make you happy, you'll never be happy. Because the words that

Madison Avenue fears most are: 'I am content. Enough is enough.' You only have to watch about an hour's television to know we have a society where we are told that we are defined by what we have and consume, not by who we are and who we love. And more than that, that having and consumption just has no end. You always have to have more—a better toothpaste, a better deodorant, a better shampoo, a better girlfriend, a better boyfriend, a better house, a better car. You know, it goes on and on. Hegel called this the 'bad infinite.' And I think he was right. It's a catchy phrase because it's infinite in that there's no end to the needs. But it's bad in that it can never be fulfilled. So the first thing to do is to find your own happiness. And for me, that's come largely in defining it by relationship to others. Yes, by service to others, by helping relieve the suffering of others. But also just by enjoying other people, by getting to know people of every race, variety—you name it—and entering their lives.

The second thing about happiness, after you've defined what you think happiness is, is that happiness is a state of will. Now that sounds like a funny thing to say because I don't believe people can, as they say, sing in the chains. I do think there are objective measures of suffering that really do obstruct human happiness. It's why it's so important that we work for people to have the basic food, the basic human needs, the basic education to really flourish and enjoy life.

But having said that, I don't think happiness is something that just happens to you. I think you have to choose to be happy. You have to choose not to be resentful or embittered or envious or feeling inferior. You have to choose to say my life is a good life, is worth something and I'm doing something about making it worth something in order to really experience happiness.

And the third thing I'd say, the third little piece of advice about happiness is that happiness is not an isolated quality. It has to be shared with other people. There really is no happiness outside of relationship because I think happiness is intimately connected with love. Happiness is a relational thing. It has to do with your involvement in the lives of other people. And here's the irony. Even if you are personally suffering, even if your entering into the lives of others brings you suffering, because that's the way it is. When you get to know a person who's being evicted, suddenly you're worried about an eviction. If you get to know a person who's being battered, suddenly you're concerned, you're worried, you're up late at night about being battered. Taking on the suffering of others does not mean that your happiness will be compromised. It just means that

your happiness maybe mellows and deepens.

And that brings me about to the end of what I wanted to say, except for this. Something about law school, about this law school, and about being lawyers. I love this law school. I wish I could have lived forty or fifty years. I had dreams of not only becoming an institution as a teacher—I hope not a curmudgeon, but a great teacher, but as a scholar, as a builder. I was hoping that people would look back on me as one of the bricklayers. I know we've had bricklayers, but everything has to grow and I hoped I would have been one of the second or third or fourth generation of bricklayers for the Washington College of Law, so deeply have I felt committed to this place. But that's not going to be. And that's all right. But I encourage all of you to try to appreciate the place in which you have found yourself. I don't know how to communicate it.

I don't want to invoke my proximity to death as giving me any special wisdom. I don't want to make odious comparisons to my own law school experience or that of so many of my peers. But you really may not know what you have here, what we have here, what we have built here. And in this I will claim a special expertise. My experience here has confirmed that again and again and again. This is an extraordinary place because of the extraordinary people who dwell here, who work here, who have given so much of their lives here.

And now about lawyers. I love lawyers. I know there are lawyer jokes. I know lawyers get a bad rap. I know the corruption of the profession. I know. I have seen the seedy underside of the law and yet I love lawyers. And I love the profession. I don't think there's another profession that gives us so many skills and such an opportunity to set things right. And if not to set things right, to at least even the odds for those who have the odds so profoundly stacked against them. And though I know for the students, there's terrible student debt. I know for my colleagues on the faculty, there are professional pressures. There are prestige issues, there is pressure to publish. I know all of that. But I also know that each of you possesses, or in the case of the students, is developing, gifts that can really make a difference in the world, that can ease human suffering and increase the happiness, not only of yourself, but of others.

And that I guess is the last thought I would leave you with. I hope you'll go out seeing your law degree, certainly not as a license to print money, and not just as an occupation because so many lawyers are unhappy. But seeing it as a vocation, as a calling to do something good in the world. I sometimes joke that I was on a mission from

God in my career, but it was only a joke. A little bit of a joke. Part of it was quite serious, that if love and justice do rule the universe—and I hope they do—each of us has a part to play in that. And in my own life, taking that view of my own living and my own relationships with others, I feel as if I have been rewarded a hundred fold, that I have gotten in return so many, many good things.

A professor of mine once was asked, 'What's the point of all of this stuff that we do, all of this progressive jargon, you know, all these things you public interest lawyers do? Is it just you want to stop evictions? Or do you want to make sure there's no world hunger? What is it?' And he replied, 'We want a world that is safe for love.' My hope is that my own life has contributed to making the world a little safer for love. I am sure this institution contributes to making the world safer for love. And my hope for each of you is that you in your own lives will find happiness in making the world a place that is safe for love.

Thanks very much.

Peter requested that the video of his farewell message be accompanied by the following song:¹

I've been bound to leave you, we've known that for awhile
 I'm sure it's something I can't do if I can't leave you with a smile
 I don't know how far I'll have to go till I'm sure those eyes won't
 cry
 And in my mind, I've left enough to know that I can't leave you
 With a bad goodbye

Chorus

Goodbye, easier said than done
 Goodbye, there's no good when you're the one
 Whose goodbye you swore would never come
 And in my goodbye you're finding none.

I'm still bound to leave you, I surely don't know how
 My heart won't let me put you through

1. Clint Black, *Bad Goodbye*, on NO TIME TO KILL (RCA 1993).

What my mind said should happen now
I don't know where we'll go from here, there may be no way to fly
And the cloud I'm in just makes it all too clear that I can't leave
you
With a bad goodbye

Repeat Chorus

How can we be so far between where we are and one more try
And any way I look, I've only seen that I can't leave you
With a bad good-bye