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IN MEMORIAM: HOWARD LESNICK (1931–2020)

My first encounter with Howard Lesnick was in December 1998, at “Rediscovering Religion in the Lives of Lawyers and Those They Represent,” a conference hosted by Fordham Law School. From the back of a largish auditorium, I heard Howard’s contributions to a panel reflecting on some of the tensions that arise when lawyers bring their religious values into the ethical dilemmas they might meet in the course of their service to clients.¹

I had the immediate sensation: this person could be my friend. It was not only that I resonated deeply with his analysis, but I was taken—taken up, taken in—by the aura in which he held together critical engagement with curiosity and respect for worldviews that might have been different from his own.

We did not have much of a chance to connect personally during the actual conference, but as I was drafting my own essay in response to the symposium,² I plucked up the courage to send an email to share how touched I was by his presentation and to request his feedback on my draft. His response was typically Howard: immediate, deep, committed engagement with the manuscript, and enthusiastic personal encouragement.

When I moved from law practice to Fordham Law School to initiate, together with Russell Pearce, Fordham’s Institute on Religion, Law & Lawyer’s Work, the opportunity arose to dive into law teaching. In spring 2003, Howard made the weekly train trip to New York City to team teach with me at Fordham a seminar he had ideated, “Religion, Law & Lawyering.” The following semester we reversed our train travel, and I flanked him in the same seminar at the University of Pennsylvania Law School. Our routine on the days that we taught together was to meet for a very long lunch where we talked not only about the class but our lives, our commitments, and our ongoing scholarship.

I should have been stunned that a person of his stature would devote so much time and energy to help me get my legs in teaching and to provide detailed critical and encouraging feedback on my scholarship. As we team-taught, I should have been stunned that a person of his experience would be completely receptive to my suggestions for different sources and other topics to explore.

But lavish generosity with his time and receptive openness to ideas from traditions not his own—a capacity not only to listen but to let himself be touched and transformed by an encounter with the other—are qualities so quintessentially Howard that they were simply baked into the cake of his mentoring style and our friendship.

In 2010, the materials Howard developed for the seminar were collected in the reader *Religion in Legal Thought and Practice*,³ which I have used for the version of the course that I have taught at Georgetown Law since spring 2012. In the midst of my first semester using the reader as my

1 See Howard Lesnick, “The Religious Lawyer in a Pluralist Society,” in “The Relevance of Religion to a Lawyer’s Work: An Interfaith Conference,” special issue, *Fordham Law Review* 66, no. 4 (1998): 1469–504.

2 Amelia J. Uelmen, “Can a Religious Person Be a Big Firm Litigator?” *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 26, no. 4 (1999): 1069–110.

3 Howard Lesnick, *Religion in Legal Thought and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

textbook, I wrote to Howard: “I was a little broken-hearted going into this, for the fact of not team-teaching this material with you, and worried that I might feel a little bit lost . . . but I feel like the book, with all of the amazing notes, and the careful selection and crafting of each chapter, is in many ways like teaching with you—your voice comes through with elegance and depth at so many important junctures. So, I’m just loving it!”⁴

Almost one year after his passing, I am more than a little brokenhearted, and it has taken some time not to feel a little bit lost. But as I continue to gather the legacy that Howard has left through his scholarship and the wisdom that I gleaned through his mentoring, I sense from within the elegance and depth of his gentle voice as a constant friend and traveling companion for my continued academic, intellectual, and personal journey.

How might one sum up that legacy in just a few words? My top choice would be a quotation from his stunningly beautiful essay *Being a Teacher, of Lawyers: Discerning the Theory of My Practice*. He wrote:

My goal is to teach students to ask themselves:

Who am I?

In my work as a lawyer, what will I be doing in the world?

What do I want to be doing in the world?

My aim is not to avow a particular set of answers as the truth, nor to lead students to reach answers like mine, nor even to teach them the relevant arguments in support of differing answers. It is rather to avow the appropriateness of asking the questions, and to engage with whatever answers the questions call forth. *Teaching, to me, is evoking that engagement.*⁵

It is difficult to describe exactly how Howard evoked that engagement, but I know that his presence and his stance in the presence of others have helped to form the habits of mind and heart that now permeate my own teaching and mentoring relationships.

I can feel it when I sit with students and mentees—or actually with any human being who would like to share something of their intellectual, personal, or spiritual journey. His gentle voice reminds me to be generous with my time and my undivided attention. When I am feeling especially busy, it nudges me to take off my watch (when possible), put on a pot of tea, and relax into my chair so as to say in every way possible, “I am here for you, not just in your assignments and projects, but as a human being. I honor your presence and I am grateful for the gift of being able to share in some way in this part of your journey.”

When I prepare for my discussion-based seminars, I can trust Howard’s advice: “Do not be afraid to shift the center of gravity to the interior life of your students. It’s not about you.” Pope Francis might further drive home the point: “[W]e should never respond to questions that nobody asks.”⁶

Throughout my teaching career, Howard’s example and methods have helped me to seek out and develop creative ways not only to discern how the students’ questions might become the

4 Email from the author to Howard Lesnick, February 2, 2012, 1:52 p.m. (on file with the author).

5 Howard Lesnick, “Being a Teacher, of Lawyers: Discerning the Theory of My Practice,” *Hastings Law Journal* 43, no. 4 (1992): 1095–106, at 1101.

6 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* [The joy of the gospel] (November 24, 2013), § 155, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

foundation and driver for class discussions, but also to foster a sense of community in a classroom when the students realize that they can find each other in their shared questions.⁷

Finally, Howard is ever-present when I endeavor to comment on another person's scholarship or writing. Whether my work has the flavor of sincere questions on areas of difference or disagreement or consists more in celebrating with a contemplative spirit the work of wisdom in another, Howard's example leads me to search for all of the ways in which we can "encourage one another and build each other up" (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

As I closed one of our email exchanges, "Thank you Howard, I look forward to any and all ways to continue the conversation."⁸ Our conversations have certainly changed their form, but they will undoubtedly continue. I hope I can in some way "pay forward" even a tiny measure of the gifts that I have received from you. "Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever" (Daniel 12:3).

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7 Many of these ideas are now collected in Amelia J. Uelmen and Michael Kessler, *Five Steps to Healing Polarization in the Classroom* (Hyde Park: New City Press 2018); Amelia J. Uelmen, "The Art of Accompaniment," in *Polarization in the US Catholic Church: Naming the Wounds, Beginning to Heal*, ed. Mary Ellen Konieczny, Charles C. Camosy, and Tricia C. Bruce (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2016): 88–100; Amelia J. Uelmen, "Professional Education and the Paschal Mystery," in *In the Lógos of Love: Promise and Predicament in Catholic Intellectual Life*, ed. James L. Heft and Una M. Cadegan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 67–99; Amelia J. Uelmen, "A Response to Kenneth Garcia: 'Where They Are, Just as They Are'," *Theological Studies* 73, no. 4 (2012): 909–23.

8 Email message from the author to Howard Lesnick, January 24, 2013, 8:43 PM (on file with the author).