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JOHN GEORGE STEPHENSON, III — PROFESSOR AND FRIEND

Urbane, courtly, a gentleman — all apt descriptions of the man, but terribly incomplete and totally uninformative as to the depth of this kind man. Coming from Princeton and Harvard, he was “Ivy” in the old tradition. But John Stephenson was a lot more, and when he died a part of the founding “spirit” of Villanova Law School was lost to eternity. He was not a man who could be described by a few obituary statistics or even well chosen adjectives. I had often characterized John Stephenson as one of the few completely good and just men that I had ever encountered. Small honor from this writer, but worthy of note because of its recognition by so many others. However, the description is still less than satisfactory and certainly incomplete. For John, in a sense, was a paradox. He was so open, quiet, honest, and sincere as to almost obscure his wisdom, patience, and depth of knowledge. He was a kind and modest man — all agreed on that, but to some he was a man living in the past and from another era — Cal Coolidge, gentlemen farmers, summers in Newport, and that sort of thing. He looked that part, but the demeanor was so misleading. To those few, it is a reflection on their own lack of insight in failing to recognize unique quality masked in the uniform of apparent stereotype.

This was a man who left the prospect of a comfortable, “respectable” practice in his beloved Pittsburgh to go to Miami, Florida to teach law. Yes, garish, flashy, expansive Miami. One reminisces at his reports of the dancing lessons he took so that he could learn the South American numbers then in vogue in Miami. John Stephenson loved Miami and left a mark on Florida property law and on his students at the University. This writer still hears of him with affection from prominent real property lawyers in that state. When Professor Stephenson left Miami due to his dissatisfaction with certain academic policies, he signed on as the first full-time professor at Villanova. In his interview with Father McGuire, after they had reached agreement on terms, he said: “You may not have realized it, but I am a Protestant and will not feel hurt or unkindly toward you if you might consider that an impediment to my teaching at Villanova.” And the response: “I did not hire you to teach theology, John.” John Stephenson meant what he said, and he remembered far more than some clergy and the rest of us that he was part of a University dedicated to the tradition of one of the greatest minds in Church history. John believed there ought to be something a little bit different in the teaching style of such a law school, a recognition that there is more to the law than

merely the reading of statutes and court opinions. All of us would do well to remember this teaching of Professor Stephenson. He quietly evangelized that court decisions are more than words and results; they envelope the entire man, the judge's strengths, weaknesses, and experiences — even his wife and mother-in-law, as he used to say. Does this sound like a man from another age? If it does, we have become devoid of a sense of historical and human perspective.

One can recall this quiet man unhesitatingly interrupting his busy schedule or his outside activities to help solve a student's problem. His dedication was such that, if asked why he prepared pre-examination summaries and reviews for his classes, his response, characteristically, was: "I have to make up for the times that I was unprepared." And, of course, there were some of those days. But John, more often than not, gave all of his time because he was that kind of man.

I remember well his astonishment during the first Property I class at Villanova, when the members of the class, unsophisticated in the ways of the "hunt," were untroubled by the court awarding the fox to the scoundrel who shot the prey just as it was treed by the dogs and as the horsemen, resplended in their red jackets, were approaching in triumphant culmination of the day. This was the first real insight to his teaching style — an unobtrusive but effective methodology. Understand history and "the times," and you might then better understand the rule of law and how it might be applied today. And, when all is said and done, is not that what we are — prognosticators of the law?

One can remember Professor Stephenson's feelings on the subject of what others characterized as an obligation to provide tutorial assistance for minority group students — a matter on which reasonable men can and do differ strongly and honestly. But no one could differ with his oversimplified comment: "Oh, it isn't tutoring and I don't consider it an extra amount of teaching time. It is really a case of providing a helping hand and saying: 'You have talent and ability. Just use it. Law school is not really as difficult as we professors pretend. After all, we need some justification for our pay. And, if you just work a little you will graduate from this school and become a good lawyer. And, if I can help a bit, which is probably doubtful, I shall be pleased to do so.'" Paternalistic? To the contrary — the very opposite. John would not even dignify his action with the word "tutoring." Honest encouragement is worth much and John provided this to all who sought his help.

One recalls his original bout with cancer and his subsequent comment to me: "Bob, I was convinced I was dead when I heard *that* word,

until it finally dawned on me that I was still alive and feeling quite well and probably wasn't going to die." Ironically, he was wrong for one of the few times in his life, and wrong about something of which he constantly spoke and joked; something he was convinced would occur early in life and of which he had no fear. Retirement he feared with horror — death he had good reason not to fear. The Grim Reaper posed no threat. I can see him grinning in his own inimitable way at the rain on the dreary fall day of his funeral. He would have had it no other way. I can hear his chuckling at my arriving at the church when the ceremony was completed. To John, these things would be prophetic for he loved to treat himself as the butt of his puns. His chuckle was a combination of quiet laughter and a nodding head. It said much because it typified the man. The subtlety of his humor and the constant understatement of the depth and scope of his learning complete the paradox at this time when subtlety and the art of quiet, reasonable exchange of divergent points of view have almost been lost. Does that sound like a man out of the past or does that sound like a man of wisdom?

John Stephenson was devoid of animosity. I never heard him utter the words: "I do not like so-and-so." That kind of thinking was unknown to John. I am sure, like all of us, there must have been people who bothered him, but he honored them with silence.

In his inimitable way, he characterized his lovely wife of many years by noting she tolerated him because they long ago had agreed that he would make all the major decisions and she all the minor ones and that they fortunately had not been faced with a major decision since their marriage.

Mrs. Stephenson will miss him; we will all miss him. Villanova will miss him. He did his job on earth extremely well and with uncommon lack of ado. Villanova will find a new professor of property law as it must, and has during his illness. Villanova Law School, of course, will go on. But Villanova would do well to search diligently for someone a little like John Stephenson. Villanova will not find one quite like him; but, in this day and age, more than ever, Villanova needs a man like John on its faculty. Such a man will not be easy to find, for in so many ways John was one of a kind. He will be missed, but his stamp has been firmly imprinted. I can see him right now — chuckling as he reads these words and, with his quiet, impish grin, saying: "There is not a word of truth in it, other than my lack of preparation, but I do kind of like it."

John, of course, has no worries. Professor Stephenson is now where men like him belong. There is sorrow, but enormous solace

in knowing that there are men like John Stephenson and that we were privileged to know him and share some of his goodness. This was a man whose way of life can best be summed up and remembered in the words of another open, paradoxical, lovable man who, indeed, is out of the past but whose simple philosophy, like good wine, grows better with age — the “poverello from Assisi:”

Oh Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love; for it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

—Saint Francis of Assisi

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