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THE PATIENCE AND PRESCIENCE OF A CHESS MASTER

RALPH J. ROHNER*

THE people of Villanova Law School know the range and detail of Steve Frankino's latest deanship better than I. But I hope these few paragraphs can add to their appreciation of him as a leader, a colleague and friend, an administrator and—above all—an educator. Over the forty years of our acquaintance I think I have learned something of what makes him tick. Not *all* of it (for Steve is still a work in progress), but a good portion nonetheless.

Steve's years in legal education are a third of a century, and counting. Three deanships, each at least twice the duration of a typical law school dean, and each a tenure of accomplishment and advancement for the school he led. Active participation in the highest councils of the American Bar Association's (ABA) Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar. Consulting and advisory roles to law schools in the making. Participation in the ABA's Central and East European Law Initiative. Woven through this distinguished professional career, binding it together and giving it texture and pattern, are the personality, character and soul of the man named Steve Frankino.

Those characteristics begin with an enormous generosity of spirit. His career is a nonstop commitment of talents and energy to the service of others; the institutional sponsors of Creighton, Catholic and Villanova Universities; the faculty and staff to whom he gave direction and support; the alumni and other constituencies who profited from the stature he brought to their school; and above all, the students he taught and for whom he built facilities, shaped and managed curricula and hired and deployed faculty. His work product is the nurturing environment for teaching and learning he has developed and left at each of those schools.

Steve also has the gift of being able to engage fully in the hardscrabble processes and decision making of academic administration, from major crisis to petty squabble, without ever losing sight of those fundamental principles that derive from faith and the rule of law. Kindness and civility to all. Institutional loyalty, always. A keen sense of due process in resolving controversies. Fairness among contestants for favors or resources. Tolerance and respect for divergent views within a diverse law school community. A self-effacing attitude which, at a time of space constraints at Catholic University, had him relocate himself and the law school administration into construction trailers on the lawn, freeing their former offices for faculty and staff use. His principled approach to deaning created a

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sense of serenity and comfort among colleagues who knew that, whatever the issue or its difficulty, it's disposition would be thoughtful, supportive of the teaching mission and fair.

Among Steve's techniques for effective leadership is an extraordinary self-control and sense of optimism. Has anyone *ever* seen him lose control of his temper, of a conversation or of an agenda? He might not win every skirmish, but you would never know it from his words or demeanor. A raised eyebrow was his body language for vigorous disagreement. He kept confidences, even secrets, where others could not resist the temptation to gossip. In any setting, public or private, has anyone heard Steve present anything but a positive face on the circumstances of his school, the quality of its programs, the accomplishments of its faculty and students or his own confidence in the future? Such an outlook can only reflect Steve's own internal sense of commitment to the educational enterprise.

Which brings me to the most striking characteristic of all in my appraisal of Steve Frankino. It is that remarkable prescience that permits him to always be a step ahead of everyone else in seeing the implications of actions taken; in spotting the hot buttons and pressure points that will concern others; and in perceiving exactly what steps, in what order, will produce the desired results. It is a Machiavellian skill of the highest order (I say this to honor his Italian heritage and without a pejorative connotation). He seems to see the field of academic maneuver—the intricate mix of personalities and resources, timing and options and cause-and-effect, all in quest of a better education for students—as a chess master sees his board: a challenging game of wits, skill and judgment with victory there for the taking. And Steve does this transparently, i.e., he controls the game without bluster or heavy hand, but rather with subtle manipulation and collegial suggestion built on foresight. I can remember dozens of times when I thought to myself, “well, good old Steve sure has dug himself into a hole on this matter,” only to find him soon smiling benignly and seeming to whisper “checkmate.” And the triumph behind the smile was always an institutional victory, not a personal one. The school was better off and whoever wished could take the credit. To say he was a consensus builder understates the point. A mere consensus builder is content to go with the flow. Steve steered the stream.

Sometimes this skill at knowing when and how to strike played out over time and we might better call it patience than prescience. Or maybe it is simply a sense of dramatic timing. Rather than risk a rash or uninformed decision, or action uncertain in its consequences, Steve could manage to suspend a matter or, to the occasional irritation of over-eager faculty, ignore it for a while. He would rethink a game plan, reposition players and bring the matter forward for resolution at just the right moment and in just the right way. The former president of Catholic University once said that for Steve “delay is strategy.” Yes, in the same sense that one awaits uncomplaining the entree from the master chef. (I had to get

a culinary allusion in here somewhere to acknowledge yet another of Steve's talents—in the kitchen).

Finally, I cannot fail to mention Steve's sense of style and good taste. During his tenure as dean, social events in our school were always first class. So were the speakers programs. So were the academic innovations including our Communications Law, Law and Public Policy, Comparative and International Law programs and the *Health Law Journal*. I would add his choices for interior decoration, but on that there *is* room for debate!¹

I am not sure what combination of factors inculcated these traits in Steve Frankino. A good family, good teachers and role models, no doubt. In his adult years, a wonderful wife and family, too. Steve would certainly say he has been blessed by God. But it is he, after all, who has used those God-given talents so consistently, wisely and well.

Steve and I were undergraduate roommates and fraternity brothers. He was already an educator then, teaching me and others good taste in drink, music, ideas and conduct. He practiced the same leadership skills and style as president of our student government that he later employed in his deanships. We were law students together, and teaching colleagues for a while in the mid-1960s, before he went to Villanova for the first time. After his deanship at Creighton, I helped coax him to come from Omaha in 1979 to become dean of the Columbus School of Law of The Catholic University of America. I watched the renaissance of our school under his direction and was honored, and awed, to succeed him as dean when he returned to Villanova in 1987. He is a remarkable man. Three law schools are deeply in his debt, and Villanova has the great good fortune to host the next chapter in his life as an educator. *Sic transit gloria*. That is a piece of a Latin phrase Steve will recognize. But the glory of his good work will not soon fade.

1. Anything printed in a law review needs at least one footnote. Steve cannot make footnotes. That is because he is technologically challenged in matters such as computerized word processing. But this only adds to his unique decanal style, as all forms of memoranda and announcements, even budgets, flow from his desk in that beautiful parochial-school penmanship he learned in Montana years ago. That script is, in a way, a symbol of the continuity of Steve's character—classic, stylish and resistant to passing fancy.

