
Conversations

Bruce Levine†

In the spring of 1999, I announced my retirement from teaching at Washburn Law School, effective with the close of the spring semester, May 2000. Twenty-nine years will have been devoted to the law school and the students that I have taught. The last time that I wrote in this fashion was in 1989 when the Washburn Law Journal published my essay “Thoughts in Preparation for the Last Lecture.”¹

Looking back, I see my time with law students as conversations which started, for the most part, with the first year course in Contracts and continued with many students through the remainder of their time at law school and beyond. The conversations were held in the classroom, the office, the hallways, and anywhere else that moments of connection were possible. I tried to have both a personal as well as an academic conversation, feeling that the most effective teaching requires both—an encompassing human conversation. If the conversations were meaningful, they will continue to reflect in the life of the lawyer past my own time.

I have been asked to write about my approach to teaching. I will try, here, to describe the way in which I think about my work, the ideas that structure my efforts and the underpinnings of the conversation as I see it. I have been influenced by mentors of my own in the field of accounting, the practice of law and by the faculty at the law school. I will always respect Dean Raymond L. Spring and his faculty, exceptional as human beings and professionals, for bringing me to the law school in 1971. What has characterized each of the mentors, and what was most important to me, was a manifest sensitivity to me as a person and to the professional I was striving to become.

Mutual respect between law professors and law students is the foundation of the conversation. It is my experience, repeated throughout the teaching years, that law students reflect the respect accorded to them personally as well as academically. I believe the success of the

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1. Bruce Levine, *Thoughts in Preparation for the Last Lecture*, 29 WASHBURN L.J. 18 (1989).

conversations, academic in end result, is predicated on this foundation.

Teaching is a constant experiment with each class and person being distinct. An initial personal level connection underlies the quality, to a significant extent, of the academic conversation that is the essence of the professor/student relationship and the primary responsibility of the law professor. It does not take more than a few words spoken with sincere interest to initiate, and then to continue over time, the personal side of the human conversation. Law students and teachers are both engaged in finding their way in life. The fact that I have had more years behind me does not interfere with or deter a communicated sense of personal identification between those students whom I teach and myself.

Each law student, as a human being, is different; the conversation must be an individual one, nothing rote or mechanical. Sincerity and caring must be manifest. I look for a way to reach each person, at their various stages in life, by asking where they have been prior to law school, what brought them here, and what thoughts they may have for the future. I try to indicate that I am here to help them find their way and try to establish a personal connection. Students have come to my office periodically for, what some have expressed as, a "shot of confidence." It takes just a few moments to reconnect with them. It gives real meaning to my life at the law school to touch their lives, primarily in academic and career conversations but when needed, in personal conversations as well. The sense of a joint endeavor, a feeling that we are engaged together in the work of the profession, sets the stage for the conversation. What I seek to develop is a community of interest in the work of the law school and for a life in the law.

At times, prior to the start of class, I look out and see people preparing for a future and wonder what life will hold for them. I know the personal happiness and sorrow that can come as the years pass. I am aware of the struggle to find meaningful work and a place for a life in the law. My conversation with each student is only for a limited time, this particular time and place. Sometimes the conversations continue far into the future and continue to hold their meaning.

I have written that we teach who we are,² believing that it enters

2. See Bruce Levine, *Legal Education—A Personal Reflection After Twenty Years*, 27 WASHBURN L.J. 330, 335 (1988).

I have a sense of what a life in legal education amounts to, a sense of what is of lasting value in teaching. I think that we strive to transfer a part of ourselves to the law student, a sense of our feelings for life and law. We teach who we are, convey our sense of commitment, our thoughts of law, lawyer and profession, all beyond the subject matter, the doctrines and policy analysis of our courses. It is, I believe, the individual visions that we teach and it is these visions that sustain us. The teaching of law may very well involve, in its essence, a transmittal of ideals which provides a framework, a way of thinking and feeling, that informs our work.

Id.

into our teaching and our conversations. There is vitally important learning that comes from the diverse law professor/human beings that we are and the history out of which we came. In addition to academic structure, I attempt to encourage a sensitivity in the student to other people and to the respect, warmth and affection that should be shared among us. The ramifications to the profession, I think, are apparent. For the protection of human dignity and human rights, the profession must be infused with responsibilities which emanate from an underlying human compassion, one human being for the other.

Working toward some resolution of who I am as a law professor is essential to the conversations. I tried to think it through in an essay entitled "An Issue of Professional Identity."³ I wrote that "I am a law professor who is Jewish."⁴ The history of persecution against the Jewish people, the Holocaust in this last century, enters into who I am and my thoughts of law, lawyer and profession. Jewish history provides a framework, a way of thinking and feeling that informs my conversations, albeit indirectly. The conversations have humanitarian underpinnings, apart from this history, which comes from the important influences of parents, close friends and the experience of growing up in a caring environment. In the absence of a humanitarian culture at the law school, the education in law will have failed to achieve its essential purpose.⁵

After thirty-three years of teaching, I continue to innovate in the classroom where the academic conversation is paramount. I use different ways to engage students intellectually in the first year course in Contracts, as well as in the second and third year courses in Federal Income Tax and Remedies. The law students that we graduate become the bar of the state. If they are to defend my human dignity, my human rights, my right to be secure in my home and in my person, as well as the similar rights of others, they must have both the personal compassion and commitment and the trained lawyer's ability to effectuate that responsibility. For this reason and, more generally, for the need of lawyers to counsel their clients effectively, I have required high academic standards and found that law students have accepted their responsibilities readily. In light of the importance of each lawyer in ensuring a just society, I have always held law students first in terms of my responsibilities at the law school.

Without deeply held feelings of compassion and caring, there will

3. Bruce Levine, *An Issue of Professional Identity*, 32 WASHBURN L. J. 35 (1992).

4. *Id.* at 35.

5. I wrote in an earlier essay that "[l]awyers must accept their responsibility to protect those human rights, that dignity, to which every human being is entitled, know it well as part of their professional self. To fail in this regard is to deprive the profession of true greatness and significance." Bruce Levine, *An Education in Law—For What Purpose? "The Trust We Impose on the Law Student."* 34 WASHBURN L.J. 516, 529 (1995).

not be that level of dedication, in the lawyer and in the profession, to those events and issues that directly impact real people's lives. I hope that my conversations with students have had the effect of nurturing a vital humanitarian impulse and its implicit connection to their practice of law.

I have had significant conversations with students at the law school, human beings with both personal and professional lives to build. I hope that I have had something meaningful to tell them at this time in their lives, conversations that will remain with them. I have been building memories as well that will remain with me.