Professor Block: A Student Remembers

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Professor Steven Block taught Civil Procedure to first year law students here at the University of Minnesota Law School. I was one of his students.

I did learn from him the rules, the theory, and the application of Civil Procedure, but what I will remember most about his teaching was not contained in our textbook nor tested for on the final examination.

He introduced the course by explaining that for people to live together successfully they need rules that will keep peace among them, make them deal justly with one another, and enable them to collaborate efficiently. Since people are likely to differ about what these rules should be, it is necessary to set up some procedure by which the rules may be authoritatively declared. But then he stated that we must also ask if a given rule makes sense and remember that the law is inevitably in development and that the direction of its development would lie in part with us as participants in setting that direction. It was a theme he returned to often—asking us if what we were learning made sense and why.

I remember particularly a discussion the class had about Rule 11 of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure. It developed that many of us believed that lawyers are basically scoundrels willing to do whatever is necessary to win our case. The next day Professor Block began by telling us that it wasn’t "worth all the money in the world" to practice law that way, because the bottom line was we have to live with ourselves and take responsibility for our decisions.

My relationship with Professor Block, the teacher, changed when I began to work for him as his research assistant. He also became my employer, my mentor, and my friend. In these areas, his influence was crucial in a more personal sphere and in less tangible ways. An incident last spring illustrates his uncanny ability to combine humor, friendship, and guidance. I had gone to him seeking advice. At that time I was tempted to give up the struggle to become a lawyer. I asked him what I would lose if I quit law school. He said I would be giving up my dream. I would be giving up struggle, harassment, disappointment, and exhaustion. I would be giving up the capacity to turn dreams into reality, the joy of accomplishment, the pleasure of sharing myself with the world, the chance to be a part
of a new breed of women who are creating themselves. I would be giving up my time, my moment when I could change—could amend history... He went on for several minutes and then he laughed.

He was right—to become a lawyer is my dream. But on that occasion, he also gave authoritative permission and intellectual legitimacy to the inner turmoil augered in law school. I was lucky to be his friend. It was indeed a gift to have daily contact with his brilliant mind.

Because Professor Block insisted that we learn not just legal rules, but also search for and question the reasons behind the rules, as well as recognize our ultimate responsibility to live by our personal moral values and take responsibility for our decisions, we will not just be better lawyers, but also better people. He believed that each of us can have an impact on our world. He willingly accepted the ancient Chinese curse, “May you live in interesting times,” not because he hoped for joy, but because he saw no reasonable, acceptable alternative. His death is a great loss to the students of the University of Minnesota Law School.

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