

**Tribute to Ross M. Lence in *PS, a Political Science Journal***  
**By: Susan D. Collins and Donald S. Lutz**  
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On July 11, 2006, our distinguished colleague Ross M. Lence passed away. Ross had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in August of 2005, and even in his most difficult moments this last year, he continued to grace our lives with his good cheer and to engage in that activity he most loved, teaching.

Ross came to the University of Houston in 1971, after completing a B.A. at the University of Chicago, graduate study under George Carey at Georgetown University, and a Ph.D. at Indiana University, during which he undertook a year of study at the British Museum. At Indiana, Ross had studied with Charles S. Hyneman, whom he credited with opening up a new world of ideas for a "kid from the wilds of Montana." Under Hyneman, Ross focused on the ideas, traditions, and institutions that constitute the American political order, but his study spanned many eras and thinkers, many texts and traditions. At Houston, Ross held a joint appointment in Political Science and The Honors College, and he taught courses ranging from the Introduction to American Government and Democratic Theory to Ancient/Medieval Political Thought and The Politics of Greek Comedy. He was a devoted, and unapologetic, reader of the "great books," in which he effortlessly engaged students and colleagues as a regular lecturer in the Honors gateway course.

But he found sources of enlightenment in the most unexpected places, and his lectures — replete with humor and intentional non sequiturs and startling flashes of insight — kept students eagerly scrambling to learn. His course titles alone reflected the learning and wit that drew students to his classes: "Plato's Republic: An Exhumation of Western Man"; "Machiavelli in America"; "Attila at the Gates: Topics in Contemporary American Politics"; "To Be or Not To Be in Modern Times"; "Plagues: Ancient and Modern." But it seems that it wouldn't have much mattered what Ross chose to lecture on; as a student recently recalled, "the man could have read the telephone book and made it interesting."

Not surprisingly, then, Ross was a favorite among students. In his 35 years at Houston, he became such an institution that students often advised one another not to graduate until taking a course from Ross M. Lence — and this advice despite his reputation for rigor and tough grading. Students took pride in surviving that first 'F' on a Lence paper, and each had a story to tell about some comment that shook them from their slumber. In a pithy remark, he was able to make students simultaneously laugh and think: "Young man," he once counseled on a first paper, "If we are going

to communicate, we are going to have to settle on a common language. I prefer English." "Capital punishment may be cruel," he told a class, "but it's not unusual, and therefore it fails the constitutional prohibition." Or his own piety notwithstanding, he once was heard to say, "The Bible tells us that Moses was a humble man. He was the humblest man alive. Of course, as we know, Moses wrote that!" Ross also delighted when students made him laugh. "Miss Little," he asked an eager freshman, "Do you believe in the overthrow of government by force or violence?" She paused and then confidently replied, "Force!"

Ross took pride in the fact that he could rouse the spirit of left-wingers and right-wingers at the same time and then make them laugh with him and at themselves. His annual introduction to Commencement was a much anticipated event even by his colleagues in the administration at whom he might poke good fun: "Many of you do not know what a Dean is. I assure you that many of them do not either. But they have taken special heed of God's command to multiply and fill the earth." It is true that Ross had an occasional detractor. Despite having been late or absent from class a number of times, a young woman turned in her final exam only to announce to his back as he wrote on the board: "Dr. Lence, you are a horrible teacher, and I want you to know that because of the way you teach, we haven't learned a single thing this semester." Of course, Ross's wit invariably came to the rescue, for without so much as turning around, he replied, "Yes, madam, and you are empirical proof of that."

Ross was not given to political correctness, but he steadfastly promoted the cause of colleagues and students regardless of gender, race, or religion. His irrepressible wit, moreover, was coupled with a generosity of spirit and an abiding concern for others. He formed long friendships with those whom he'd first met in his classes; he reached out to those who were suffering or struggling; and he inspired many to fulfill their best ambitions. If empirical proof of Ross's reaching influence was ever needed, it came in the 1990s when hundreds of former students donated funds to establish the Ross M. Lence Distinguished University Teaching Chair, a post he held until his death.

Although he wore his piety lightly, Ross was a religious man, and it would be hard to understand him without appreciating the way in which faith and reason together informed his life and work. About this interweaving, the Dean of The Honors College, Ted Estess, observed in his eulogy, "The wellspring of Ross's irrepressibility, of his merriment and generosity, the ground bass of the songs that he sang was religious. To him, teaching itself was a religious vocation. I am speaking of religious in the root sense of the word: *re-ligio*: a binding together again, as ligaments connect and bind. Ross was bound, first of all, to life itself; to reality and to the structure of the

real; but also to country, family, and friends-and to the religious tradition that nurtured him from his mother's arms to his dying day." The Chair of the Political Science Department, Harrell Rodgers, likewise noted: "Ross's classes required students to do some hard thinking, and they often found the process to be a life changing experience . . . . Yet understanding that they had taken the path least traveled, they proudly proclaimed the benefits of an examined life. I think the fact that Ross himself was religious made him the perfect messenger of thinking. If a man as pious as Ross promoted thinking, it had to be safe. There are strong messages here for all of us who want to help students find a moral compass and be educated, decent, contributing citizens." To his former teacher, a Houston civic leader who had attended Ross's classes in the 1980's paid tribute most simply by writing, "Because of him I am a better person who continues to use the tools he provided in the effort to build a good and just city" (Houston Chronicle, July 23, 2006).

Ross exemplified a life of thought and good citizenship also outside the academy walls, in his many seminars with the Women's Institute of Houston, the Liberty Fund, and the Houston Teacher's Institute. His commitment to this life was also manifest in his willingness to shoulder the burdens of committee work that few of us relish. He was Director of Undergraduate Studies in the department for a quarter of a century, shaping the undergraduate curriculum in every detail. In various college level committees, he also shaped curriculum for the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, and in 1978, he was appointed to the University Undergraduate Council, which he also chaired over the years and through which he shaped undergraduate education at the university as a whole. In short, Ross left his fingerprints on the heart and soul of education at the University of Houston, and in 1998 he was recognized by the university by being named a John and Rebecca Moores Professor, one of the university's most prestigious professorships and a fitting affirmation of his many other teaching and service awards.

Our discipline sometimes worries about its relevance, but Ross's life and work — the great love students bore him and the way in which his courses penetrated and shaped their lives as individuals and citizens-remind us of one of our most relevant tasks. We thought it fitting, therefore, to conclude with Ross's own statement on teaching in which he pays tribute to the teacher who most influenced him and recalls that part of our mission he would wish us never to forget.

We say farewell to our friend and colleague in the confidence that he is loved in turn.

## **On Teaching**

**By: Ross M. Lence**

I shall not shock anyone, but merely subject myself to good-natured ridicule, if I profess myself inclined to the old way of thinking that the primary concern of teaching and teachers is the student.

While such an observation may seem elementary, it should be noted that for those who define the functions of a university as "the discovery, preservation, and transmission of knowledge," the role of teaching (presumably the transmission of knowledge) is formulated in such a way as to avoid mentioning either the teacher or the student. Indeed, when confined to the transmission and preservation of knowledge alone, teaching would seem to be little more than the transmission of decaying sense, entombed in that graveyard of knowledge, the notes of the teacher's students.

Teaching necessarily involves the highest forms of discovery, the awakening of the students' minds and souls to the world of creativity and imagination. A good teacher challenges students to join in the continuous, meticulous, and solitary questions of the mind. I myself prefer important questions partially answered to unimportant questions fully answered.

Who could doubt that those students were blessed who witnessed the phenomenal mind of Enrico Fermi as he unleashed the power of the universe on that cold winter day under the bleachers of Stagg Field at the University of Chicago? There, with only the assistance of a slide rule and his hands, Fermi managed to do what now requires the use of two computers to replicate: to produce man's first nuclear reaction. There, a great teacher, in the tongue of his native Italy and understood by hardly anyone present, managed to convey to his peers the desperate need to insert the carbon rods back into the nuclear mass, thereby saving not only themselves, but the city of Chicago.

No doubt everyone remembers the teacher who most influenced his or her thoughts, person, and soul. No one is perhaps more aware of the best teachers than teachers themselves. That person who most influenced my own thinking was the Sage of Goose Creek, Charles S. Hyneman, Indiana University's Distinguished Service Professor and

President of the American Political Science Association. That man did something for me that few teachers have ever done for a student. In a desperate effort to teach this kid from the wilds of Montana about the American Regime, Charles Hyneman took me on a 15,000 mile, 5-year trip across America, where he introduced me to every site where an Indian had died, every sausage factory in America, and even Alvin, Texas, home of Nolan Ryan.

Today I attempt to lead my students on such a journey of the mind. Some days are good; some days are not so good. But everyday I remind myself that teaching is like missionary work, and that I am the messenger, not the message. I constantly strive to bring others to see the excitement, as well as limits, offered by the life of the mind. I encourage all students to be bold in their thoughts, moderate in their actions, and courageous in their defense of truth-wherever it is and however it can be known.

As I now come to my own golden age, I often think of my teacher. Of his incredible kindness, of his depth of soul, and the power of his imagination. My real hope is that I, too, will be remembered by those who come after me with the same fondness.

This is my philosophy of teaching: teachers love their own teachers, and they are loved in turn.