

Farewell to Our Teacher and Friend¹

I begin with the salutation that Ross himself used most often: *Salutem in Domine*.

Our teacher and friend Ross Lence was well known and loved for many things: certainly for the clarity and sharpness of his intellect; for the generosity and gaiety of his spirit; for his indefatigable dedication to his students.

In his early years, he was known for the briskness of his step across campus, such that admiring students hurried to keep up; throughout his years, we knew him for the garish colors and shocking patterns of his ties and suspenders.

But perhaps above all, our friend and brother Ross was known and loved for the quickness of his wit; for the merriment and laughter that he bestowed on any gathering, effortlessly, with grace, bite, and kindness. If his greeting was *Salutem in Domine*, his farewell was *Gaudeamus* — Rejoice! Take pleasure in life! Enjoy!

A spirit of *hilaritas* and *felicitas* — that's what our friend gave us. That's what we gladly remember, what we shall sorely miss.

So it is not surprising that every one of Ross' students has some story to tell. One student received his first paper back from the Good Doctor, only to read this comment: "Young man, if we are going to communicate, we are going to have to settle on a common language. I prefer English."

This morning, we have no difficulty finding a common language. And I am not speaking of English. What we hold in common — what holds us in common — is gratitude, respect, and affection for Ross himself.

For you see, Ross Lence had an extraordinary capacity to dispose persons in a common direction, and to constitute community. The means by which he did so was conversation; for conversation, practiced with Ross' wit and generosity, binds persons together. It builds and manifests community.

Anyone who visited Ross in the hospital this past weekend, or anyone who saw him during the year of his illness, witnessed that community. Last evening and again this morning, that community gathered in abundance, present and palpable. Graybeards from the early 1970's are taking interest in current Honors students; graduates from the 1980's are interacting easily with Lencians from the 90's — all of them, students, faculty, and alumni from four decades, immediately connecting, telling their own stories about their outrageous and beloved teacher and friend.

¹ Eulogy for Ross M. Lence at St. Anne Catholic Church, Houston, Texas, July 14, 2006, as given by his friend Ted Estess, Dean of The Honors College at the University of Houston.

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One Lencian tells of the student who, having been late or absent from class a number of times in the semester, walked up to turn in her final exam. His back turned to her, the Good Doctor was writing something on the board, as she said: “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.” And without so much as turning around, Ross replied: “Yes, madam, and you are empirical proof of that.”

Circero helps us understand the charisma—the spirited gifts—of Ross Lence when he says, “The essence of friendship consists in the fact that many souls . . . become one.”

The collegial community of friends that arose around Ross Lence owed much, of course, to his own altogether distinctive qualities: his personality was as winsome and energetic and engaging as one is ever apt to find. Donald Lutz — Ross’ close colleague of thirty-five years and a master teacher himself — got it right when he told me earlier this week, “Every thing that Ross did had a little bit of magic about it. He was a chariot of fire, a visitor from another place, a gift of God.”

Ross *was* our chariot of fire, our celebrity teacher, the one we showed off, the one whom we sent out to the community, the one in whose radiating light we like to stand, as if to suggest, *We are a bit like him ourselves*. He was our *high star*,² the one by whom we charted our course and calibrated our compass, pedagogically, intellectually, and morally.

But not always politically. Ross was sometimes — well, often — heard to complain about the state of political affairs in the country he so dearly loved. He would snort, “In America, anything is permitted between and among consenting adults except the shooting of firecrackers.”

Those of you who studied Greek philosophy with Ross certainly learned that we can measure every art, including the art of teaching, by its product. The monument to the artist is what he creates.

If we would see the monument to Ross Lence, we need only look around this morning at the community that he, as artist and midwife, brought into being.

Ross would of course want me to say that he had much help in his life and his work, most notably that of his mother, Nickie. “Big Momma,” he sometimes called her. One needs only to meet Nickie to see the source of many of her son’s gifts. Over the years, literally thousands of students came to her house to see her son and to eat her food. They also came for the beer.

² High Star is the street on which Ross lived in Houston for some thirty years.

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Our friend Ross, of course, was a teacher of virtue, a philosopher, a lover of wisdom. But he was, as well, a lover of sights and sounds, and of all things beautiful. His offices at the University were appointed more stylishly than mine and other faculty's offices. And I have to say it: he was an impulsive shopper. Once he told me, "Ted, the only things I regret are the things I didn't buy."

To be sure, not all students took to Ross — some were unhappy because he wouldn't tell them what they should think. He wouldn't even tell them what *he* thought.

Other students were unhappy because Ross was irreverent. He said things that would get any other faculty member fired. He talked about cannibalism and goats, and you were never quite sure why. He certainly was a trickster. Some students, and probably one or two colleagues and an occasional dean, suspected him of being a diabolical Machivel. This made him especially happy.

But in reality, the wellspring of Ross' 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 inclination of Ross Lence toward the religious is evident in words that he wrote several years ago to the parents of an Honors student who had suddenly, and tragically, died. As was his custom when people were in trouble — and Ross did such things an untold number of times over the years — Ross reached out to those parents. He visited them in their home, attended the funeral service of their son, called them several times, and wrote a note, a portion of which I, in closing, want to share with you. As is often the case with what a teacher says, these words of Ross return now to their source:

"How I wish that some faint words of mine could erase the sorrow in your hearts. All of us wish for a little more time to reflect and to love life. But God will never abandon those who love him."

"I am reminded of the immortal words of Catullus on the death of his own brother: *atque in perpetuum, frater, ave atque vale* — and so for all eternity, brother, hail and farewell."