

ROSS LENCE: HE TAUGHT STUDENTS AND ME

I remember the first time I walked down the hall in PGH, to the corner teeming with students, all seeking nurturance and advice, around the corner and into the office with the nameplate that read, *The Reasonable Mister*. I had no idea what was going to happen to me over the next 18 years. I was greeted by a little fellow with a twinkle in his eye and an infectious smile who, I would discover, was the University of Houston's great *Disturber of Complacency*. The first thing he said to me was, "So, we are going to teach together. Welcome!" We did teach together in the Core Curriculum for fifteen semesters. I should have known back then that something unusual was up when the next thing the Mister said was, "I just returned from a meeting of the Undergraduate Council. You know, the brain is a wonderful organ. It starts working the moment you get up in the morning, and it doesn't stop working until you get to the second floor of E. Cullen."

Every course with Ross was a strenuous exercise in liberal education. For Ross, liberal education, intellectual growth, liberty, and freedom were central to life. They were interconnected, and they had little to do with the popular political sentiments of the day. For him, liberal education was based on nurturing human intellect and human talent in the service of human freedom. Students were exposed to those values in every course. What gifts they received. Ross expected these qualities to grow from his teaching. He wanted his teaching to make a difference, but a particular kind of difference.

For Ross, education was a way of living day to day in the face of our ignorance. It was a way of groping toward wisdom, but in full recognition of our own limitations and folly and a way of diversifying and expanding ourselves, free of illusions that our education would ever be complete. He also understood better than anyone else I know that educating for human freedom and liberty means educating for human community--that freedom, liberty, and community cannot exist without each other. The elastic mysteries and dilemmas of obedience versus liberty, which drove others to despair, made him smack his lips and smile. Ross took almost childish delight in what he called

my “stunning lecture on John Stuart Mill’s “On Liberty” and Stanley Milgram’s research on behavioral obedience.

Ross was a man of deep commitments, but also a committed skeptic and a questioner--the disturber of complacency. He was conservative in matters of economics and policy and law, but he was open, loving, accepting, curious, and tolerant in matters of personal behavior, personal choice, and personal life style. Everywhere in the University, he was fearless, honest, and scornful of hypocrisy and pretense by persons in authority, but unfailingly patient and nurturant with honest persons who were trying hard in the face of difficult odds. He railed against the “McDonaldization of the University,” but he would spend hours helping a student who worked full time to make it through the University. I often wondered how a person with such a big heart could be such a formidable needler and adversary of persons in power.

Teaching with Ross was one of the high points of my forty-one-year career in higher education. He brought great gifts to the University, to the intellectual world, to his College, to his department, to his students, and to me. A host of thoughtful and effective citizens now live all over the world, in a variety of callings and professions, who have been affected deeply by Ross. How do I know? Because I have seen it first hand, and because I, too, have been affected deeply. We actually taught each class session together. My God, what an experience that was!

In every course, Ross worked hard to teach the difference between skepticism and trivializing. This distinction was fundamental to him, and he lived his own life on its basis. As a result, he was labeled an iconoclast at times. He was not--he never sought simply to destroy important symbols. But, he was an avid stalker of symbols, and he stalked blind faith and bias with tenacity, caustic humor, perceptive wit, and skepticism. I witnessed Ross at work on this issue many times. He did it to lead students into the habits of skepticism, self-examination, and self-directed humor.

George Bernard Shaw once noted that “All great truths begin as blasphemies.”

If Shaw was correct, then classes with Ross were legendary. He was a spellbinding orator. He would pace around a hall full of students, speaking in lucid, lofty, carefully crafted sentences--without ever looking at a note. He spoke on topics ranging from Aquinas to Machiavelli, from St. Francis to Freud, from Socrates to Mark Twain, from Mickey Mantle to John Locke. But, there was much more.. In the classroom, he was articulate, profound, witty, engaging, warm, well-organized, stimulating, widely aware, and persistent. He also was emphatic, provocative, profane, raucous, pushy, scolding, and demanding. Complacency made him irritable. Intellectual laziness and sloppiness made his face turn red and the veins on his neck stand out. His concern was not where his students placed on the various political polarities of the day. What *did* concern him--passionately--was for them to base their positions on solid thinking. So, he sometimes leaned hard on students, but always in the interest of waking them out of their dogmatic and lazy sleep in the face of great historic questions, great literature, and the major issues of the day. Students who came from dismal backgrounds, but were trying hard were beneficiaries of gentle, loving, supportive attention and feedback. Why? Because he, like I, came from such a history. I witnessed this first hand, and it was a singular experience. I can still hear Ross saying, "Be bold and audacious in thought. Be precise and effective in speaking and writing. Be moderate and considerate in action." Even now, when I count the honors he received, it's hard to believe that I taught with that man.

Who else in Creation but Ross Lence could have lectured repeatedly on Billy Goats, Freud, Whitefish, Montana, Helen of Troy, London's Choking under Horse Manure, Dostoyevsky, Washing Machines, Martin Luther King Jr., Tolstoy, Socrates, Hamilton, Ghandi, Calhoun, and, yes, even Cannibals, and still have earned all those honors for teaching? Students at times thought they were getting the academic equivalent of Jerry Lee Lewis or The Grateful Dead, and they often were slow to realize that they actually were getting Mozart or Mahler or Ravel. Almost always, their

realization was exhilarating.

Back in the heyday of the Chicago Bulls in the NBA, a sportswriter once asked Stacey King, a bench warmer for the Chicago Bulls, to describe the most memorable game of his career. Mr. King replied, "That's easy. It's the night Michael Jordan and I combined to score 70 points." Deeply impressed, sitting down the next morning to write his column, the sportswriter checked the records and found, on the night in question, that Stacey King had scored two points and Michael Jordan had scored sixty-eight! This story is one of the central metaphors of my relationship with Ross Lence. He and I combined to score 70 points many times. The fact that he usually scored sixty and I scored ten only makes me feel lucky--lucky and humble to have been involved with him and lucky and thankful to have been in those special events that most people might simply call "classes." Classes with him were elevated intellectual bazaars--intellectual circuses. Just like Michael Jordan with his teammates, Ross made me a better person and a better teacher. I will be grateful for that forever.

Ross dazzled people quickly, and, for a time in every course, students were mystified, afraid, angry, and blinded. But, when they *got it*, when they understood that the man in their classroom was not a yelling clown but an intellectual giant, they catapulted forward in their own maturity. That leap often included me.

Midway in our adventure in collaborative teaching, Ross, in a short but serious ceremony before a class, gave me a T-shirt, on which was inscribed William Shakespeare's declaration: *For he today that sheds his blood with me shall be my brother*. We did shed a little blood together during that crazy enterprise. I am proud to have shed blood with Ross and to have been his brother.

My personal tribute to Ross Lence is not grief, but gratitude. He has been released from the suffering of the last months of his life and from what he called the "chaotic brutality of modern medicine." He has been restored to laughing without distress. I can conjure up a clear image of The Reasonable Mister, to whom I am

indebted for so much--for being my teacher and my brother.

Thank you very much.

Edwin P. Willems
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