

**Remarks of Susan D. Collins
Ross M. Lence Memorial Service
December 1, 2006
A.D. Bruce Religion Center
University of Houston**

It is my honor to speak on behalf of my colleagues in the department of political science in tribute to our friend and colleague Ross Lence. I hope they will not mind if I begin with my own memory of the first time I met Ross, which was before I came to the University of Houston.

We met at a conference in Flat Rock, NC. I had been forewarned about this crazy man from Houston, though all the warnings had been followed by fond recollections of the irrepressible Lence wit.

And sure enough, I was quickly initiated, for as we walked along after being introduced, he happened to spy a North Carolina license plate with the NC motto: “First in flight.” “First in Flight?,” he stopped and grinned at me. “FIRST IN FLIGHT?! THEY CAN’T MEAN THE WAR?!”

We laughed, and I distinctly remember thinking, “I’m going to like this man.” And I did. In fact, as is true of all my colleagues in political science, I came to have an abiding affection for Ross, a truly loveable human being.

And not simply for his trademark wit, though it is impossible not to love someone who could so ring our lives with laughter.

But his trademark wit issued from a mind in constant motion and from a generosity of spirit. His capacity to extend himself seemed limitless—to his beloved mother Nickie Lence, his family and friends, his colleagues, and, most especially, after his mother, his students.

Indeed, as much as we valued him as a colleague, no one doubted that Ross’s true vocation—his life’s blood—was teaching and his students.

It is impossible to understand fully his gifts as a teacher—how his classes and lectures could be so replete with startling flashes of insight, intentional nonsequiturs, high seriousness, and even higher comedy. Ross kept students eagerly scrambling to learn in courses titled, “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.”

And in some ways, 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.”

Truth be told, it didn’t always matter to Ross! A young woman once raised her hand at the end of a course and asked, “Professor Lence, do you think you’ll ever teach a course on the books you actually assigned??”

One falls back on cliché in explanation of Ross’s gifts as a teacher: Ross made students think for themselves.

But Donald Lutz, or “LUTZIEEE!” as Ross liked to call him—the man who lured Ross to Houston and who reveled in watching his friend at work—pointed out that while Ross owed much to their mutual teacher Charles Hyneman, he also had emulated another, Byrum Carter. For Mr. Carter rarely provided students with conclusions or answers. What he did supply were premises for students to begin puzzling over themselves.

Ross perfected this technique. In a lecture on the constitutional question of capital punishment, for example, he would at some point produce the major premise that there is a constitutional prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment.

Sometime later, he might throw out a related minor premise—capital punishment may be cruel, but it’s not unusual.

“Hey!,” a bright student might later call from the back of the class, “does that mean that capital punishment fails the constitutional prohibition??” At which Ross might only laugh and say, “Mr. Little, do you mean to tell me that you are so much wiser than the wise Justice Brennan?!”

Of course, Ross himself was nothing if not irreverent. For decades, colleagues in political science trusted no one but Ross to direct the undergraduate program or represent the department on important college and university committees, but they also amiably endured his jokes at the expense of social science.

When a colleague once reassured Ross that he liked to keep one foot in Political Theory and one foot in Empirical Methods, Ross laughed and said, “And that would be your club foot sir!”

Now, it would be hard for anyone to take offense at Ross’s irreverence, especially seeing that it could extend even to the good Lord himself.

In his lectures, he would wonder if the book of Genesis simply proved that next time, God shouldn’t take Sunday off, or what the book of Job might be suggesting by showing that even God will occasionally make deals with the devil.

But Ross’s apparent irreverence reflected Aristotle’s definition of the virtue of wittiness: the ability to make people laugh while saying nothing inappropriate to a free man.

Ross was nothing if not a free man, in the older sense of the term: a man who combined gravity and levity and who loved all that was beautiful, noble, and good. And one has to believe that at the pearly gates, he was forgiven his irreverence since he was also a man of deep and abiding faith.

Ross loved the Academy, even as he knew that it could be a rough and tumble place. He laughed knowingly at the story of a colleague of mine at another institution who shook the hand of a friend departing for a new position and said, “Well, Larry, you’ll be missed, but you’ll be replaced”

Our good fortune and our misfortune is that Ross is deeply missed and can’t be replaced. Ross did more than make the University of Houston a better place. He made it a place: he brought it to life and gave it a sense of its self and its mission.

And so while none of us are under any illusion that the good doctor Lence can be replaced, we are grateful for and buoyed by our recollections of our friend and of his love for the university where he so cheerfully and gracefully lived out his vocation.