

**Remarks of Tom Kirkendall  
Ross M. Lence Memorial Service  
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Two extraordinary mentors, both of whom were great teachers, have blessed my life. The first one was my father, who was a beloved teacher at two medical schools for over 40 years. The second one — who came into my life when I was not listening much to that first mentor — was Ross Lence.

My first experience with Ross was probably similar to that of many of you. I wandered — and I mean quite literally wandered — into my first class with Ross in 1973. I was a shy and rootless young man, unsure of myself and my beliefs, having just moved from the security of growing up in Eastern Iowa to this bustling and somewhat threatening big city.

One of Ross' special gifts was his instinct to detect such insecurities in his students. But I must admit that it did not occur to me that Ross was preparing to become my mentor when he summoned me to his office for the first time. I mean, what else was I to think when the first written comments that I ever received from Ross were the words "POOH-PAH" scrawled in large red letters at the top of my first paper?

As we all know, Ross was a magnificent teacher, a rare combination of intellect, eloquence, humanity and self-deprecating wit. Donald Livingston, a philosophy professor at Emory University, contends that it is "no exaggeration to say that Ross must be included in a handful of the greatest teachers in the America of our time."

But Ross' teaching brilliance was only part of his endearing character. I recall asking myself after my first few classes with Ross. "What is it about this man that he seems so gosh darn happy, content and fulfilled all the time? What is his secret?"

Well, as Ross used to observe frequently, an essential undertaking to understanding anyone is to examine where that person came from. And if we apply that lesson to Ross, we begin by discovering that his special nature was initially molded in Montana by his loving mother, Nickie.

When Nickie had Ross ready to go off to college, Ross chose to go to the University of Chicago. Ross used to delight in telling folks that he decided on Chicago based on a most reasonable criterion — Chicago offered him the most scholarship money.

After Chicago, Ross gravitated to Georgetown, where Professor George Carey advised this bright young grad student with a ferocious interest in American political thought that he really needed to study under, as Professor Carey put it, “a man who knows more things American than any living person.” That man was Ross’ ultimate mentor, Professor Charles Hyneman of Indiana University.

Many of us have heard Ross’ wonderful stories of his legendary road trips with Professor Hyneman, who was affectionately known as “the Chief” to his students. The Chief and Ross traveled 15,000 miles together over the next five years, experiencing a broad range of American culture. Ross used to say that, before those road trips, he had never realized just how many sausage factories there were in the United States.

But it was during those trips with Professor Hyneman that Ross refined his disciplined analytical method that was at the core of his teaching brilliance. My friend and fellow former Lence student, Kevin Whited, recently reminded me that Ross’ approach to analyzing a subject, the question was often far more crucial than the initial answer because it led to even more important issues. This is why Ross often began class discussions by asking someone to read the question of the day and then asking his students: “Do you think it is a good question?”

This analytical method was also reflected in something that Ross repeated whenever he assigned the question for one of the famous three-page papers that he required of all of his students. I quote Ross from memory here, but I’m sure this is close to what he used to say:

“When consulting the text in order to answer the question, you should consider three things: What does it say? What does it mean? and What difference does it make?”

Those questions sound deceptively simple now. But I must admit that it took me about three semesters with Ross before I finally began to figure out what he truly meant by asking them.

For the most part, Ross never really cared whether a student got his questions “right.” Indeed, many of his questions did not have an obvious “right” or “wrong” answer.

What did matter to Ross, however, was that a student find support in the text for their answer — in other words, “What does it say?”

It was equally important to Ross that a student tried to understand the author’s meaning for the text rather than just relying on the contemporary interpretation — in other words, “What does it mean?”

And finally, it was most important to Ross that a student came to some resolution as to why the answer to the question mattered — in other words, “What difference does it make?”

Ross’ analytical method was one of the most valuable gifts that he gave to his students. I can personally attest that I have used that method in analyzing issues in my profession over the past 27 years, and I will continue to do so for the rest of my life.

In addition to refining Ross’ analytical method, Professor Hyneman also mentored Ross on a decision that was quite important to this University and to all of us. During one of their many trips together, Professor Hyneman took Ross to Alvin, Texas, about 30 miles south of here. Upon their arrival, the Chief declared:

“Ross, this is Alvin, Texas, the home of Nolan Ryan. That’s a pretty darn good reason for you to settle here.”

Well, as Ross used to say about his mentor’s suggestion: “It was August at the time and I thought we were in hell. So, there didn’t seem to be much chance that I would settle there!”

But a year or so later, Ross chose the University of Houston over Williams College, largely because of Charles Hyneman’s belief that the University of Houston was going to be a great university someday.

Ross came to love Houston and this University, and his vivacious personality became an endearing part of this institution’s character and soul over the past 35 years. Ross’ life here centered around selfless service to others, and he left a remarkable record in that regard:

- He served for 23 years in the office of Director of Undergraduate Studies;
- He served for 28 years as a member of the University's Undergraduate Council;
- He served for 28 years as one of the most popular instructors at The Women's Institute, where – by the way – he taught a course in 1985 entitled “The Noiseless Thief: The Supreme Court and Civil Liberties.”
- He served as a founding board member of the Abbeville Institute and as one of the earliest and most frequent participants in the Liberty Fund Colloquia;
- He dedicated literally thousands of hours of his life in serving as an advisor to students, for which he received nationwide recognition;
- And finally, he served as a magnificent teacher, a mentor to many of us, and a dear friend to us all.

Returning to the question that I posed earlier — What was it about Ross that gave him such contentment in his life? — Ross' legacy of service to others leads us to the answer.

You see, Ross' genius was that he combined service to others with his extraordinary teaching ability to become a conduit of God's grace to everyone in his life.

This channeling of grace was the source of Ross' effervescent love of life that attracted all of us to him.

This delivery of grace was Ross' most special gift to us.

So now, many years later, that rootless young man who wandered into Ross Lence's class in 1973 is thinking about things other than the meaning of the words “POOH-PAH;”

He is thinking about that big-hearted mentor from Indiana who blessed this University, our city and our lives by sending a brilliant young teacher our way;

He is thinking about the love of a devoted mother, who was a pillar of strength that sustained our friend when he fell ill;

He is thinking about the love of dozens of students, former students, colleagues and friends who jumped at the opportunity to reciprocate our friend's kindness by comforting him during his difficult final months;

He is thinking about the legacy of one of this University's finest teachers, a man whose life influenced — and will continue to influence — thousands of lives and families in a rich and fulfilling way;

And finally, he is thinking and praying for his four children, that mentors will emerge to shepherd them in their lives in the same loving way that Ross Lence cared for their father in his.