

1981

Tribute: Robert I. Stevenson

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Recommended Citation

Sally Y. Wood, *Tribute: Robert I. Stevenson*, 16 U. Rich. L. Rev. 5 (1981).
Available at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/lawreview/vol16/iss1/4>

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ROBERT I. STEVENSON

*Sally Yates Wood**

Sir Thomas Moore: Why not be a teacher? You would be a fine teacher, perhaps a great one—

Richard Rick: If I was, who would know it?

Sir Thomas Moore: You, your pupils, your friends, God. Not a bad public that.

A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

I remember a fellow T. C. Williams law student turning to me at the end of a school semester and remarking: "I really did learn alot in Mr. Stevenson's Products Liability class, and you know, I swear I don't know how." I certainly had to agree that I, too, had learned alot, and I knew that this had been the case in all the courses I had had under Mr. Stevenson. (While at T. C. Williams, I managed to enroll in every class offered by Mr. Stevenson.) I did chuckle, however, at my friend's bewilderment about how or why he had managed to learn as much as he had.

My friend must not have had time to analyze why he had benefited so from Mr. Stevenson's instruction. This was understandable since the poor man's "heels had not yet cooled" from his first Robert I. Stevenson experience.

In order to appreciate this experience, it must be understood that the majority of law students, whether seasoned third-year students or not, would enter Mr. Stevenson's class for the first time with pen and paper in hand, ready to take meticulous notes, and prepared at all cost to memorize said notes and to parrot them back come exam time. This was still the case no matter what the student's previous law school exposure to the Socratic method of learning. Old learning habits die hard; learning security blankets aren't easily cast away.

However, only the Saints could preserve the students who entered Mr. Stevenson's classroom and failed to quickly throw those old, tattered blankets away. On many occasions I had the opportunity to advise law school friends about their approach to Mr. Stevenson's class. (Of course this was a point in time when I had completed a Stevenson course or two.) Remember well how law students plot and scheme about their

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courses. What horns do I need? Is there a Gilberts? Do you have a good outline? My advice: "Lay your pen aside. Listen and think about the rat-a-tat-tat of questions that Mr. Stevenson fires out across the classroom. Be prepared to feel totally frustrated. You'll prepare for a Stevenson class for hours. You'll prance into his Commercial Law class, for instance, thinking you have Article Two down cold—only to be made painfully aware that you haven't thought of this implication, this problem, that angle. You'll leave the class ready to have another look at Article Two."

The Stevenson experience meant too that the student began to fire questions back. Mr. Stevenson would tolerantly respond to any question, no matter how rudimentary. I should emphasize that Mr. Stevenson was certainly not patronizing in his approach to his students. This energetic New Englander always illustrated utmost respect for his students. For this reason his students always felt free to question and to grow.

The word "respect" does help to explain the Stevenson experience. Mr. Stevenson had so much respect for his students that he knew that they could learn to reason—to think. He had so much respect for his students that he did not want them to parrot others' words. Mr. Stevenson had so much respect for himself that he did not need his students to parrot his words.

Hopefully, in writing this tribute and in attempting to describe the Stevenson experience, I have illustrated that Mr. Stevenson is a teacher. Hopefully, in noting that Mr. Stevenson is a teacher, I have indicated my intent to praise him. Few are due such a tribute.

Of course, there are many definitions and opinions about what constitutes a teacher. Many, myself included, would agree that:

A teacher should not be continually thundering instruction into the ear of his pupil, as if he were pouring through a funnel, but induce him to think, to distinguish and to find out things for himself; sometimes opening the way, and at other times leaving it for him to open; and so accommodate his precepts to the capacity of his pupil.

MONTAIGNE

It well might be best not to define or categorize this honorable term "Teacher." "Teacher" evokes thoughts and feelings individual to us all. Thoughts and feelings, Mr. Stevenson, that make your students applaud and thank you.