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## Tribute to Professor Carroll "John Was Third"

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## TRIBUTE TO PROFESSOR CARROLL “JOHN WAS THIRD”

*Jim Gibson \**

In any law school, there are those of us—most of us, really—who like to hear ourselves talk. We think that no conversation is complete until we have voiced our views.

But then there are those rare few who do not feel that need, who instead have a talent for picking their moments and crystallizing an issue with a single, insightful observation. That was John Carroll. At a faculty meeting, in a colloquy with a visiting scholar, and of course in the classroom, John could be counted on to say the wise thing at just the right time. His quiet voice could fill a room. It is impossible to contemplate never hearing it again.

When the law school family first heard the horrible news of John's passing, and we were grasping for ways to comprehend and express our loss, one of my colleagues said that she wished John were here to help us through it all. She got it exactly right. John would have known how to give comfort, what to say. When not to say anything. How to listen.

Sadly, it was not until John was gone that I began to understand all the ways that his gentle, generous soul had enriched our institution. I had known John mostly as a great teacher and a peerless mentor for his students. I knew that he loved the law school. That much was obvious from the time and energy he devoted to his work.

But the number of students, staff, and faculty who could tell a story about how John's counsel had helped them through a tough time—it was amazing. And humbling. And inspiring. And of course his boundless energies were directed far beyond the

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He was there when you needed him. And he was always clear about what was most important.

That was, of course, the most difficult challenge I have ever faced. Our prayers were answered, and Rose recovered and blossomed into the beautiful, healthy child she is today. In the intervening months, though, I struggled with how to return to my work at the law school while maintaining a focus on my family, and especially baby Rose. Ultimately, I decided to invoke the university's "Stop the Clock" policy, which permits faculty members with a new baby to essentially hit the "pause" button for a year and postpone promotion and tenure decisions. It was not an easy decision, though, and it continued to worry me. It was sometimes difficult to stay clear about what was most important.

Then just a month before he died, John quietly reminded me again to cherish and hold close all that is most precious in this life. As the Dean sent out congratulations to all of the law faculty who had recently been promoted, John wrote the following to me: "I noticed a missing name that deserves to be on this list, and wanted you to know that I was thinking about you and David and Rose today. I'm sure it was a difficult decision, but I deeply respect your decision to 'stop the clock' temporarily on this process so you could devote time where it was needed most." John under-

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You know I'm bound . . .  
 I'm bound to thank you for it  
 I want to thank you  
 For so many gifts  
 You gave with love and tenderness  
 I want to thank you  
 I want to thank you  
 For your generosity  
 The love and the honesty  
 That you gave me  
 I want to thank you  
 Show my gratitude  
 My love and my respect for you  
 I want to thank you  
 I want to . . .  
 Thank you  
 Thank you  
 Thank you  
 Thank you

NATALIE MERCHANT, *Kind and Generous, on OPHELIA* (Electra 1998).

stood my struggle; he validated and supported my decision. And he was clear about what was most important.

The day before John's death, we celebrated Rose's first birthday and marveled at the miracle of her young life. Rose and my family, *they* are what is most important.

My favorite poem ends with this question: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"<sup>2</sup> John knew the answer. He *lived* the answer. And his gift to me—and to many—was to help us remember what the answer is.

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2. Mary Oliver asks:

Who made the world?  
 Who made the swan, and the black bear?  
 Who made the grasshopper?  
 This grasshopper, I mean—  
 the one who has flung herself out of the grass,  
 the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,  
 who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—  
 who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.  
 Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.  
 Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.  
 I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
 I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
 into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
 how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
 which is what I have been doing all day.  
 Tell me, what else should I have done?  
 Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
 Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
 with your one wild and precious life?

MARY OLIVER, *The Summer Day*, in HOUSE OF LIGHT (1990).

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