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He Was So Kind & Generous

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TRIBUTE TO PROFESSOR CARROLL
“HE WAS SO KIND AND GENEROUS”

Meredith J. Harbach *

John had many gifts, and he shared them generously with his colleagues and students at the law school. As I have reflected on the gift of his life and the depth of our loss, many stories and conversations have come to mind. But none is more profound—or more appropriate, I think—than the anecdote that came to me immediately after I found out about John’s death.

I arrived at the law school on Friday, March 9, 2012 to the news that John had died suddenly the day before. I was devastated. And I could not help but be struck by the uncanny timing. Exactly a year before, on March 9, 2011, John was with my family and me at Virginia Commonwealth University Medical Center. John came to pray with us, and cry with us, as our tiny baby Rose—just two days old—fought for her life in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. He followed up with a generous message, offering us help and prayers, and connections to family members who were members of the VCU community. That was the kind of man John was: kind, generous.¹

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1. With apologies to Natalie Merchant, Jim Gibson and I performed *Kind and Generous* at John’s Law School Memorial Service. I cannot think of a more fitting tribute:

You’ve been so kind and generous.
I don’t know how you keep on giving
For your kindness I’m in debt to you
For your selflessness, my admiration
For everything you’ve done
You know I’m bound,
I’m bound to thank you for it
You’ve been so kind and generous
I don’t know how you keep on giving
For your kindness I’m in debt to you
And I never could have come this far without you
So for everything you’ve done

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-

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?"² 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.

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).
