It’s hard to believe that I didn’t know Roberta four years ago. I knew about her, of course. And what I knew were not just the facts of her extraordinary career, which had so many “firsts” of enormous significance, including being the first woman President of the American Bar Association and the first woman President of The American Law Institute. I also knew what she had done with the positions that she had worked so hard to attain: how she had used them to make our legal system fairer and more effective, and how she had used them to open a leadership path for people who did not look like the then-traditional leaders of the elite organizations in the legal profession.

Roberta often talks about what it means to be an “American lawyer.” In her lexicon, it means much more than merely being a lawyer admitted to practice law in at least one state. (And it doesn’t mean a lawyer admitted to the bar of every state, though when Roberta recounted during our Dallas reception last year that she was a Texas lawyer I thought that she might have that distinction.) And, while high ethical standards are a necessary condition for meeting Roberta’s “American lawyer” definition, they are far from a sufficient condition. Being an “American lawyer” means a great deal more. It means doing the right and courageous thing even when not doing so would be legal and ethical as well. It means acting at all times in ways that will make our legal system stronger and more respected. It is admittedly difficult to come up with a full definition of what it means to be an “American lawyer” and it is understandable that many respected lawyers would disagree about some of the elements. But I have no doubt that everyone would agree that nobody exemplifies the ideal of the “American lawyer” better than Roberta. She is the quintessential “American lawyer.” And, for that, the ALI and so many other institutions are so grateful!

And I am personally enormously grateful because, even though I didn’t know Roberta four years ago, she has now become such an important part of my life, as a boss, as a mentor, and as a friend. And, touchingly, she has made Vicki and me feel that we are part of her extended family.

For Roberta, her family is at the core of what is important. She takes such delight in them and in the extraordinary things they do, from all the lives that Barry has saved as a result of his clinical practice, his research, and his medical advice on TV; to the many disadvantaged citizens of New Mexico that Jenny has helped through her leadership of New Mexico Appleseed; and to the clear understanding of the consequences of globalization that emerges from Joshua’s books. I have never heard Roberta so happy as when we talked about Jenny’s amazing accomplishments in putting an end, in New Mexico, to the truly abhorrent practice of the “lunch shaming” of schoolchildren whose parents can’t afford to pay for a school lunch. Or when I told her that I had run into Justice Kennedy in New York’s Penn Station and that as I walked with him down to the platform and he got into his train, he turned around and said: “Please tell Roberta that I finished reading Joshua’s book and that it’s great!” Well, maybe Roberta was even happier recounting her granddaughter’s first smile and the performance of her grandsons in their elementary school play.

Luckily, Roberta has a very capacious vision of “family.” So many of us have been treated as members of Roberta’s extended family. And, that is a real privilege! Vicki and I quickly became close to her non-extended family, and were introduced to the music scene in Santa Fe, the leadership of the New Mexico legal community, and the major cardiology institutions in Albuquerque (not because we had any heart trouble at the time).
We came to have a real sense of Roberta, not only as an extraordinary institutional leader, but also as an extraordinary person, one able to connect people, bring them together, and make them feel valued and loved.

Many remarkable individuals who had to fight as hard as Roberta to be accepted and who had as many “firsts” as Roberta become hardened by the experience. It becomes difficult for them to remain gracious, to be good mentors to people who don’t understand the hurdles faced by the prior generation. Trial by fire made Roberta formidable, determined, and steely, but never took away her humility and her humanity.

Roberta will, of course, continue to be centrally involved in the work of the ALI as the Chair of the Council. That makes this transition less emotionally fraught. It is a celebration and not a good-bye.