

TRIBUTE TO JOHN SEXTON

Like many of you, I consider John Sexton to be one of the greatest teachers I've ever had. The irony, of course, is that he taught me in a classroom only three times, when I was a first-year student in Arthur Miller's Civil Procedure Class at Harvard Law School more than a quarter century ago. Then, as now, Arthur Miller was one of the most spellbinding teachers in the legal academy, so it was with bemusement that his devoted first-years watched this bearded Paul Bunyan of a man come to substitute teach. Someone whispered that he had been a divinity student. Another claimed he had turned the pigtailed St. Brendan's girls into the high school debate champs of New York. Yet another said John had dueled with Larry Tribe in the National Collegiate Debate Championships. As it turned out, all of them were right. But within seconds, we forgot John's past as he captured us in his spell, a spell that captivates me still. John spent three classes making the bland subject of joinder unforgettable, while sucking down gallons of coffee, and telling an endless stream of stories in that unmistakable Brooklyn accent.

What was striking about John Sexton, the teacher, was the remarkable way that he brought you into his common enterprise. Your success was his success. Your learning was his triumph. When one struggling student groped for an answer, John sprang toward him and shouted, "Let it out, big fella! I know it's inside you!" And when the student finally blurted out something, John bearhugged him, and we all roared, because we had learned something, not just about joinder, but about how a great teacher teaches students to love the law.

When John helped edit my *Law Review* note the next year, what I remember most is not the substance but the encouragement, the way he told me, "I believe in you." When I applied for Supreme Court clerkships, John told me he "just had a feeling" that I would hit it off with Justice Blackmun, and of course, he turned out to be right. When I went to take the New York Bar in Albany, having studied the whole summer, who should I bump into but John, who with characteristic *chutzpah* had decided, even while clerking for the Chief Justice of the United States, to take the N.Y. bar exam without studying. And when we both passed, and drove together to Albany months later to get admitted, John so charmed the Character Committee that when the interviewer got to me, he asked me

only one question: “Are you a friend of John’s?” And when I told him yes, he waved me through.

As an Asian, I had long valued the art of jujitsu, but it did not take long to recognize that in John Sexton I had found a grandmaster. He has the gift of getting arrogant people to underestimate him, of getting shy people to trust him, and of getting everyone to love him—a gift one sees only in the rarest of leaders.

In the 1970s, John was one of the oldest law students in America. By the 1980s, he was one of its youngest law deans. And in the years that followed, I learned countless other lessons from John, not in the classroom, but in his own unique tutorial: in his car, careening through the streets of New York while he drove with one knee; in his NYU apartment, punctuated by his phone calls every ten minutes to tell his wife Lisa, “I love you;” and most frequently, in some 24-hour diner or another, with a paper cup of coffee waving in his hand like Leonard Bernstein’s baton.

Almost every one of these conversations John would begin by saying, “Let me tell you this in confidence. Brother to Brother. I have this dream . . .”. And then he would paint his compelling vision: of an NYU Law School that stood among the finest in the world; of the first global law school; of the first law school dedicated to service in the public interest; of a law school whose members are not self-serving independent contractors, but totally involved with what John called “The Enterprise.”

When he sketched these visions, of course, they were figments of his imagination. But in a short time, I noticed, what he had dreamed had become reality. In every one of our discussions, John would push beyond the problem at hand to ask, “So how do we take this to the next level? What’s the big picture?” And even as he talked about big ideas, I noticed, the more he cared about people that others forgot. I remember no walk with him where he did not stop to pat a waiter or security guard or cabdriver on the back; no evening in which he did not field a call from an anxious student. For as great a dreamer as he was, John the Dreamer never displaced John the Teacher.

For more than a decade, John Sexton was not just one of America’s greatest law deans, he changed the way the game is played. Everyone—and I mean everyone—in legal academia has their favorite John Sexton story. Law professors replay their meetings with John the way cellists replay the great concerts of Yo-Yo Ma, the way chess players replay Fischer’s greatest games; the way boxers relive the great fights of Muhammad Ali. And every story ends the same way: with John doing something so outrageous, so hilari-

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ous, so compelling that his interlocutor simply could not say no, with the end result being that NYU was a stronger law school than it had been the day before.

So when New York University picked him to be its president, it simply recognized an obvious truth, that John Sexton was far and away the best person to lead this great university into a new millennium. And when my teenaged daughter recently visited the NYU campus on her own pre-college tour, the tour guide proudly asked, "How many university presidents do you know who teach freshmen seminars?" My answer: He must be a very special teacher. He must be a very special dreamer. Why, he must be a Paul Bunyan of a man. I know only one teacher like that, one of the greatest teachers I've ever known: President John Sexton.

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