

TRIBUTE TO JOHN SEXTON

My first encounter with John Sexton began with his utterance of the following simple sentence: “Law is all a matter of definition.” You can imagine, of course, that it was spoken in that Sextonian way—blue jeans, flannel shirt, the ever-present cup of coffee, the hands waving around, and the Brooklyn accent. Although the substance of Civil Procedure has slipped my mind after all these years, I find it wildly appropriate that John’s first words are the ones I remember most clearly. After all, how many of us have wondered, “What makes John tick? How did he get this way? Is he for real? Did he really tell Marty Lipton that he loved him at the presidential installation ceremony?” Indeed, all of those questions are variations on a theme: what is the essence of John—the definition of John as it were. I thought I would spend a few minutes today trying to share with you and pay tribute to the essence of the John I’ve come to know over the last fifteen years.

That, of course, is easier said than done. We all know by now about his achievements as a theologian, debate coach, successful entrepreneur, law student, Supreme Court law clerk, professor, Dean of the Law School, and now as the President of NYU. But this description of his achievements doesn’t tell us about what make John tick. As I cast about for inspiration, I turned to a book called *Mr. Blue*. For those of you who aren’t familiar with this 152 page tract, allow me to describe it. Written in 1928 by Myles Connolly, a screenwriter of some note, this book appeared to be required reading for young Catholic adolescent boys during the 1950s. And lest you think this was some niche Catholic book, the book remained in print for 60 years and received critical acclaim from a variety of publications, including the New York Times. John often describes his reading of this book as a transformative experience for him. I reread *Mr. Blue* last week and noticed tantalizing parallels between *Mr. Blue* and John.

The protagonist, *Mr. Blue*, is variously described as a beguiling mythical character, a mystic of some sort, a human paradox, a sort of modern St. Francis, and a uniquely American personality—the idealistic rebel. Like John, he thinks of money as something to be spent quickly, generously and extravagantly. Money is a means to an end—to make others happy. More to the point, *Mr. Blue* is described by the narrator as “having a certain spectacular quality, one might call it a certain spectacular sanity, beneath all his ideas that was novel and stimulating to me.” John’s very being vibrates with

spectacular sanity. He is a veritable idea machine, churning out wild, wacky dreams—many of which become reality. I offer the existence of our Law School community and the Global Law School program as two prime examples. John also shares Mr. Blue's penchant for music, although Mr. Blue loves marching music and John's taste runs more to Meatloaf, Neal Diamond, and Amazing Grace.

I also noticed one glaring difference: Mr. Blue is an inveterate Boston Red Sox fan. John, of course, is a Brooklyn guy—born and bred. That has a few implications. First, and foremost, it means John roots for the New York Yankees, arch enemies of the Boston Red Sox. Second, John retains three distinctive Brooklyn traits: his accent, his scrappiness (ever see him play basketball?), and his competitiveness. As Professor Stabile mentioned earlier, John can make a game of anything. I still remember our first rafting trip together in the summer of 1992 and learning the tricks of grooming oneself in the wilderness along the river. Even simple tasks such as brushing one's teeth took on a new life. One evening, John, Jed and I gathered our belongings for the trek to the river's side. We had water bottles, flashlights, and, of course, our toothbrushes with toothpaste already squeezed on. Rather than drink the river water, we used our water bottles to "rinse out" our mouths and crudely—after rinsing spit out into the river. After a few moments of peaceful silence under the moonlight, John piped up and claimed, "I bet I can spit my toothpaste water further than either of you." Not to be outdone, Jed and I immediately rinsed vigorously and began arching our backs and leaning forward in an effort to spit further. Our toothbrushing foray evolved into a fifteen minute spitting and laughing battle. Who would have thunk??

But I digress. Back to Mr. Blue: Mr. Blue's approach to the world stems from his infectious enthusiasm, his belief that making the world a better place is a worthy goal, that charity and humility will triumph, and his faith that all human beings have redeeming qualities. More than once in the book, Mr. Blue declares he is a man who wants for nothing, who couldn't be happier with his life. Couldn't this also describe John? His is the very soul of a caring visionary whose every thought and action comes from a strong core. You might be tempted to think his gestures are too excessive to be genuine, but you would be wrong. Every hug is as heartfelt as it looks. Upon hearing his dreams, you might be tempted to think his goals are outsized and unattainable, but again, you would be mistaken. John dreams are big enough for all of us. But most importantly, when John shares his dreams, he causes all of us to feel a

2004]

TRIBUTE

15

little more optimistic, work a little harder, and to become better people.

In recognition of John's very essence, one day, if he hasn't already, the Mayor of New York will thank John for contributing to the vibrancy of New York City and making it a better place to live. Dean Revesz and the students at the Law School will, more eloquently than I, thank John for continuing in the traditions of Deans Vanderbilt, McKay and Redlich and rejuvenating and expanding our Law School community. I know that my many distinguished fellow board members are grateful to John for his vision and leadership. Former students will thank John for expanding their horizons with his legendary teaching prowess. Many others will thank him for inspiring them to achieve new things and yet others will thank him for his Mr. Bluesian generosity. While I have experienced all of these things, I want to close by thanking John on my own behalf—for your endless support and advice all these years, for my treasured memories of the Grand Canyon and our other river trips, for the long summer nights at Fire Island playing Trivial Pursuit. But most of all, I thank you for allowing me to become a part of your treasured family and loving me as one of them. I am most honored to be here as part of this exalted extension of your family.

R. MAY LEE
CEO
Marketboy

