

JOHN SEXTON TRIBUTE

I find myself in an unusual position. I've known John Sexton for over 30 years—indeed, he is one of the few people in my current life who has known me through the awkwardness of adolescence and through every succeeding stage of my maturation—but this is only the second time I've been afforded the opportunity to speak about him to a captive audience. Far more often, I've sat in large audiences listening to John—and squirming as he told one or another story about me from my high school days, when we began our relationship. Some of those stories were actually true; others bore some germ of truth in the first telling, but as time went on became more myth than fact; others I think never had any basis in reality, but I've heard John tell them so many times, I've actually come to believe them.

So now it is my turn. This afternoon it is my honor and my pleasure to pay tribute to a man who has been my friend, my mentor and my second father. My strength is not as a storyteller, and most of the stories I could tell you about John, he tells much better than I do. Moreover, unlike me, he doesn't embarrass very easily, so there are no stories I could tell that he wouldn't tell you himself. So instead, let me tell you something of what I think makes him such a special and extraordinary man, someone worthy of the tribute the Annual Survey pays to him this afternoon and pays to him by dedicating its 2003 issue to him.

There are a lot of things I could talk about that make John a special person. One is certainly his commitment to excellence, which pervades all that he does. For John there is truly nothing that does not warrant full effort. Whether it is picking up the squiggles of paper off the classroom floor and making sure the shades in the room are adjusted to the same level, preparing for a debate tournament, doing school work or law review activities, or playing basketball or tiddlywinks, his admonition is always the same—put your all into the effort. Whatever you do, do it to the best of your ability.

That commitment and striving for excellence includes for John an absence of any concept of boundaries. He starts no project with a sense that there is any limit on how far it can go and he instills in others that same belief that all things are possible. A large part of the success he has had, and will continue to have, comes from his belief that it can be done and his willingness to put everything he has into the effort to achieve it.

But that is not the aspect of John I want to stress. Rather, the theme that I think is most essential to understanding John is his concept of family. From the time he first walked into my freshman math class at St. Brendan's High School to encourage us to join the debate team, John made clear that he viewed the debate team—or the society, as he called it—as a family. It is true that it took a while for this message to take: we were, after all, teenage girls in an all-girl school taught mostly by nuns (some of whom—including the ninth grade math teacher—had actually taught my mother when she went to the same Catholic school 20 years earlier), so what we mostly noticed and were attracted to at first was the fact that John was a male, and a relatively young and attractive male at that.

But we soon came to understand and embrace his overarching view. We were not just a group of competitors for prizes—although we worked extremely hard and certainly won more than our fair share of championships over the years. Rather, we were bonded by love and concern for each other's well-being, and the pursuit of debate goals was never permitted to overshadow that. His is a vision that speaks of communal goals and the common good, rather than the interests of any one individual.

That notion of common good includes a deep commitment to service. John's is not the attitude that says (in words he used to chide us with when I was in high school), "first me, then me again, then my dog, then again me." Rather, it is "what can I do for someone else." For John, among other things, that meant delaying law school until he saw a group of high schoolers, including myself—the leader of his last debate team—graduate and move on.

Over the years, John moved on from debate coach to law student, to judicial clerk, to law professor, dean and now university president, but whatever community with which he has been involved, he has never wavered in his vision of that community as family. The concept of family has simply grown over the years, encompassing, in his current incarnation, first NYU Law School and now the University in its entirety.

But even saying that does not fully give effect to John's vision of family, which is more than just an interpersonal or even an institutional model. John sees the community and communion, not just of a group of high school students, a law school or even a university community. He sees, rather, a global community, a communion of all beings, a vision that is rooted in his Christian upbringing. That, I submit to you, is an important vision, particularly today. We know the effects of a world constructed on notions of primacy of individual goals and of differentiations among groups. That is a world of

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corporate greed, political unrest and religious disharmony. It is a world in which we resolve our differences through threats of violence and through war. But the world need not inevitably be ordered in this way.

John's notion of family, of global community, offers a model of unity and of common ground. John has never found anyone, even those with whom he has had violent disagreements over some issue, with whom he can't find some basis for discussion, some common ground, and thus, some way to resolve conflict. His starting point, a starting point that says: we are one; we are family, offers a basis not just for interpersonal and institutional ordering, but for world ordering. I, for one, think a world organized according to Sextonian principles is a world of incredible possibilities.

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