It’s a real honor for me to have been asked to give a tribute to Lance. For many years, I've known Lance the professional from afar and admired his extraordinary accomplishments. But since early February, during the three months of our ALI transition, I have also come to know Lance the person, from a much closer vantage point. I now know what all of you who have worked with Lance on ALI and other matters for many years already knew well: that he is an extraordinary generous, warm, empathetic, charming person; and that he is consummate problem solver. Behind his easy-going affability, is a person with great determination and with the ability to find ways to bring people and competing positions closer together.

First, let me remind you of some facts, which many of you already know. Lance has one of the most impressive legal resumes that anyone could aspire to.

Yale, BA summa cum laude 1962: Chairman, Yale Daily News. I believe that he was the first or second Jewish chairman.


Clerk to Justice White, 1967: straight from Law School.

Assistant to NYC Mayor John Lindsay, working on transportation and community issues.

Long and distinguished stint on the Harvard Law School faculty.

Columbia law dean, 1991-96.
And, of course, Director of the ALI, 1999-2014.

Perhaps slightly less well known is the first significant recognition of Lance’s abilities. During his senior year in high school, Lance was the winner of a Kentucky championship: he was the best high school typist in the Commonwealth of Kentucky. By my calculation, this happened in 1958. This was no obscure award. In 2008, on the 50th anniversary of this award, an article focusing on this feat appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle. (I’m really not kidding!) The article was written by Susan Alexander, one of Lance’s Harvard Law School classmates. She described gender stereotypes at Harvard Law School in the early 1960s, and particularly the fact that the male students typically hired women to type their work (or enlisted their wives or girlfriends to do so), whereas the female students, who comprised only about 4% of the class, did it themselves. This is what Susan Alexander says and I quote:

“One bright young fellow who broke the mold was my classmate Lance Liebman. A transplant to Kentucky (after spending his early years in Queens, N.Y., where his progressive school district encouraged boys to learn typing), Lance became a high school journalist and a crack typist. When he entered the Kentucky state typing contest, he won first prize. Gender stereotyping reared its silly head, however: The Lexington Leader referred to him as "Miss Lance Liebman."

This reminds of the story of a less distinguished law student than Lance. JFK Jr., who died tragically years later, was a graduate of NYU Law School on his way to a job at the Manhattan DA’s office. Even in the 1990s, lawyers there were expected to type their own work. Endearingly, JFK Jr. took a crash typing course at what was then described as a secretarial school. He was the only male student in that course. Unfortunately, this happened right
after the tabloids reported with great fanfare that he had not passed the bar exam. One of his fellow students turned to him, referring to his presence in the course, and said: “Is this what happens when you fail the bar exam?”

During this ALI transition period, I’ve made frequent trips to Columbia Law School to meet with Lance and to benefit from the wisdom that he has so generously make available to me. I had very much look forward to my first conversation with Lance but I had not relished the thought of entering the Columbia Law School building. As some of you know, during my time as dean at NYU, we hired a number of very talented Columbia faculty members. When I once showed up at the Columbia building for some kind of academic event, I was waiting for the elevator, surrounded by some Columbia law students with whom I was chatting, when across the lobby one of Lance’s colleagues whom I knew well yelled at me: “Thief, thief.” The students thought that I had in fact stolen something. I had vowed never to go back to that building.

But once I started going back to meet with Lance, I felt differently. I now walk into the Columbia Law School building with pleasant anticipation. In preparing for tonight, I reflected on what it was about Lance that produced this about-face in my reaction and I scribbled some notes. I then found out that my current thoughts had been revealed with great elegance in the New York Times by David Margolick, who in 1992. Margolick wrote a very sweet article about Lance’s first year as dean, entitled “At Columbia Law School, an uncommon ebullience and evangelism at the top.” This is what Margolick said, and I quote:

“For as long as anyone can remember, Columbia Law School has been regarded as a very prestigious, very dull and very unpleasant place to be. Students are happy to get in, happy to get out and say they went there and unhappy about almost everything in between. Then the school named Lance Liebman as dean.
Mr. Liebman … has been at Columbia's helm for barely a year, hardly enough time to change an institution's personality. …

But under Mr. Liebman … something unprecedented has come to Morningside Heights: joie de vivre. Surely no one -- not Harlan Fiske Stone, not Charles Evans Hughes, not any of the other deans whose portraits hang grimly on the office walls -- can have approached the job with as much energy and ebullience.

Mr. Liebman gossips with elan, has a goofy and infectious laugh and exhibits a sense of humor worthy of Calvin Trillin's second cousin.”

What a nice tribute in the New York Times! It is fitting that when a prize was established in Lance’s honor by the Columbia Center for Public Interest Law, its title was the “Lance Liebman Nice Guys/Gals Do Not Necessarily Finish Last Award.” One of the winners of this award was Justice Sonia Sotomayor, when she was a judge on the Southern District of New York.

As a newcomer to Council meetings it would be wrong for me to tell you about Lance’s extraordinary accomplishments as ALI director: the large number of restatements completed, the significant Principles projects, the international outlook that the ALI acquired. You have know how crucial Lance’s leadership was to those projects! But over the last few months, I did get a close look at how Lance approaches his ALI work. I’ve been the proud recipient of literally thousands of his e-mails: to reporters, to advisory committee members, to representatives of various interest groups, and have participated in dozens of conference calls with him. The picture that emerges is of a person of enormous accomplishment, wonderful people skills, a great sense of humor, and the ability to use the uncommon combination of these talents in a way that moves forward the substantive work of the institution that he has directed with such distinction for 15 years. Thank you Lance for your extraordinary leadership, for your wonderfully
generous mentorship of me, and for agreeing to continue to be involved closely with the work of the ALI as a member of the Council (and, as a result, as one of my new bosses).