L. HART WRIGHT

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Hart and Phyllis Wright had been at the University of Michigan for twenty years (1947-67) before I arrived in 1967. For the next dozen years, while I was President of the University and a largely inactive Professor of Law, I knew him more as a friend and a citizen of the University at large than as a colleague in the Law School. Much of what I have to say therefore derives from a different context than those who will write of his distinguished contributions to the law.

Because he was part of that remarkable group of faculty members who came to the University immediately after World War II and are now retiring, it is impossible to separate him from them. The trauma and dislocations of the war years gave them a common bond, they shared common problems of acquiring housing, raising young families, and helping to cope with the problems of a university trying desperately to accommodate the veterans who were seeking an education.

Perhaps because they were caught up in the problems of the community as well as of the University, they were not only widely acquainted across colleges and departments, but were involved in a wide assortment of matters outside their own fields.

So it was that I came to know, respect, admire, and have a deep affection for Hart Wright. However engrossed in his own immediate work he might be, he never failed to respond to a request to help resolve other problems which the University might have. To take but one example, he was Chairman of the Board of Student Publications during much of the student turbulence of the late 1960's and early 1970's. A major function of that Board is to give "advice" to the editors of the student newspaper, The Michigan Daily. Since the period was characterized by many changes in student habits, mores and language, the task of giving "advice" to the headstrong editors of The Daily was unenviable to say the least. It absorbed endless hours and offered almost no rewards. It was the duty of his Board to preserve the precious liberties of the first amendment to the United States Constitution, to co-exist with the perennial desire of students

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to outrage their elders, and to try to see that the paper printed reasonably accurate information as opposed to totally inflammatory rhetoric. It took a strong person to cope with all of that and still retain a sense of perspective. Hart not only did it, he did it extremely well, and he did it longer than anyone had a right to expect. It was the kind of selfless contribution which makes the difference between whether a university can deal constructively with the many issues which divide its constituents or whether it becomes an indifferent bureaucracy, perhaps less turbulent but also less creative.

Hart's efforts with the Board of Student Publications were duplicated many times over, both within the University and in the community. To any assignment he brought vigor, an aggressive but sensitive presence, generosity of both mind and spirit, a delightful sense of humour, a sharp and incisive mind, and a firm set of values which came from his early years in Oklahoma, his family, his devotion to his country, and his unending quest for a better and more humane world for all of us.

He will be remembered by all his hundreds of students as one of the very best teachers they ever had; by his colleagues as a distinguished lawyer and a forthright opponent and proponent; and by his legion of friends as a presence felt as strongly in his absence as when he was with us.

Though taps have now been blown, those among us who knew Hart Wright will never forget him or fail to smile when, in countless ways, we feel his indomitable spirit in our midst.
A professor is more than a teacher because in addition to teaching, a professor attempts to instill in his students important standards or values.

Those words, as best I can recall, were the first words I heard in Tax II at 9:00 a.m. on a Thursday morning many years ago. L. Hart Wright went on to say that, while it might seem trivial, he thought punctuality was fairly important to budding lawyers, and that therefore he had been sorely grieved that one of his students in Tax I the preceding semester never — and that was not an overstatement or at least not much of an overstatement — seemed to be able to get to the class on time. He further explained that he had tried everything he could think of, including calling on her as soon as she opened the doors, as she walked down the aisle toward her seat, or while she was taking off her coat. Sadly, he reported, he had not been successful in altering her tardy behavior. In desperation he sought the advice of his young daughter — without, of course, revealing the identity of the student — and, he told the class, she said, after reflection, "Daddy-o . . . you should be nice to her." With that, he stepped back from the podium, pulling with him what appeared to be a drawer or a shelf. Within seconds, it became clear that he was carrying a tray, and as he came up the aisle to my seat I made out eggs, bacon, toast, juice, coffee, and fruit. In a second he was standing before me, saying "Sooo, pleaseesee . . . won't you try to come to this class on time."

L. Hart Wright was a great Professor because he did more than teach. I vaguely remember one or two sections of the Code; I shall never forget his lesson on punctuality. I have the impression that we talked about what the law was; I recall quite clearly that we explored at length why it was that way and whether it should be that way. Hart was stimulating as a professor because he was interested in, and


1. At that time, women students comprised about 2.5% of the class, so the use of the female gender substantially narrowed the field of potential targets.
excited about, the subjects he taught, and he made them come alive with folksy analysis, anecdotes, and pure whimsy.

I have some difficulty distinguishing between Hart as a professor, as a counselor, and as a dear friend who was one of the main reasons I kept finding good cause to return to Ann Arbor after my graduation. But whatever the role, there were certain undisputable truths that came through loud and clear: there is room for common sense in our profession. There is much to be said for telling it like it is (well before that became a cliché). It never hurts to ask why (or why not). And everything improves with a dash of humor, best of all when it is directed at ourselves.

L. Hart Wright is best remembered not as someone who taught hundreds of would-be tax practitioners or revenue agents, but as someone who brought law to life and life to many lawyers. His unique blend of humor and humanity touched those who came in contact with him in many and varied ways. Case in point: an ex-student of his who always — and that's not an overstatement or at least not much of an overstatement — now gets to where she should be on time.2

2. At least I don't sign up for classes at 8:00 a.m. Wednesday through Saturday.