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SLICES OF A MAN

One of the sad facts of life is that none of us can know another person completely. We each acquire slices of a person, but no one acquires the whole man or woman. The result is something of a mystery—each person acquainted with a particular individual knows the same human being, and, at the same time, he does not know the same human being. Many persons knew John Rogers but each one knew a different man, a difference only of degree sometimes, but a difference of substance at other times. So it was in my relationship with him, spanning more than a quarter of a century. Presented in these pages are a few slices of a man I knew as “John Rogers.”

If I were asked to accomplish the near impossible by choosing one word or one phrase to describe the essence of his personality, I would not hesitate in selecting “gracious.” Other persons asked to do the same might well choose other words or phrases, such as, “love of justice,” “a true Christian,” or “learned,” depending upon their acquaintance with him and the degree of their perceptiveness, but I would have to choose “gracious.” Not gracious in the limited sense of good manners; gracious with all its synonyms of affable, genial, sociable, cordial, compassionate, hearty, and considerate. Many stories could be told by way of illustrating this pervasive trait but perhaps one example will suffice. John Rogers never drank alcoholic beverages of any kind, and would have preferred other persons to emulate him in this regard, but he was never militant on the subject nor did he ever express his views at inappropriate times. When he was Dean of the University of Tulsa College of Law, and attended off-campus student parties at which alcohol was served, he would take a glass of soda or ginger ale, not to deceive the students into believing that he was drinking, but to put them at their ease. He knew the fitness of things.

Some people have faces that are meant to grin. John Rogers had such a face. It was reflective of his sense of humor, a slice of the man acquired by most persons who knew him. Even a cursory look at any portrait of him, even those meant by him to have a serious mien, will reveal a slight upward tug at the corners of his mouth and a “twinkle in his blue-green eyes” (as a recent biographer described them). This

sense of humor seemed to permeate his every activity but it was especially noticeable in the law classes he taught. All his many activities in higher education tend to overshadow his role in the classroom. But it was there, standing at the podium and introducing his students to the intricacies of Constitutional Law, where he most exhibited the John Rogers I came to admire and to love. He was an excellent teacher because, among other reasons, he knew instinctively what so many of us in the field of education tend to forget—a teacher never teaches anyone; he merely helps others to learn. His humor in the classroom helped others to learn. One can teach by the use of humor; one cannot teach by the use of fear.

Upon the occasion of a dinner given in his honor by the National Conference of Christians and Jews, he began his response to the award by saying: "I am humble enough to know that I do not deserve this honor, but I am vain enough to accept it anyway." This remark brought a lot of laughter because those of us in the audience knew that he was not a vain person. Not vain in any sense of the word, least of all in the sense indicated by Spinoza—that to a vain person everything that happens to him is terribly important.

Mr. Rogers was a gentle man, but he was not a weak one. Only those who are strong can afford to be gentle. I never saw him angry at anyone, nor did I ever know him to raise his voice in disapproval of an individual. He had no need to do so. He was held in such respect that he needed only to display his disapproval by a gesture or a word to achieve the result most of us try for with desk-pounding and harsh words. He was firm; he was fair; and, surprisingly to some persons, he was flexible. I doubt that anything or anyone could have shaken his religious faith, but in all other areas of life, he continued to have an open mind. He was willing to listen to other persons, to learn new ideas, and perhaps to alter his views at an age when most of us have become fairly rigid in our beliefs and in our ultimate values. His views on capital punishment are an example of his flexibility. When I first knew him, and began to have serious discussions with him, it soon became obvious that we disagreed on the value of capital punishment. After two or more years of intermittent discussions on the subject, he told me he had changed his mind and that we were now in agreement. It was not I who changed his mind, as no one ever changes the mind of another by argument. It was his pondering of the arguments, of the philosophies, and of the human values that caused him to be so flexible and to change his mind.

What was his greatest achievement? No one can say. The answer depends upon the one who is being questioned. But certainly his connection with the law school must be considered an answer that would spring to the minds of many who might be questioned. It is true he did not found the law school; that honor belongs to another. But it is equally true that without his devotion to higher education, without his love of justice, and without his hours of work, there would be no college of law as we know it.

To those who knew John Rogers these few words are unnecessary; to those who did not know him, they are inadequate. But it is hoped that the latter group of persons may take these few slices of a man and reconstruct in part the man—John Rogers.

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