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Ellen E. Hausler

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Remarks on Professor Richard A. Hausler

BY ELLEN E. HAUSLER

“In teaching it is the method and not the content that is the message - the drawing out, not the pumping in.”

Ashley Montague

My father kept a copy of that quote in his office, taped to a bookshelf. It expressed not only his views on teaching, but also how he chose to interact with everyone including his children. It always amused us when students inquired if it was all just theatrics for the classroom — the stare, the raised eyebrow, the bemused half smile, the drawn out “Really,” as he finally, mercifully, moved in for the kill. No, that was life with Richard Hausler. It was a true Socratic upbringing. No question that he could not answer with another question. No final answers.

I attended a law school class of my father’s once in the early eighties — the first day of freshman contracts. Although I had been warned by my mother that even visitors could be called on, Professor Clifford Alloway persuaded me that I must chance it. How could I possibly think of going to law school myself, his good friend Clifford argued, unless I appreciated how awful it could be. A classroom encounter with Richard was survivable, according to Clifford, if one learned to think like a snake charmer. Don’t call attention to yourself, don’t make any sudden movements and if the snake does call upon you, stand your ground and hold his gaze until, bored with your sorry response, he moves on to the next victim. Thus, completely unprepared, I sat in the back row, behind the tallest person I could find.

My father appeared precisely five minutes late, walked to the lectern, put down his book, opened the seating chart, and then strode to the windows where he adjusted the window blinds for what seemed an eternity. There was no first day pleasantries. He never said a word, never introduced himself, just let the tension build. He finally turned, and looking directly at one student seated in the front, asked a question of the student seated five rows behind him. He spotted me immediately. He knew the seating chart cold and spent the entire class firing questions at all the students unlucky enough to be sitting directly around me, working into his hypothetical their home towns, colleges and other biographical details, which he had memorized beforehand. He prowled the entire room, sometimes stopping to perch beside a student as he leisurely thumbed through their textbooks and notes. Meeting the mind of the

great doctor was scary territory. As in the best horror movies, the real entertainment was anticipating the next jolt. He finally left as he had come, with no good-bye's.

A frustrated actor is what some have said about him. This was nonsense, of course, as he was not frustrated in the least. Teaching was a performance art for him, the classroom his preferred stage. When we were younger, in our elementary school days, he used to take us out to dinner once a week after his evening class. On a rotating basis, one of the four of us used to go with him to the Blue Grotto, an Italian restaurant that is still there on Red Road. The point of the evening was not to eat, it was to entertain him, to somehow engage and keep his interest. "No ticket, no laundry." The lesson was to think about your audience not yourself, and the message you wanted to convey. The highest, rarest praise was to be deemed a good conversationalist, to be clever and well-informed. Although we never got a grade, he always made it clear when it had been a "C" evening. His favorite rebuke to us through the years was, "If you were my student I would flunk you." Harsh? He didn't think so. "If I never demand anything of you," he would explain, "then you will never know all that you can do."

My father was not only an inspired teacher, he was the best company. Amazingly impudent from an early age, he was mercurial, ever curious, impatient, easily bored and wickedly funny. He relished a good debate and a spirited faculty fight, especially the ones he won. He disliked pomposity and pretense and generally delighted in questioning all authority except his own. He was a gentleman and a scholar who always maintained that teaching at the Law School was the perfect job. He loved the Hausler Chair and Hauslerween and shamelessly enjoyed every skit ever done about him. One year when a student actor in Equity Playhouse did a particularly hilarious Hausler portrayal, my father ceremoniously presented the student before the next performance with a suit and a tie of his. "Child," he informed him, "you will never be a truly great Hausler unless you look the part. You have the walk, but unfortunately not yet the style. That only comes with practice."