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Tribute to Professor Fred Zacharias

FAUST F. ROSSI*

I met Fred Zacharias the first day that he began his law teaching career in the fall of 1983, and we quickly became friends. During the next six years that he spent at Cornell Law School, many aspects of our professional and social lives were entwined. We both taught the Trial Advocacy course—I in the fall term, he in the spring term. We shared the same administrative assistant. For several years we lived in the same neighborhood. We jogged together. We talked regularly about our research interests, about our approach to teaching, about sports, about family. We were close, and his friendship made me a better man.

Although I was twenty years older than Fred and had about seventeen years more teaching experience, I learned at least as much from him as he learned from me. It was clear from the start that Fred had chosen the right profession. I thought at the time that Fred would become a model for law professors everywhere, and as we now know, he proved many times over that I was correct. Fred had all the qualities for professional success. He was intelligent, conscientious, disciplined, and hardworking. These virtues guaranteed that he would be the extremely productive author that he became and that allowed him to take his place as a nationally famous scholar in the areas of professional responsibility and constitutional law.

Unlike some of our brethren, he took his teaching responsibilities very seriously. In his early years, Fred devoted an enormous amount of time to class preparation. He once told me that law teaching at its best was

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like trying a new case everyday. That was how he prepared. He was dedicated to inspired teaching—the kind of teaching that requires a huge portion of the teacher’s strength and enthusiasm, the kind of teaching that not only sharpens the students’ legal minds but affects them as human beings, the kind of teaching that requires intellectual effort and the pain of hard work from students but that, in the long run, provides them with memories of intensive learning and shared affection between student and teacher. As Fred liked to say, “I owe my students that much.”

Fred’s professional success is only a part of who he was. What I admired the most about Fred was—to use a simple word—his goodness. His life was a life of achievement. But his personal qualities made Fred special. There was never a touch of arrogance about him. He cared, really cared, about his students, his colleagues, his friends, his law school, and, above all, his family.

He was a man of absolute integrity. I cannot remember him ever saying anything to anyone that could be called manipulative or duplicitous or even politic. He was completely open. You knew what he was thinking and feeling. He was loyal. He knew how to be a true friend.

When Fred left us after six years and moved to the University of San Diego School of Law, it was a huge loss for Cornell and for me personally. We kept in touch by e-mail, and every six months or so Fred, his wife Sharon, and I would meet for dinner when I was in California. I eagerly looked forward to those dinners over the course of the fifteen or so years that followed his departure from Cornell. They allowed me to keep up on the exploits and growth of the Zacharias boys. What was obvious to me was how proud Fred was of Blake and Eric, and how much he loved them.

The last conversation Fred and I had was by telephone several weeks before he passed away. He knew what was coming. He was at peace and reminiscing about his life. He described how grateful he was for the support and comfort that he had received from Sharon over all the years of their married life. He then told me that the happiest moments in his life were the times that he spent with his family.

I never discussed religion or belief in the hereafter with Fred. But knowing him has increased my faith. I cannot help thinking that there has to be a special place in Heaven for someone as good as Fred. I know at least this much: he will live on in my memory and in the memories of his many students and colleagues.