

PROFESSOR JOHN “JACK” APOL

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IN MEMORIAM

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“I REALLY LOVE THE CHANTING”

*Dean Joan W. Howarth**

I see random groups of MSU Law students several times a day, often in the elevator. I typically ask how classes are going. In the first semester after arriving as the new MSU Law dean, I initially found one of the common responses disconcerting. Many students told me that their favorite class was Criminal Law with Professor Apol. They would continue, “I really love the chanting.” This came from a great variety of students—men and women, young and older, multiple races. “The chanting”? It sounded like a cult, not a law school class.

Soon I understood. When I heard loud chanting coming from a classroom—seventy voices strong—I understood. When a 1984 graduate, or a 1996 graduate, or a 2005 graduate reminisced with me about law school by chanting the elements of burglary, I understood. Early in his career as a professor of criminal law, Jack Apol figured out that chanting the elements of a crime loudly in unison helped students to learn the crimes cold. With the doctrinal structure firmly in mind, they could concentrate on the real work of legal analysis. But I doubt that Jack spent much time on the theory of chanting. I never heard him talk about kinesthetic learners, or pedagogical pacing, or multimodality. But he knew exactly what he was doing. The first time I mentioned the chanting to him, he grinned. “Are there complaints about the noise? I tell my students to be very loud.”

In short, Jack was a big, funny man who ran a highly controlled yet raucous classroom. As a teacher, Jack was irreverent, spirited, and sometimes outrageous. He understood that law school is a lot of work and wanted his students to have so much fun that they would work even harder.

Jack Apol was a great teacher. Last year he was honored with the inaugural Campbell Great Teaching Award, named in honor of legendary

* Dean and Professor of Law, Michigan State University College of Law.

Detroit College of Law professor Donald F. Campbell, who was also a dear friend of Jack, although a very different person and teacher. Jack Apol projected a larger-than-life character. He was a joker and a cynic (he would say realist) about many things, certainly including academic politics. He was generous. There was something of the swashbuckler about him, maybe a holdover from his eight years in the Navy. Many students considered him a dead ringer for John Madden, the football player, coach, and media personality. They looked and sounded alike, and like Madden, Jack had a reputation as a tough talker with a heart of gold.

Jack wanted his students to succeed as attorneys and in life, as he did. Jack was a true character who lived an extraordinarily stable life, a professor at the same law school for thirty-four years, married to his beloved wife Carol for forty-six years. Jack was devoted to Carol, and to their two daughters, Heidi and Andrea.

Perhaps oddly, Jack's teaching reminds me of the prominent Quaker educator Parker J. Palmer. If confronted with Palmer's 1983 book, *To Know As We Are Known: A Spirituality of Education*,¹ Jack probably would have snorted loudly. Jack might have dismissed Palmer as insufferably pretentious, as a typical elitist academic putting on airs. Jack's language would have been saltier. But when I think about Jack Apol's teaching, I remember Palmer's book, *The Courage to Teach*.²

Palmer wrote *The Courage to Teach* "for teachers who refuse to harden their hearts because they love learners, learning, and the teaching life."³ That sounds like Jack Apol. Palmer tells us that "[g]ood teachers join self and subject and students in the fabric of life."⁴ That, too, sounds like Jack.

You know about the chanting. Those of you who teach should feel free to try chanting with your students, but do not be surprised if it falls flat. As Palmer tells us, "Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique: good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher."⁵ For it to work, for business lawyers to happily chant the elements of burglary thirty years later, the teacher who taught them to chant had to love chanting with his students. Jack's teaching methods were as original as Jack himself, as close to his heart as to his students'.

Jack did have the heart of a teacher. He matched the elite academic credentials of other law professors, having followed graduation from the University of Michigan Law School with a federal clerkship. But Jack's

1. PARKER J. PALMER, *TO KNOW AS WE ARE KNOWN: A SPIRITUALITY OF EDUCATION* (1983).

2. PARKER J. PALMER, *THE COURAGE TO TEACH: EXPLORING THE INNER LANDSCAPE OF A TEACHER'S LIFE* (10th Anniversary ed. 2007).

3. *Id.* at 2.

4. *Id.* at 11.

5. *Id.* at 10 (emphasis omitted).

education in the world was broader than that of many law professors, having enlisted in the Navy at age sixteen. Jack had spent eight years in the Navy, much of it in intelligence work, before leaving to attend Grand Valley State University. Before joining the law faculty, Jack Apol had tested himself in many ways. Palmer links the power of heartfelt teaching methods to self-knowledge:

[A]s we learn more about who we are, we can learn techniques that reveal rather than conceal the personhood from which good teaching comes. We no longer need to use technique to mask the subjective self, as the culture of professionalism encourages us to do.⁶

Like Jack Apol, Parker Palmer criticizes an academic culture that encourages distance between teacher and students. With a line that almost sounds like Jack Apol, Palmer makes a point that Jack would heartily endorse: “Academic institutions offer myriad ways to protect ourselves from the threat of a live encounter.”⁷ Palmer describes the recipe: “To avoid a live encounter with students, teachers can hide behind their podiums, their credentials, their power.”⁸ Jack did not hide in those ways. Jack was a very smart man who chose simple, sometimes comical teaching techniques. He stood out in legal education, a world where teachers are very smart people whose techniques may sometimes teach exactly that—how smart they are—more than anything else. *The Paper Chase*’s fictional Professor Kingsfield became iconic because so many law professors conducted class in that terrifying way.⁹ Jack Apol did not teach down to his students. Nobody ever confused Professor Kingsfield with John Madden, let alone joked with him about it.

With a critique that could have been aimed at the excesses of traditional legal education as represented by Professor Kingsfield, Palmer asks:

Why do we have so much trouble seeing students as they really are? Why do we diagnose their condition in morbid terms that lead to deadly modes of teaching? Why do we not see the fear that is in their hearts and find ways to help them through it, rather than accusing them of being ignorant and banal?¹⁰

Sadly, law professors have not always been associated with genuine like and respect for their students. When Jack Apol won the Campbell Great Teaching Award last year, countless former students cheered. Jack Apol’s students understood that he cared about them, liked them, and respected them. Palmer says that “[g]ood teaching is an act of hospitality toward the

6. *Id.* at 24.

7. *Id.* at 38.

8. *Id.*

9. See *THE PAPER CHASE* (Twentieth Century Fox Film Corp. 1973).

10. PALMER, *supra* note 2, at 48.

young.”¹¹ Jack Apol’s students understood that, through his teaching, Professor Apol was welcoming them to happy lives in a great profession.

According to Parker Palmer, teaching requires intellect, emotion, and spirit.¹² Jack Apol’s very large spirit lives on in his beloved family and through the generations of lawyers he taught so generously.

JOHN “JACK” APOL: A TRIBUTE

Clark C. Johnson†

I am attempting, as best I am able, to provide a “few words” about my friend and colleague, John “Jack” Apol. Anyone who knew him would be quick, and rightly so, to respond with all the old trite sayings like “they broke the mold when he left us.” True indeed. “He was one of the most unforgettable characters I ever met.” Just as true. “He had a heart as big as the country he served.” Yup, spot on. “His students were like his children.” Now we are getting there. But what I saw in my friend, and biased I am, was a man who had mastered his craft and worked hard for the betterment of those for whom he was responsible, both in and out of the classroom. The profession is better because of him, and any student will be quick to say what a positive impact he had on them. Many were helped by him in ways which they never knew about soon and long after they graduated. A rare bird indeed. Broke the mold? Looks like it to me. We were all lucky to have his as a friend. My heart is full.

STUDENT TRIBUTES TO PROFESSOR APOL

The MSU College of Law and the DCL community lost a dear friend, respected academic, and incredible teacher in Professor Jack Apol. It was very clear to me on the first day in his Fall 2010 Criminal Law class that he had a passion for what he did and a mission to see each of us succeed. As a fresh and adjusting law student, it was encouraging to know that a professor of his caliber would contribute to my legal education. He had a way of

11. *Id.* at 51.

12. *Id.* at 5.

† Professor of Law Emeritus, Michigan State University College of Law.

reaching his students that was simply unmatched, and his lessons will live in my memory beyond my practice of law. His legacy of outstanding contribution to our school, the students, and the profession has been recounted by countless faculty, students, and alumni since his passing, and will be remembered for years to come.

- Christopher C. Ricotta, former student

Professor Apol had an uncanny ability to sense when the pressures of law school were becoming more than I thought I could handle, and he always provided the ideal bit of advice to lighten to mood. So much of this advice has remained with me and undoubtedly always will: that preparation is more important than anything else; that there are others who are weaker and face greater challenges than you and yet are able to finish the task at hand; and, of course, to always think of Charlie. I will never underestimate the impact he had on my life.

- Haley McCall, former student

Professor Apol was an exceptional teacher. A legend at the law school, his love for teaching and his students was evident. Amidst the stress and sometimes near-panic of our first year of law school, Professor Apol had the amazing ability to use humor to dial down our stress and ensure that we learned the material extremely well. Often we had so much fun we wouldn't even notice we were learning, and his sometimes outrageous hypotheticals were so memorable that it became easy to remember the law found within them.

I will never forget to watch out for one-eyed serial felon "Marv" when he either drinks too much or gets a hold of a .44 Magnum (the most powerful handgun in the world!), because the likely result will be chalk reindeer legs scattered over the classroom walls or an attempted burglary. I will also never forget the elements of any common law crime, which we dutifully chanted over and over in class, or his sound advice that the most prepared lawyer usually wins. Professor Apol demonstrated how humor can be very helpful in difficult situations, but that there is a time and place for somber reflection as well. His great enthusiasm and heart will not be forgotten among the many students whose lives he touched.

-Laura Danielson, former student

