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## Reflections on Lee

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## Reflections on Lee

*Mitchel Lasser\**

Greetings everyone. Let me begin by saying that Lee was quite simply the dearest friend I have made in the ten or so years that I have been in legal academics. As a result, I have actually found this whole exercise to be really very hard; and I suspect that this time has also been very, very difficult for all of us who have joined together here today. So allow me to express in sympathy: thank you all just for being here.

This exercise—that is, trying to figure out what one can say in just a few moments about someone as full, and rich and warm as Lee—has turned out to be somewhat different than I had expected. For a long time, these last few weeks, I actively resisted putting pen to paper for this occasion. In retrospect, I think there were probably two main reasons for this.

The first was a resistance to face up to—never mind try to come to terms with—the sheer magnitude of the universe’s loss, no matter how greatly we all gained from Lee’s presence. The second was a strong impulse to resist the closure that this kind of rather official and even formal event seems to imply or suggest.

That said, while spending the last few weeks in a state of rather melancholy procrastination, I have however become increasingly conscious that I have been spending a surprising amount of time *smiling*, as I have had the enormous pleasure of playing, and replaying, over and over again, memories of even the most common, everyday and recurring moments spent around Lee. And I have come to realize that, far from generating closure, this exercise has served to make fresh again and to make forever available the memory of apparently little—but still and always meaningful—things:

Memories of how—when sitting down and talking about relatively serious matters or slightly touchy problems—Lee would cross his legs, remove his glasses, lean on his elbow, and start to nibble pensively on the ends of his glasses. The world was just a welcoming place to everyone when Lee was around . . . You could just feel the glow of good will that he left in his wake just by passing through a space. Who could ever forget the glow radiating from down the hall as soon as one walked into the front office of the College of Law at the University of Utah? Lee’s own office might have been two doors down the hall, but his very essence utterly permeated what might otherwise have been an innocuous front office space.

Memories of all the times Lee would make the people around him blush as he introduced them to each other. I have never met someone who could—in

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\* Professor of Law, Cornell University Law School. Remarks given at the memorial celebration for Dean Lee Teitelbaum at Sage Chapel, Cornell University, October 21, 2004.

all good faith and in all sincerity—say such embarrassingly nice things about the people around him. I suspect that you all know exactly what I mean...

And finally, memories of all the times that I felt slightly awkward with him when we would talk about our own—or other peoples'—academic projects. I have never been in the presence of another academic who made me so conscious that discussing such things in such an academic manner was, in certain important respects, a second best option, a really good pretext for getting together and transmitting a more fundamental message: curiosity about, empathy towards, and above all affection for, the people one is speaking with and speaking about. For all of Lee's enormous respect for academic analysis and intellectual debate, interpersonal relationships were, I think, the real substance of what he most valued, even in scholarly work.

In short, Lee radiated a lesson of interpersonal generosity, an ongoing lesson about how to take pleasure in the people around you, and how to radiate that pleasure back to them. It was a wondrous lesson, seemingly effortlessly conveyed by a most graceful and gracious teacher.

That said, and in keeping with that lesson, I am—like so many of us—going to miss Lee. More than I can say.