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Recommended Citation

Douglas G. Baird, "Remembering Walter", 62 University of Chicago Law Review 1339 (1995).

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Remembering Walter

Douglas G. Baird†

Walter Blum's first memories were of the university—more precisely the noise of the football crowds on Saturday afternoons at Stagg Field. As a very young child, he could hear them from his house several blocks away.

Walter was a product of his environment. He took courses from Robert Maynard Hutchens while still a student at U-High. Ned Rosenheim and Ed Bergman were classmates when he continued his education on the quadrangles. His first teacher in law school was Edward Levi. He joined the Law School faculty just after the Second World War at the same time as Bernie Meltzer and Harry Kalven. Such an environment is hard to top.

Walter was the first citizen of the Law School. He wore a hat to the Law School each day, regardless of the season. Walter would place it on a hat stand in the reception area so that everyone could tell that he was there. He would then come into the dean's office to review the state of the Law School.

Walter never pretended to do more than offer his advice as a member of the faculty, but many generations of deans understood the true purpose of these meetings—to make sure that the dean was attentive to all the details to which the dean, in Walter's view, should be attentive. These ranged from faculty appointments to student concerns to light bulbs that needed replacing—in ascending order of importance.

My last conversation with Walter, just a week or so before he died, was like these. There were faculty appointment prospects to discuss. The new head of the Tax Conference had to be picked. Funds for the Clinic needed to be found. But most important, he wanted to take the pulse of the Law School and make sure that it was still on course. At the end of my report, he smiled, nodded his head, and told me: "Keep sailing."

Like most law students in this country over the past fifty years, I first encountered Walter Blum on the shelves of my law school library. You read a series of Walter Blum's papers on tort

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law in your first year, his *Uneasy Case for Progressive Taxation* in your second, and *The Law and Language of Corporate Reorganizations* in your third. Because I first knew him through his work, I have always thought of him as Walter Blum, rather than Wally Blum.

When we met in the flesh for the first time, I was twenty-six years old, five months out of law school, and looking for a job. Walter took me out to dinner with Richard Epstein and Frank Easterbrook. I did not do much talking. Walter's tie was the strangest that I had ever seen. That dinner with Walter was the first of hundreds. Walter knew all the best Chicago restaurants, whether Chinese, Greek, Italian, or Afghan, and he knew the best way to get there—whether he was driving or not.

Walter and Natalie looked out for the young faculty. At the end of any day on which we had taught badly or reached apparent dead ends in our scholarship, Walter would invariably appear at our office doors to suggest another new restaurant to try.

Dinner conversation never flagged. Walter and Natalie had always just returned from another fantastic trip. No matter where they went, they had fun—as they would lose their passports, have their pockets picked, and find themselves in rental cars with flat tires several countries away from the closest Hertz office. Every vacation was a great adventure. Any town they visited had an exotic museum or restaurant that had been closed to the outside world until they discovered it.

Walter's mastery of the law was as evident as his good spirits. Every April fifteenth, he was a source of aid and comfort to those of us who put off the search for wisdom on matters pecuniary until the very last minute. He would be cheerfully by his phone the entire day, giving instant and useful tax advice to friends, colleagues, and students.

Walter enjoyed giving young faculty drafts of his examinations and asking how we would go about answering them. But he took even greater pleasure in reading *our* examinations. No matter how far removed our examinations might be from Walter's fields, he delighted in reappearing after some fifteen minutes, answering all the questions, and identifying things that could be improved.

Walter never stopped having fun learning the law—and he never stopped instilling this enthusiasm in others. Walter was a Socratic teacher for colleagues as well as students. To every effort we would make at cracking a hard problem, he would respond: "There are three important points to make here. Can

you tell me what they are?" When we could not, Walter would tell us. There were always connections that we had never seen or had glossed over—and there were always three of them.

Walter never stopped reading. He could read the latest cases and books and articles as fast as the law librarians could find them. No matter how much he thought a new trend was silly or a passing fad, he always read about it and talked about it. But Walter never followed academic fashions—or indeed any others. To be sure, there was one day when Walter came to the Law School in an incredibly well-tailored suit with wide peacock lapels that was at the perfect height of fashion, but it was a false alarm. Walter had bought the suit forty years before.

Walter believed in the values of the university and devoted his life to preserving them in a sea of changing and sometimes hostile forces. What Walter wanted more than anything was for others to believe in these values too and for them to try to hold the course as well. Keep sailing.