Thanks for Professor Walter Blum

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I speak today on behalf of the students, the thousands of students, who knew Walter Blum as their professor. After we graduated, some of us referred to him as Walter, or as Blum, or even as Wally. He probably liked that. But it seems to me that for today, for a few minutes, he should be “Professor Blum.”

We knew him best in the classroom. First you noticed his bright ties. But then his intensity and energy brought the class alive. He demanded attention—the 80/80 rule was his standard: 80 percent attendance, 80 percent prepared. He was the consummate questioner. He would ask a question and you knew it was a real question, and you knew, you just knew, that no matter how good your answer there would be the next question and the next and the next. When you started “getting it,” when it started making sense, his enthusiasm was plain for all to see: if you slowed down he might just finish the sentence for you.

It was also clear when the answer wasn’t quite so good. His enthusiasm could quickly turn into disappointment. Yet it didn’t feel like being criticized. It felt like you wanted to try again, and try harder.

Professor Blum was like a symphony conductor. He could challenge the best students, and leave them working and thinking. He would pull the best students beyond their adequate preparation and make them strive for more, knowing that maybe, with a lot of work, someday they might actually say something interesting—something that Professor Blum hadn’t already thought about ten years ago. He could draw out a student who was struggling and extract a good point from a rambling response, making that student feel that there was sense in the struggle.

Professor Blum was warm and friendly. He remembered students who were scared and went out of his way to talk with them. He talked with students outside of class. He offered to help

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with personal tax returns and really did it. One of my colleagues, a top student, admits to asking questions about his form 1040EZ. He received cheerful, ungrudging help. Professor Blum was quick with a joke. There was a twinkle in his eye that never left. It was impossible to miss the fact that he found joy in life, that the questions were good and the answers were good, that learning something new was a joy, that life was good.

At the same time, he was formidable. I remember several times having questions I wanted to ask. I remember standing outside his office door one time for half an hour, formulating the question so that it was a “good” question. I remember debating a partnership tax issue for hours with my classmates because we didn’t want to ask Professor Blum until we were absolutely sure there was no easy answer.

Professor Blum scared us. He challenged us. He made us learn. He made us want to learn.

Just by counting the years he taught at the University of Chicago it is easy to measure his students in the thousands. But his influence extends much further. His legacy includes those who are learning from his students. There is a second generation of students, and even a third generation of students, who may not know how much their education is influenced by one Professor Walter Blum, of The University of Chicago Law School. If these second- and third-generation students stopped to ask their own professor sometime, those who knew the man could tell them how much they owed to a warm, friendly, intense, demanding master teacher in a wild tie.

Having said all these good things about my professor, I still haven’t told the story. When I was asked to speak today I said yes with only one clear thought: “I want to honor that man.” I have reflected on that reaction. What is it about him that I so clearly want to honor? It is true that he made me think and work, that he scared me and challenged me. However, I finally realized that there was one thing he did above all else. He gave weight to everything he worked on. His attention made things important. Because he thought an issue was important, was worth study, was worth time and effort, it became important. He communicated that there were right answers. Not simple answers. Not mechanical answers. But right answers, after taking into account the statute and its history, economics, the political climate and the foreign exchange rate and the incentives of practicing lawyers and the rate at which information disseminates. His grasp was all inclusive. With that grasp, he commu-
nicated that there were right answers and that they were worth seeking. Because he thought the questions were important, they became important to me and to many others.

In sum, when I think of Professor Blum, what I remember most is that his opinion mattered. He believed there were answers. He was credible. His attention made things important.

I didn't ask his advice very often, because I always worried that my questions were not good enough. However, when he told me that I could work in tax, I believed him. When he said I could find a job teaching, I believed him. I once gave a little speech. Afterward he told me that I had made a good point. Not only was it a good point, it was right. Not only was it right, he then quoted me. There is no higher professional honor I will ever receive.

Professor Blum made a difference. By the force of his intelligence and intensity and attention, and by his humanity and even his humor, he made things important. He set the agenda for me, as for hundreds of his students. I am grateful for this chance to honor him and to say thank you.