

## A Great Tonic

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Speaking at a memorial for one's father-in-law is a daunting task. If your father-in-law was Walter Blum . . . well, you can imagine the trepidation I'm feeling here today. Walter played a big role in his family's life. Both he and Natalie were devoted to their family, as we were to them.

This is an occasion when emotions run high. Walter would not approve. He would not approve of tears. What he would approve of is a joke. One of the first things that comes to mind when I think of Walter is his sense of humor. He had a great love and feel for humor. His wit was as dry as the crunchy, unbuttered toast he ate every morning for breakfast. I also think of his laugh. The way when he was telling a funny story, he would close one eye behind his big owly glasses, lean toward you to make sure that you were enjoying the story as much as he was, and laugh heartily like a boy.

Maybe it was his humor and his laugh that made Walter seem youthful. Wise and scholarly as he was, to me there was something of the boy about Walter. It was one of the things I liked about him most. Then again there was his enthusiasm. Did you ever meet anyone who had more enthusiasm than Walter Blum? He was always up, always interested, always curious.

"Tell me what's new," he would say. "What's going on in your life? What do you think about the Middle East, rap music, Robert Mapplethorpe, the Super Bowl?" He was forever sending you an article to read or telling you what movie to see. Bored he never was, and therefore he was never boring. He was always interested, and always interesting. Walter was one of the most interesting and stimulating people I knew.

Walter never grew old. Mentally he never grew old. He did not stagnate, he did not become complacent or jaded, though there was much in modern life that he didn't care for. He never

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† David Coggins, an artist, is married to Walter Blum's daughter Wendy. They live in Minneapolis with their two children, David and Sarah. These remarks were given at a memorial for Walter Blum on February 4, 1995.

stopped learning. He was always engaged with life, with people, with the world. This is what kept him young.

Vitality might also have had something to do with it. The famous Blum vitality, the famous Blum energy. He had incredible stores of energy, certainly more, even in his later years, than people half his age. If Generation X had only a fraction of his zip. It was always constructive energy, always put to some good use, to acquiring some new knowledge. This was irksome at times to those of us who were around him a lot. "Relax a little bit, Walter," I would try to say to him, especially when he was organizing the day—our day—to the nth degree.

Finishing lunch at the family cottage in Wisconsin, after lavishly praising the meal (Walter was nothing if not polite), he would invariably look at his watch, ask what time dinner would be, then start plotting the afternoon's activities. Eyes would roll. It was a hot summer's day and all you wanted to do was read just enough lines of your novel to fall asleep.

But this energy of Walter's, this sense of engagement had its effect. He led, he taught us by example. Around Walter, you were not lazy. You did things, you went places, you ate in ethnic restaurants, you talked about art or baseball or politics, though never, thank God, about tax law. Even when you were not around Walter, you were not lazy. He had high standards. He expected you, he encouraged you, to do things on your own, to read a book, see a play, take a trip, to accomplish things, to engage life, to enjoy it, to learn from it. And we did.

Our children, David and Sarah, remember how he was always encouraging them, how he was always supportive of and interested in their lives—whether it was school or sports or their social lives. He took them on trips to New York and Washington. He went with David to visit colleges. When he called the house, he always wanted to talk to them.

Talk. This was one of the things Walter liked most—to talk, whether it was at the dinner table or over the telephone or in his study at the house on Kimbark. He was a great talker. He wanted us to do well and be well, but as much as anything he wanted us to be as interested in the world as he was, so we would have something to talk about, to discuss. He always wanted to hear something new, something interesting, something amusing. He was always seeking something to engage his mind, that ever inquisitive, always computing mind. His was a mind that never rested.

Even at Pine Lake, in the midst of the beauty and serenity of nature, far from the hurly-burly world, he had to stay in touch, he had to stay connected. Even on the dock there was a phone at his side, in the old days attached by cord to the cabin, a hundred feet up the hill. Later it became a cellular phone.

No, Walter did not like to be out of touch. Nor did he like to waste time. The alarm on his watch always woke him from his short naps. He did not like to be idle. He did not like to be alone. And he seldom was. Walter gave new meaning to the word social. He had many friends, and he cherished the time he spent with them. He seemed to go out every night. He always seemed to be going to or coming from a party. Even at Pine Lake his social calendar was busy. This was not surprising. He was excellent company. He was buoyant and funny, always his engaging self. I honestly can't remember ever seeing him in a bad mood.

He met and got to know many of our friends and our children's friends. And he remembered them, almost always by name (he had a phenomenal memory). He always asked about them and wanted to see them when he came to Minneapolis. Or he wanted them to visit him at Pine Lake. They all remember him, and they remember him vividly and fondly.

Walter made a big impression on people. When you were with him you knew you were in the presence of a rather extraordinary person. When people met him, they didn't forget him.

He seemed to know everyone and everything. He had been everywhere. He knew all the good restaurants, all the good Greek, Italian, Mexican, Thai, and Chinese restaurants; he didn't go in for the fancy, overpriced French places. He loved wine, movies, architecture, plays, music. I know many of you would have been amused to see him waltzing around the cottage at Pine Lake on a Saturday night in his blue work shirt and jeans, wine glass in hand, lustily singing along with a tape of Cole Porter songs or the *Three Penny Opera*.

Then there were the ties. Who will forget the ties? I always equated those colorful, exuberant ties with happiness. It was easy to do, I suppose. Still I thought it was true—they captured him perfectly. I always thought that as intellectual as he was, and as intractable as he knew the world's and life's problems to be, that Walter was one of those rare individuals—a happy man. He was at peace with himself. He took that prodigious energy and prodigious intellect and conscientiously and unselfishly put it to good use. He made a contribution in so many ways to so many

things and to so many people. He had a right to be happy and proud.

Walter *was* a man of many ties. I am not referring now to the ones he wore but to more important ones. His ties to the law and to the Law School and to his colleagues, to his teaching and to his students. I have a quick story to add to the many about Walter and his students. When Wendy and I first moved to Minneapolis and bought a house, who should one of our neighbors turn out to be but a former student of Walter's. And naturally Walter had been one of his favorite professors in law school. I always thought that Walter in his inimitable, behind-the-scenes fashion somehow arranged to have one of his students live across the street to keep an eye on us. And not only that. That former student is now our lawyer. Even in his absence Walter is keeping tabs.

The many ties. There were his ties to the university and to Hyde Park and to the city of Chicago and to his country and to Pine Lake. There were ties to his dear friends and finally, of course, to his family, whom he cared about deeply, from his wife, Natalie, who was every bit as vibrant and remarkable as he was, to his lovely and noble daughters, Wendy and Cathy, and to his wonderful grandchildren, Mallory, Sarah, and David.

Among the many things that make up his legacy for us, his family, are the things Walter, the teacher, taught us. The little things and the big things. He taught us how to build a fire, how to play casino, how to get around in a city. He taught us the value of sharing a meal together, of discussion, of traveling, of learning, of the long view. He taught us the importance of taking care of the things and the people you love, of respect, of courtesy, of friendship, of democracy. He taught us that laughter is a great tonic. Walter himself was a great tonic.

He taught us how to die with dignity and grace. He taught us that most important lesson of all—to embrace life, as he did so energetically and wholeheartedly, and to enjoy it, to engage the world as he did so ceaselessly, and to give something back to it as he did so generously and capably.

The most vivid memory I have of Walter is of him having a meal with us—at our home in Minneapolis, at the cottage in Wisconsin, or at a restaurant in Chicago. There's pasta and a bottle of wine on the table, the children are there. We're talking. Eventually Walter steers the conversation toward some important topic, some social or political issue, something in the news, and in his Socratic way, gets us to talk about it. There is discus-

sion, opinion, outburst, argument. Just when it starts to get a little thick, a little too serious, he says, "That reminds me of a joke."

We'll miss those jokes. We'll miss those meals. We'll miss him.

