Our Friend Wally: Some Reflections

Edward W. Rosenheim

As we have been reminded, Wally was born in Chicago and, except for the War Years, spent his entire life in this neighborhood and his entire career in this Law School. The Blums’ address for over thirty-five years has been 5724 Kimbark Avenue.

But if these facts conjure up the image of a homebody, forget it. No one I know has ever been more addicted than Wally to what I call “expeditions.” They took the Blums to an array of places that included, to name only a few, Brussels and Beirut and Morocco and Malaysia and all the Scandinavian countries and Moscow and the Antipodes and Algiers and the Antarctic. I call them “expeditions” because mere “traveling” won’t do. Presumably the Blums’ voyages involved luggage and reservations and tourist shrines, but as reported, they were epics, replete with pity and fear and grotesque mirth.

Most of us only vicariously enjoyed these junkets, but there were also expeditions of the sort that Peggy and I and many of the rest of you shared with Wally and earlier, of course, with Natalie. These expeditions were limited to Chicago and its environs but were animated by the same spirit that sent the Blums to the ends of the earth.

It was in the mid-1950s that we first tasted the joys of the Blum-inspired expedition. These were the outings with our wives and assorted small children that are a joy to remember, although the actuality was probably pretty taxing. Intended to delight and instruct, they took the form of visits to zoos, parks, museums, and the like. What seem to have survived in the memories of our children and even grandchildren have become peripheral legends of minor accidents, disorientations, disorders, and, most vividly, the occasion when, riding awkwardly on the miniature railroad in Lincoln Park, my bald head was lavishly adorned through the offices of a large exotic bird; Wally liked to call the episode Rosenheim’s Finest Hour.

† David B. and Clara E. Stern Professor Emeritus, Department of English, The University of Chicago; Alumni Chairman, University of Chicago Centennial. These remarks were given at a memorial for Walter Blum on February 4, 1995.
Of recent years, Wally took his grandchildren on more ambitious expeditions—to Washington and New York, and with young David, on the Grand Tour of Colleges—and, though I'm sure they accomplished their major purposes, I hope they included all the antic, incidental adventures of an authentic Wally Blum enterprise.

Through the years, our more adult expeditions have included performances, exhibits, movies, and, above all, restaurants. Visiting a restaurant, especially an unexplored one, was the quintessential Wally Blum undertaking. We all knew you couldn't go anywhere without running into Wally's students, who would invariably greet him delightedly. (Some of his greatest tales are of encounters with students at the bottoms of canyons, on Alpine peaks, on primitive Asiatic ferryboats, in the box office line at X-rated movies.) The restaurant routine inevitably included one or more such incidents, when a Blum student would turn up as customer, proprietor, or waiter (the last, in justice to Wally and the Law School, more often a current student than an alumnus).

It was characteristic too of Wally's restaurant visits that, while some spots turned out better than others, we can't remember going to a really bad one. This was because, as with everything else, Wally had done his homework and we were suitably briefed; if we were sometimes surprised, we were rarely disappointed.

Again, Wally had a true Johnsonian regard for food and drink. It's true that some of the most memorable talk occurred around a restaurant table, but Wally never considered dinner as a mere excuse for conversation. If on occasion the wine proved more notable than the wit, this was no reason for writing off the evening.

It is good to think about Wally's expeditions; they are a treasury of particular happy memories. Beyond this, however, I think they reflect qualities that marked many aspects of his life. He did not embark on them, large or small, out of restlessness or boredom, or by a desire to "keep up," let alone "one-up." He was, I think, animated by an almost fierce, affirmative desire to know and to experience. To exploit the Mt. Everest cliché: he embarked on expeditions because of what was there, there to be seen, heard, felt, tasted, understood, and judged. And this urge helps to account, I think, for that aspect of Wally that continues to astonish—and at times to amuse—all of us who knew him. I refer, as you've guessed, to his extraordinary command of almost
every kind of information—produced, to be sure, by a phenome-
nal capacity to read and retain but also by an inveterate zest for
learning.

This adventurous curiosity leads me to speak of other quali-
ties that we cherished as friends of Wally. It is hard to speak of
some of them without courting sentimentality—and Wally
seemed to be the least sentimental of men. He simply refused to
wear his heart on his sleeve, to ventilate his uncertainties, to
rehearse his troubles. This wasn’t a matter of false delicacy or of
reticence, but of realism, of intense intellectual acceptance of
undisguised truth, however agonizing its actuality. I believe it
was this realism that was reflected in Wally’s extraordinary
courage in the presence of bitter pain and adversity, most notably
in these past cruel months, but in other chapters of his life as
well. It was this courage that he combined with grace, with a
quiet, loving concern for those who loved him, for which I can
think of no better word than “gallantry.”

But though he seemed so remote from sentimentality, the
virtue that I found his most conspicuous quality is one most
closely associated with the sentimental. I refer, of course, to his
gift for loyalty. His family and friends know quite as well as I do
the depth of Wally’s personal loyalty and the other qualities it
embraced: affection, tolerance, patience, generosity. But I’d like
to speak of his institutional loyalty, specifically to the University
of Chicago. It wasn’t the kind of loyalty that gloats on a school’s
superiority or expresses itself in lip service—still less (especially
in Wally’s case) in the Old School Tie. In this case, it simply
meant that this urbane, greatly talented man believed that his
university merited everything that was in his power to give it.
And what Wally was able to give was indeed a great deal.

Over the years I’ve teamed with Wally, I’ve never stopped
admiring the manner of his contribution to our undertakings. He
believed that deliberations should be, above all, informed, and
that urge for information I’ve talked about was crucial in provid-
ing such circumstances. His love for incident and anecdote could
be the instrument for indispensable background knowledge. And
the range of his information allowed him, almost magically, to
provide relevant answers to unanticipated questions.

The realism I’ve mentioned governed his sense of priori-
ties—his knack for distinguishing among degrees of urgency, for
noting the difference between immediate actuality and attractive
possibility. This became especially clear when we worked on the
Centennial, of which he served as faculty chairman. As Kineret
Jaffey will attest, no detail of planning for that meticulously planned year was too small to command Wally's energetic attention. At the same time, his imagination merrily invented an array of speculative projects which, if totally realized, would have turned the Centennial into a kind of super-Disney World; as it was, they reminded us of possibilities for light-heartedness which appeared in such forms as bagpipers and floating phoenixes. And this, in turn, suggests another gift Wally brought to every enterprise in which we were associated: a sense of humor that could invade the most solemn passages. His humor was far from the measured jocosity of too many academics; it was irreverent, exuberant, often indecorous—a reflection, I think, of that unblinking realism which, seeing things as they are, found many of them wonderfully ludicrous.

Wally's loyalty strikes me as a compound of pride in the university and a vision of what the university most fundamentally means. The pride rose in part from simple association with the institution, but also from what he had done to strengthen and honor this place that he so loved. As he was an essentially undemonstrative man, the pride showed itself largely in the feelings he displayed about his students, past and current. That pride was in itself a generous emotion, as I have reason to attest. One of the happiest elements in our long friendship with Wally has been that fact that Peggy, my wife, was his student. And Wally's warm, transparent pride in that fact has added to my own pride in my wife.

Wally's vision of the university was of a unified community, a single enterprise. Its ultimate mission subsumes those of its various constituencies—although the mission is carried out in a very complicated diversity of contexts and means and ends. In this view, too, collegiality—that overworked word—embraced all members of a community engaged in a common enterprise: inquiry and communication of its results. There have been few more diligent or prominent members of this Law School than Wally. But, having worked with him in raising class gifts intended solely for the College, I know how wholeheartedly (and triumphantly) he labored in the interests of our undergraduate program. As his intellectual concerns admitted no boundaries and his friendships no arbitrary distinctions, so his instinct for collegiality was shaped only by commitment to common purpose.

As a realist, Wally recognized his own role within the university as an indispensable servant and a distinguished leader. Yet he was quite indifferent to the exercise of power for its own sake
and still less interested in its use for personal advantage. I'm sure these attitudes were prompted by inherent probity and generosity. But I think Wally always saw himself not only as a teacher and citizen of the university but as an alumnus, a product of the university—and this status imposed upon him certain responsibilities. Perhaps I can put this more clearly with a small narrative (a practice Wally would approve).

A few summers ago Wally asked me to spend some days with him in the family lodge on Pine Lake in northwestern Wisconsin. During that period, fishermen on the lake might have noticed, on the dock in front of the house, two scantily clad old gents, one very thin, the other decidedly well-nourished, dangling their legs over the edge and engaged in what seemed—and was—amiable, idle conversation, largely of the mundane sort that friends of fifty years with plenty of time on their hands are likely to engage in. But at one point, Wally said something that I have remembered clearly, and always will.

We had, I recall, been discussing—not admiringly—various “new” things that were going on in the world—and particularly our university: new trends, new theories, new standards, and (I'm quite sure) new arrivals on the faculty. Some instinct of restraint presently led me to ask whether our disapproving sentiments weren't the inappropriate reactions bred of nostalgia, or know-nothingism, or even a bit of fear. Wally answered me in what I think were almost exactly these words:

“No,” he said. “I really do think that these forces threaten the university, which is one of the most important things in my life. But . . . ,” and then he paused, and then he continued, “But, well if the University didn’t teach us anything else, it taught us to look at new ideas patiently and seriously . . . so I guess that’s what we better do.”

That was one reason I cherished my visit to Pine Lake long before I knew it was not to be repeated. It reminded me then, as it reminds me now, that Wally’s life—his busy, inquiring, sociable, humorous, intensely human life—was a dedicated life as well.