A Tribute to Arno Cumming Becht

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Arno Cumming Becht

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In the autumn of 1964, when I arrived at the law school to begin the first, most important, year of my teaching life, I was thoroughly and profoundly ignorant. Not just deeply uninformed about "the law"; I was that, of course, but that's easily curable: you just work at it as you go, and after a while you know enough of your subject to handle it before people who, after all, know nothing about it at all.

Nor was the significant gap the spot where pedagogical technique ought to have been. That too was true, but that too is comparatively easy: once again, you just do it, and after a while you are what you are, and teach as you teach, and it either works or it doesn't (at which point, if you're not too stupid, you find another trade).

No, the critical ignorance was more fundamental: I did not know what I was to be about, what the shape and purpose of my new and peculiar profession ought to be. I knew, that is, at least pretty well, "the law." What I didn't know, in the role I had chosen, was my proper self.

When I arrived, the law school was a small place, about two hundred students in all, only fourteen teachers (including the Dean), and three of us had just arrived. It was a little school, in part of a little old building, possessed of a pretty library. Off the stacks of that library all the faculty offices opened, and almost all the time almost all those doors stood open, especially (though a tricky side door, followed by a hard right turn), Arno's door.

Those literally and figuratively open doors were, for all the new teachers, the most important thing about the school. It was through them that we went and looked to see what real law teachers did. For me at least, Arno Becht's door was the most important one. Not really because the message he broadcast was different from the others, but because of the totality, coherence, and intensity of his version of what proper teaching was. What I saw was this:

* Arno, twenty-five years or so into teaching, at a time when he knew...
his subjects so completely that he could have coasted the year through
on a few minutes a day of preparation, changing his teaching materi-
als every year, keeping up on reading whatever came out as it came
out, preparing each day's class as if it was his first day as a new
teacher in a new course at a new school;

Arno, teased about his continual revision of his outlines and teach-
ing notes, looking up, serious and concerned, protesting that it was
really quite clear, the law of torts, and it must be his fault if some of
them didn't seem quite to catch on;

Arno, desperate to get to work of his own, grading his exams,
slowly, meticulously, thoughtfully, thoroughly, often as not starting all
over when three-quarters done because “Maybe I didn’t give sufficient
attention to that particular approach,” or “I think I was unfair at the
beginning, maybe expecting too much,” and then sighing with guilt at
taking so long at his grading that the students were anxious and
restless;

And finally, Arno, his remaining working time invaded by a new
teacher with a pile of “what do you do if?” and “when do you” and “if
they, then what” questions, stopping everything, patiently to answer,
to supply citations, teaching tricks, congratulations and condolences,
softly, thoughtfully, diffidently but, oh my, successfully.

Look, except for one book Arno coauthored (which is still living
scholarship, and will continue to be so as long as its unsolvable subject
remains unsolved), I never read any of Arno's writings. After all, it
would be hard to exaggerate the intensity of my uninterest in the
amendment of corporate charters, or even in the grand old law of torts.
I don't think we discussed his work much, nor mine for that matter,
though Lord knows I tended to be pushy enough about it. All that is
nothing. What I learned from Arno in those first years of my teaching
was not the trivia of legal scholarship, or even “the law,” but, by watch-
ing him at his job, Arno's acted out and acted upon message of what it
was to be a law teacher if one would be one nobly, to wit: A law teacher
is a teacher of students of law. They are one's charge and responsibil-
ity. A trustee's relationship to his widow and orphan beneficiaries is
part-time and pallid next to that of a law teacher to his students. Noth-
ing is more important, neither books, nor articles, nor consulting, nor
money, nor advancement in the trade. You are allowed to complain
about students, to stare stupefied at the heavens which allow such an-
wers to be made in class, which still suffer that student to live who
is—again—so ostentatiously unprepared. You are allowed occasion-
ally to explode, even without pedagogic premeditation, when the nicest of points has once more been brutally buried in some student’s home-made fudge. But you are not allowed to abandon them for anything else, for nothing else is as important. A teacher is to teach—students, yes, and other teachers too, when they are just starting out and have to be taught what it is to be a teacher.

I wish I could say that I had quite managed to go and do likewise. But at least I learned early, mostly from Arno, what it was I ought to have gone and been doing.