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# Stuff of Which Great Professors Are Made

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## The Stuff of Which Great Professors Are Made

*Charles Roth\**

I suppose that most of you reading this article have had the privilege of knowing Professor Edward Murphy, who taught at Notre Dame Law School for the thirty-seven years before his death. It's strange for me to think it, but my class—graduating this May—will be the last class of Notre Dame Law School students ever to have been taught by Professor Murphy.

Before the crisp memories of my first year are overlaid with the haze of sentiment, I want to capture, as if by photograph, the essence of this man. If I fail at that, as I probably shall, perhaps at least I shall succeed in reviving some memories among we who knew him. I would hope, too, to communicate some sense of Ed Murphy to you who have never known him.

I confess to having another purpose in mind as I write this. Edward Murphy was the best teacher I ever had. He embodies for me all that is good in teaching. If I could just discern what it was that set him apart from the many good teachers I have been blessed with! Ed Murphy's greatness as a teacher cries out for exposition, not only as a reminder to those who met him, but as a spur to those who can aspire someday to fill his shoes.

To begin with, let me describe his classroom strategy. Professor Murphy rarely lectured. He spurred student interest by combining the Socratic method and volunteer class participation, but in his own, unique way. He asked pointed Socratic questions, but he did not terrorize. He encouraged free and open class discussion, but somehow we always emerged from these forays into the maze of student opinion at precisely the point he wanted us to reach.

After thirty-seven years of teaching Contracts, Professor Murphy didn't need notes. He wrote the textbook, and he knew it inside and out. When your class comments went astray, he'd heard it twenty times before (of course, he never let on). He saw where you were headed, and he'd coax you back, with a few questions, onto some logical path.

Were it only for the fact that he taught thirty-seven years of law students, and taught them exceptionally well, Professor Murphy would deserve commendation. For a student of his, though, to stop here would be an injustice.

I think a second component of Professor Murphy's greatness can be found in the way he treated his students: with respect and kindness. At first, I thought it was strange when I noticed five or six students walking down to the podium after class to talk with him. But somehow, as the semester progressed, Professor Murphy communicated to us (he never said it) that he wanted us to ask him questions. He wanted us to address the material seriously, and he knew that that sort of consideration would not end when class was dismissed.

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And so we asked him questions. Not the pitiable “will this be on the exam?” type questions, but real, substantive questions. Sometimes he would answer you (if you wanted an answer) but more often, he’d start with, “So what you’re saying is . . .”, and as he restated your question, the consequences of your advocacy would quickly become clear. So often, you were reasoning from a jurisprudential position of which you knew little and had thought less.

His responses were always well thought out, and usually persuasive. They were not harsh. Never did I see him embarrass anyone. When he was done with you, you couldn’t know for sure whether you’d raised a good point, or whether he’d simply made something interesting out of your dumb question. You were usually glad you had asked.

Now, maybe I’m less patient than most. Still, it must be difficult to listen day after day to student questions that you’ve heard every year for thirty-odd years. I remember one occasion, when a student was obstinately pursuing his point, and I looked over at Professor Murphy, sure that he would share my frustration. I will always remember the look on his face. Though I spent twenty seconds looking for a sign of boredom, I found only concern, bordering on tenderness, that his student understand. Here I was, having asked so many dumb questions, getting frustrated at another student, while he showed only concern—I was ashamed.

I am not sure when I realized that Professor Murphy’s treatment of students was directly related to his love of teaching, but once I realized it, it became for me an indisputable point. No one could act as he did without loving their work. Little did I understand the depths of his devotion—what still seems incredible to me—that, while he was teaching us, Professor Murphy was dying of cancer.

I do not remember exactly when the rumors started going through the law school that Professor Murphy’s cancer had returned. But the day after I heard it, I could not help noticing that all was not well with him. He was still smiling, but if you watched closely, you could see grimaces appear at the corners of his mouth, and then disappear (by sheer will, I have no doubt). He was in pain. He was living, day in and day out, with pain; and we, his students, had never realized it.

From what I have said above, I would hope that his qualities begin to show through. Ed Murphy loved teaching; he taught his students well; he made class worthwhile and interesting. But to be a great teacher, I think one more component is necessary.

Great teachers not only know (and love) the material they teach, but they understand how it relates to the rest of life. Professor Murphy perceived, rightly, a confluence between Christian character, his subject matter, and his students’ lives. This, I am convinced, was Professor Murphy’s secret.

Professor Murphy never really spoke to us about the inner workings of his faith. He made his faith known in other ways, not least by the simple fact of starting class with the Our Father. And he shared with us enough of his view of life that we began to understand why he thought that contracts should matter to human beings.

A contract, he taught us, is simply a promise which the law will enforce. I say, "simply." But to Professor Murphy, promises were neither easy nor unimportant. He looked to the Bible, and saw God making promises to Israel, and, through Christ, a promise to all people. These, he said, can never be revoked. Human promises, he taught us, are a reflection of that aspect of God, as God has implanted His image in all human hearts. Thus, contracts embody something unique to humans: namely our will to do, or not to do, something. To "keep our word" in a contract is not merely a practicality demanded by business conventions or the Uniform Commercial Code. It is a human obligation, an opportunity to serve God.

Looking back, I believe it was Professor Murphy's understanding of the importance of Contracts to human life which impelled him to put forth such effort in teaching two generations of Notre Dame students. But not only that. He was great precisely because he was right about Contracts, and right about its relation to our lives. As a great teacher, he used Contracts to teach us something important about life, something especially important for lawyers. It can be summarized in one word—honesty—but only if we understand that word as he did, encompassing a duty to live life in an authentic, honest, Christian manner. His teaching was effective because his words corresponded to the way he lived his life.

Professor Murphy taught virtue to law students while teaching them Contracts; it's a rare teacher indeed who can do that.

