EDWARD V. SPARER

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Edward V. Sparer cared about evil and social injustice. He represented the poor and sought to empower the powerless. If greatness is measured (as it ought to be) by compassion for children in the dawn of life, the infirm in the pit of life, and the old in the twilight of life, Ed Sparer will be remembered as a great man, as a giant. But whatever the measure, this generation of lawyers and the generations that follow are indebted to him for proving that there are options—lawyers can choose to serve the poor instead of the privileged, the oppressed instead of the powerful, the cause of justice for all instead of the interests of a few.

To his credit, Ed Sparer will be remembered for more than his pathbreaking contribution to what some call poverty law or public interest law. He will be remembered all the more by those who knew him because of the person he was and the qualities he embodied. Ed was the kind of person who cared about evil, social injustice, and people. Even when he rose in righteous indignation about some instance of injustice Ed never forgot that human beings were involved. He always sought to acknowledge the humanity of those who opposed him even as he deplored their conduct as inhumane and their views as unenlightened. Ed suffered fools more easily and far more gently than most. He embodied those qualities that many of us treasure most. Those who saw him from a distance marveled at his eloquence and his passion. Those who worked with him respected him for his courage and his commitment. Those who knew him best will remember his enormous capacity for empathy and his seemingly boundless compassion.

This empathy and compassion created a bond from which developed a curious and often ambivalent relationship between Ed and a colleague who upon joining the faculty in 1975, became the first Black person ever to hold a tenure-track position in the hundred year plus history of this law school. Special pressures and special burdens came with being a black “first.” Despite their many courtesies and their genuine concern, individual members of the law faculty could not begin to appreciate how onerous and confining these pressures and burdens

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were. Because they were, for the most part, persons of goodwill and because they were white and male they could not conceive that a law teacher at a prestigious law school (what's more, an "elite" law school) could be harassed. Without intending either to be condescending or disrespectful, they would dismiss out of hand any complaint on the part of their junior colleague as understandable overreaction. Ed Sparer was different. In his presence that young black law teacher found understanding. In Ed's office he found sanctuary from hostility, harassment, indifference, and disbelief. Ed would respond with outrage at the myriad instances of racism. And by his genuine outrage he reaffirmed the sanity and strengthened the resolve of his young colleague.

I know this story well because I was that black law teacher whom Ed befriended.

My remembrance of Ed is an intensely personal and even a painful one. There were numerous times when I felt very uncomfortable around Ed. He seemed to be able to hear what I was saying and what I left unsaid. It was as if he could hear my heart and see my soul. He seemed to understand intuitively why I had learned to maintain distance and detachment, to interact without engaging, to participate without committing, in short, to operate from behind a wall—one that is simultaneously transparent and opaque, synthetic yet authentic. He had observed first hand how time after time that wall proved invaluable shielding me from hypocrisy and treachery.

Ed never asked that I unlearn the lessons taught by a society that seems hostile to all not male and pale. Simply by being himself he taught me an additional lesson—perhaps the most important one of all. From others I had learned the value of the wall. Ed Sparer taught me the cost—the cost in friendships forgone, opportunities lost, and ultimately, humanity diminished. Because of Ed I learned to see the wall for what it is—necessary but evil.

Ed Sparer was for a time my companion in isolation. At other times he was my mentor, my teacher, and my conscience. Above all, he was a friend to me—a far better friend to me than I was or could have been to him. It has been said that a friend "leaves you with all your freedom intact but obliges you to be fully what you are." By that standard Ed was my friend. However, I suspect he preferred the formulation offered by Dylan:

I ain't lookin' to compete with you,
Beat or cheat or mistreat you,
Simplify you, classify you,
Deny, defy, or crucify you.
All I really want to do
Is Baby be friends with you

No, and I ain't lookin' to fight with you,
Frighten you, or tighten you,
Drag you down, or bring you down
Chain you down or bring you down.

I don't want to straight face you,
Race, or chase you, track or trace you,
Or disgrace you, or displace you,
Or define you, or confine you.

I don't want to meet your kin
Make you spin, or do you in
Or select you, or dissect you,
Or inspect you, or reject you.

I don't want to fake you out,
Take, or shake or forsake you out,
I ain't lookin' for you to feel like me,
See like me, or be like me.

All I really want to
Is Baby be friends with you

*Bob Dylan*