

TRIBUTE TO BURTON WECHSLER

VICTORIA J. DORAN*

It's rare, maybe once in a lifetime, we meet someone and know in a heartbeat a great gift has come our way. That's how it was for me with Burt, and how I know it was for so many of his beloved students.

Every time I reflect on Burt, I wonder how one man could capture the hearts and imaginations of virtually all of his students, how one man could make so many of us feel special, how one man could bring out the best in each of us mentally and morally, and make us believe we could make a difference, and that it was our duty to do so. Burt was a gifted professor, plain and simple.

Those of us fortunate enough to have crossed paths with Burt know he is larger than life. His capacious love of mankind led to a burning passion for social justice and equality, which he imparted to his students—daily. He made us see. He required we know the facts behind the case, the history that led to the need to litigate, and the politics behind the bench. I loved each and every one of Burt's vibrant classes. I loved working with him more.

On one class and a rumor that Burt might need some help, I made a beeline to his office to tell him I wanted to work for him. I had never wanted a job more. He was in his office, on my first try! While opening up the top drawer of one of his filing cabinets to offer me nuts, dried fruit or the best yet, peanut M&Ms, he asked me about myself, my politics, and my grades. (As time went on, I was to learn that his filing cabinet drawer was never empty and was always open to anyone, anytime.) The next ten minutes confounded me. After hearing my grades, Burt tore out of the office without explanation, returning to offer me a job. As I had suspected and later confirmed, Burt had raced down to the Registrar's office to verify my grades.

* Assistant General Counsel, Council of Better Business Bureaus, Inc. J.D., *American University*, *Washington College of Law*, B.A., *Georgetown University School of Foreign Service*.

Much later, I remember laughing about this with him, asking him if he knew what a bundle of contradictions he was, and I remember him shaking his head yes, he knew. Life is full of contradictions, ambiguity, and impermanence, he'd say, and he was no exception.

Burt told me about a book he was working on. Yes, I wanted to work on the happy part, the "rise of section 1983." And work I did, all kinds of primary research, review of papers of the Workers' Defense League, the International Labor Defense, and interviews with people who had fought and won against Mayor Hague's 1930s oppression in Jersey City. Burt sent me to Detroit and to Harlem and to Jersey City. We needed to understand the people's struggle, what it took to make the case that the parks belonged to the people. This was our constitutional right to assembly in action, a right I learned was essential to produce fundamental societal change.

Let me tell you, working for Burt was a trip. For six and one-half years we'd meet, initially bi-weekly, later weekly and then less often. Each time I was greeted with a "How've you been, Sister?" As I would work my way through the papers and books littering his floor to a seat behind his desk stockpiled with newspaper articles, more papers and books, we'd catch up, and then we'd start to delve into my discoveries, put pen to paper. (Boy, do I remember Burt's struggles with the computer!) We'd often digress onto a current hot political topic, and we never failed to laugh until we were almost in tears at least once each visit. We'd also invariably get interrupted by a student or two, or three or four, who needed Burt's help. And we'd frequently get interrupted by a professor or two who Burt had riled up the week before about something or other. Burt never turned anyone away. Then we'd eat. Then we'd work a little more and part until our next meeting. I always looked forward to our meetings.

For those of you who don't know, the title to Burt's book is a mouthful: From Black Disfranchisement to Labor's First Amendment Right to Organize: The Fall and Rise of Section 1983: From 1871 to 1939 The Story of *Giles v. Harris* and *Hague v. CIO*. Yes, I tried to get him to shorten it, told him we needed something punchier, to which he'd respond, gliding his hand over the paper, that there was not one word he could spare. And, yes, over the years, I urged Burt to finish the book, all the while knowing he wouldn't. Burt loved the process, the research and the work with students, and I knew he would forego ego-gratifying publication to continue this process. In his quieter moments, he'd admit to this. I always thought this was so ironic for a man who decried legal process (as opposed to substance) as a time and money waster.

Over the time I worked with Burt, we also put the street heat, that Americans won with *Hague v. CIO*, into action. Always lamenting the dearth of any real political activity, Burt would still attend the rallies for choice, the marches for the homeless, and the peace vigils. I learned the importance of this participation from Burt, and I am so grateful. He'd often say there is not much we can do alone, but together we might change 'em. He'd talk about coalition-building and how the groups of the left, labor unions, women, minorities, labor, and environmentalists, needed to support each other in their individual causes. Diverting me from *Hague*, Burt also had me assist him in his efforts to challenge Bork's Supreme Court nomination. He was beside himself with delight when that battle ended victoriously.

By the way, Burt's generosity is legendary, as is his sometimes brutal and less than diplomatic honesty. He called a spade a shovel, for sure. I never had to wonder where I stood with Burt. When my work wasn't quite what he wanted or thorough enough, he told me—in no uncertain terms. But, he was even more gracious and generous with his praise. Everyone also knew where Burt stood on every political issue. No matter how controversial, Burt voices his opinion and urges others to join him in it. He was particularly vocal about his students not going to work in large law firms for corporate America. Pirates, he'd call them! I so appreciate Burt for this rare trait, and I often also marvel at how well liked he is in spite of it!

It's hard to come to a close where Burt is concerned. One of the finest people I will ever know, Burt is all heart, passion, compassion and integrity, and I love him for it. He was the Washington College of Law's ace in the hole. He made my journey there worthwhile, and I know that one day I will leave this earth counting among my greatest blessings having known and worked and played with Burt.